



**GOVCOMMS PODCAST**

**EPISODE #145**

- WITH SIA PAPAGEORGIU

TRANSCRIPT

# TRANSCRIPT

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Sia Papageorgiou:

Arm yourself with the evidence you need to make a case. But also, we really have to have a growth mindset and keep learning at the forefront of everything we do. We shouldn't sit there in our own little bubbles and focus on our communication skills only. At the end of the day, we are business people just like everybody else, and we need to act like business people. We use our communication expertise to solve business problems, but we are first and foremost business people just like everybody else. So, one is to change your mindset.

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke, thanks for joining me. Today we are joined by Sia Papageorgiou, who is the managing partner at the Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence and one of the superstars of the communication profession. Sia is a multi award-winning strategic communications leader and she is on a mission to elevate the value and visibility of communication professionals and the work that they do.

She is very opinionated about the profession and I look forward to discussing that with her today. Sia is certified in Strategic Communication Management. She's also a fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Art, Manufacturers and Commerce, and a past president of the Victorian chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators. And you would've heard me talk about the IABC many times on GovComms.

And if you are not a member, you should be. So, just quickly go and have a look at that and sign yourself up. It will be the smartest thing that you ever do. Sia has been a past board director at IABC Asia Pacific and is the immediate past chair of the Global Communication Certification Council, and we are going to talk about the importance of certification. In 2021, IABC Asia Pacific named her Communicator of the Year. And in 2022 she was awarded the prestigious IABC Rae Hamlin Award in recognition of her exemplary service in advocating for that global standard.

She is also a frequent contributor to the GovComms Institute, which we are very grateful for, and she joins me on the line today from Melbourne, Australia. Sia Papageorgiou, welcome to GovComms.

Sia Papageorgiou:

Thank you so much, David, for that lovely introduction. It's wonderful to be here.

David Pembroke:

You've really done wonderful work in promoting the function of communication and the importance of strategic communication. Tell us the story, where did this journey start? Because it's not something that people talked about a lot back in the day. So, tell us the story of how you moved from high school through your early years into this leadership role in strategic communication?

Sia Papageorgiou:

So, when I was in high school, we had a careers week, when I was in year nine. We have to go back to 1989 for that. And I was in my third year of high school and we had this careers week and every day we had people coming in telling us about what their jobs entailed, various professions. And on one of the days we had Melbourne news readers, Jennifer Keyte and Glenn Taylor come to our school. And I don't remember much about Glenn Taylor, but I remember being in absolute awe of Jennifer Keyte. And they told us about sourcing the news stories, connecting with the community, putting it all together, being ready to present the news at 6:00 PM that evening. And I just remember seeing this powerful charismatic woman in front of me and I said, "I want to be like that." And so I wanted to pursue a career in journalism.

I didn't get into RMIT journalism after I finished high school, which was my first choice by way of university. But I did get into Swinburne and I studied media and communication. When I finished my university degree, I worked in broadcast journalism and radio production and I really loved doing that. We were putting together current affairs programmes around women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. And that's something that's really, really dear to my heart, because I'm a child of migrant parents.

And so I loved doing that for a while. And then when I was in my twenties, I moved to London to work in public relations and I had the absolute time of my life. I've got to do some really exciting things. I went to Buckingham Palace and met the Princess Royal. We interviewed her for a corporate video. She was the patron of the charity I worked at at the time and just had a really fantastic time of it. And then after about two years, I came back to Australia and I didn't have a job.

And I got in touch with one of my colleagues who was a HR manager at a recruitment agency and I said to her, "Belinda, I need a job, anything will do, temporary job, just until I can get a job in comms again." And she said to me, "Sia, there's a two-week stint at the Australian Taxation Office, how about that?" And I went, "You've got to be kidding me, the ATO?". But I thought, "It's just two weeks. What have I got to lose?" Anyway, I stayed 12 and a half years. I started my ATO career as an APS-2, and I left as the EL-2 director of communication and cultural change for the service delivery arm of the ATO. So, I had a wonderful career at the ATO, and that's where I fell in love with strategic communication, David.

David Pembroke:

And with that, where did you discover it and how did you discover it in terms of the problems that you were solving, or you were being asked to solve?

Sia Papageorgiou:

I think the ATO at that time had a really great understanding of strategic communication. And we had an executive who really got the value of communication. And so we had a great framework for communicating. We had a strategy for communication, both internal and external. We knew what we were measuring, we understood our audiences. And I'm not saying we were perfect, we weren't, but we got strategic communication planning. And you know what? I mean I teach strategic communication for a living, as you mentioned in my introduction. I'm very involved in the profession, and you can't be a strategic communication professional if you don't act like a strategic communication professional. So, I had a really good foundation at the ATO.

David Pembroke:

And so with that though, and in terms of building that confidence, that trust, that respect in the function, you say that the ATO got it, or the leadership at the ATO at the time got it, but how did they get it? How was it that you were able to demonstrate to them the value of the work that you were doing?

Sia Papageorgiou:

First of all, they loved the idea of having communication professionals who were skilled in communication. It wasn't just, there's no one else to do this job and so let's put a team together. They were really focused on skilled communication professionals who had either tertiary qualifications. At that time certification wasn't big on the agenda, but at the same time they put resources to the various campaigns. So, whether you were working internally, I mean I think at one point our corporate communication function had something like 30 FTE, and that wasn't including the business line communication department.

So, each business line had their own functional area as well. But we had a corporate area, they had about 25 to 30 FTE in them. And so that whole resourcing behind it was really important. The measurement piece was important. Again, I'm not saying we were perfect, but they understood that communication as a function was just as important as other functions in the organisation. It wasn't seen as say the poor cousin of human resources or finance or any other operational area. It was just as important. And we always got invited to the meetings that mattered and the planning that mattered. A lot of that had to do with us as individuals.

So, we initiated those relationships, but the ATO did understand that and valued the contribution we were making to the organisation and ultimately to the citizens of Australia.

David Pembroke:

So, I think that's a key point. And perhaps I think the role of the communicator in organisations, given the impacts and the importance of digital technology mobility, you really do have to be telling a story consistently over time in order to engage with someone. And that does require confidence in relationships. What advice do you have to people about getting out and demonstrating their value to the organisation and getting out and building those relationships? What's the best way for people to go about and do that?

Sia Papageorgiou:

So, I always used to say to my team at the ATO, "Our job is to build relationships with people. That is the key component of our role." I mean obviously strategic planning is important and you can't be an effective communication professional if you don't plan strategically. But ultimately, what's going to get us not only elevate our value and visibility as strategic communication professionals, but what is going to get the agenda out there, make sure that we meet the needs and preferences of our audiences? And that is building relationships. If you don't know who you are talking to, who you are communicating with, you don't understand what challenges they have on a day-to-day basis, what frustrates them, what are the needs and preferences when it comes to communication? Well, how can you communicate with them effectively? And so you have to be really deliberate and disciplined about building relationships.

And I think a lot of that comes down to us having the courage and the curiosity to go out and find out what's important to people, whether that is an external audience or an internal audience. Obviously we have more access to our internal audiences, but what's stopping you from going and meeting with your stakeholders? When I was at the ATO, I used to do things like ask team leaders, "Hey, can I come to your team meeting next week just to learn a little bit more about your business and learn a bit more about your team?" And maybe the first time I did that, people would look at me like, "Why would you want to come to my team meeting?" But my response to them was always, "If I don't know about your business, I don't know what challenges your people have, how can I communicate effectively?"

David Pembroke:

But having the confidence to step forward and perhaps having the leadership to encourage people to step forward may be a little bit of a gap. Where in organisations, you mentioned that the ATO valued it, they resourced it, they prioritised it in terms of communication. But I'm sure people listening at the moment would look at that and think, "Well, that's great for you, but I work in an organisation where it's not valued, it's not resourced. We're the end of the line function. No one talks to us. No one wants to involve us." So, if that's the

difficult environment that you're operating in, again, what might be some advice as to how people can have more impact and be able to demonstrate and create more value?

Sia Papageorgiou:

I would say arm yourself with the information that resonates with the people in your organisation, whether they are other business functions or senior executives. Find out what matters to them and get to work gathering that information. There is a tonne of research out there that can help us do our jobs better. I'm a massive research nerd and I truly believe that without data you're just another person with an opinion. So, look at what is going to resonate. I mean there's a tonne of information in the Edelman Trust Barometer, for example, that talks about the state of trust in various institutions, and government is one of them.

The European Communication Monitor, my favourite study on strategic communication, that comes out once a year. Use that data. There's a tonne of data in your organisation. Or the State of Service, that's got a tonne of information in it. Your internal research that you conduct, surveys, or engagement, or employee experience policy, your exit surveys, there's a tonne of information. Use that information to make a case for why communication is important. And if you are measuring what matters in your organisation, you're measuring the right things, then over time you will collect the data you need to build a case for communication.

David Pembroke:

So, when you got to the end of your journey at the ATO, when you look back on that period of time, what were probably the two or three major things that you'd learnt that then helped you to take the next steps in your career?

Sia Papageorgiou:

So, a key thing I learned at the ATO is the importance of listening and just how critical that is to doing a good job as a communication professional. And I mentioned earlier, my parents are from Greece and my father's passed away now, but both were migrants. They came into this country 1960 and 1961. And my mother, who is the queen of Greek Proverbs and otherwise sayings, used to say to me all the time, "Sia, dip your tongue in your brain before you speak." So, basically think before you speak. But it taught me a really valuable lesson around listening more. And I think too, communication professionals have a real opportunity to ask the right questions that will give them the insight they need to create more purposeful communication. At the end of the day, we don't do comms because we've got nothing better to do.

We do it because it meets a business need or it solves a business problem. And the other lesson I learned too was really around courage and being prepared to share your opinions and advice and to back yourself around that. And I remember when I first became EL-2, I was at a business meeting with my peers and the deputy commissioner and assistant commissioners in our function, in our business area... And at the time I was still trying to find my feet as an EL-2, and just like everybody else, I suffer from imposter syndrome sometimes and confidence issues. And I remember thinking to myself, "Wow," I felt like I'd made it. I was an EL-2 and I was really proud of myself.

And my deputy commissioner who adored me and really trusted me, asked me a question. And I knew the answer, but I didn't have the courage to really articulate that at the time. And I fumbled my way through the answer and I said something along the lines of, "Well, let me think about that David, and I'll come back to you." And that really was a missed opportunity, because the next thing he turned around and said to me was, "I thought you could think on your feet, Sia." In front of everybody. And I wanted the earth to open and I wanted the earth to swallow me whole. And I vowed from that day on I would always come prepared to voice my opinions and have the courage to sell the value of communication.

We are probably the only business function in an organisation who allows others to tell us how to do our job, and it's time for us to take our power back.

David Pembroke:

What's your advice then for people about building that courage? It's one thing to say, "Next time I'm going to do it," but again, how do you equip yourself with the necessary skills and the mindset and the belief and the confidence to be able to speak up? Does it go back to that preparation and data point that you made earlier?

Sia Papageorgiou:

Well, that's one key thing. And then obviously it depends on what you're talking about. So, arm yourself with the evidence you need to make a case. But also we really have to have a growth mindset and keep learning at the forefront of everything we do. We shouldn't sit there in our own little bubbles and focus on our communication skills only. At the end of the day, we are business people just like everybody else, and we need to act like business people. We use our communication expertise to solve business problems, but we are first and foremost business people just like everybody else. So, one is to change your mindset, but absolutely keep learning. None of us know everything. We need to keep going, asking for professional development opportunities. And if I look at my own experience, one thing that really gave me confidence was getting certified.

We have a long way to go. We have been battling legitimacy issues for decades as a profession. And to me, certification really is one of those ways that we can elevate what we do, the importance of what we do, and really align ourselves to consistent global standards, which has been missing from our profession. And I always come back to something my very good friend, who sadly passed away earlier this year, Deb Ganderton, she used to say, "If we don't respect our profession, why should anybody else?" And so I think that all of that combined really gives us courage. But also connect with others that are doing the same thing. There's a huge opportunity. I mean you mentioned the IABC in my introduction. I could not do what I'm doing now without the IABC, without a network of people just like me who know what I'm going through, who challenge me, who support me, who have my back. I know I can go to them and ask them for help or advice at any time. They're the invaluable things that lift you up and give you courage to continue.

David Pembroke:

So, listen, once you left the ATO, where did you... I do want to go back to talk about certification, because I know that you've played a very big role on the IABC GCC certification, and we'll come back to that. But I'm just interested in your journey of why did you leave the ATO, and where did you go?

Sia Papageorgiou:

So, I left the ATO at the end of September, 2014. And I had a wonderful career in the ATO, but I just felt it was time for me to go. It was time for me to move on, do something different, and I really wanted to share my knowledge and my insights on a more global scale. And so I started my own consultancy, and this is where the networking is the gift that keeps on giving, because I had met my current business partner, Adrian Copley, at an IABC event 10 years prior. I was speaking at a conference, he was chairing the conference. We met, we instantly clicked, and both of us say now our instant thought was, "I need to hang on to that person, because they're going to come in handy in the future."

So, over time we would connect. But when I left the ATO, I rang Adrian and I said, "Listen, Adrian, I'm about to leave my in-house role at the ATO," and I don't think I even finished the sentence, because he said, "We have to work together." And then we started building the Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence, and the rest is history as they say. But I feel although the ATO gave me a fantastic foundation and a fantastic grounding, I feel like I found myself as a communication professional when I became a consultant.

David Pembroke:

And why? What's the difference? What's given you that sense of purpose and identity perhaps that you've received through being a consultant and an educator and not as a practitioner inside the public sector?

Sia Papageorgiou:

Because I feel that I truly have something important to share with communication professionals. As you mentioned in my intro, I'm on a mission to elevate the value and visibility of communication professionals, because I think we have the best job in an organisation. And no other function has such an all access path. We're in a very privileged position. We have access to a range of stakeholders and audiences and it's really important that we use that privilege in the right way. But I think too, the sorts of things I've been involved with as a consultant have really opened my eyes.

It's easy, and I totally get this, it's easy when you work in house and you are under the pump and you're working in your little bubble, so to speak, with your team and in your internal or external stakeholders, you get wrapped up in that one organisation. As a consultant, as an educator, as a trainer, I have a broader view. And becoming more involved with the IABC, both at the local level, at the regional level and at the international level, has really given me that whole of profession perspective. And I just absolutely love it. I really do believe we work in the best profession.

David Pembroke:

I totally agree with you. I totally agree with that. I love that line about, it's an all access pass that you get. Because, again, if you step towards understanding and you're driven by a word also that you used earlier around curiosity, you do get to listen to lots of interesting conversations. And when you can apply that knowledge, skills, experience as a communicator, you can really add significant business value and you can demonstrate that real impact from often simple ideas that don't have to cost huge amounts of money, but they come from good solid strategic thinking. But anyway, we could talk about that and big the profession up forever.

But listen, I'm interested in the role that you are in, in the leadership role that you're in, both in the global community around strategic communication, but also in that critical education role that you and Adrian run there at the Centre for Strategic Communication Excellence. What's your view on strategic communication and the function of communication and engagement at the moment? Where do we sit? How has it changed post COVID and with the more widespread adoption of digital technologies? And where might it be going? Now, let's break that down into its bits, because that's a very big question to reflect on. But where do you think we are at the moment?

Sia Papageorgiou:

I think coming off the back of COVID, I think we're in a good position. I think there is nobody on the planet who can argue that communication is not important post COVID. I think we've got some very, very key opportunities, particularly government communication professionals, to do things like help their agencies rebuild trust, and not only internally, but externally. So, we're in a good position, but if we're not careful, we're going to creep back to doing what we did before. And that is, and I'm not saying everybody operates in this way, but generally taking orders from people and having people tell us how to do our jobs. So, "I want this, I want that." And so people come to us with a list of wants. I think we've got an opportunity to be a little bit more proactive, or a lot more proactive rather, around how we manage the communication function.

I mean, at the end of the day, technology comes and goes, new generations enter the workforce. Obviously things like social media have changed the landscape for us, and COVID had a huge impact, but the fundamentals don't change. And as you know, I teach strategic communication for a living, but I also do a lot of work with organisations where I review the effectiveness of their communication. I conduct communication audits and I see the same things come up time and time again. No strategy with regards to communication. No

audience insight around what's important, what their needs and preferences are, what they're saying. No listening, no employee voice, no opportunities for employees to have a say about what's important to them.

You've got leaders who don't understand their role as communicator, or don't want to be involved in the communication equation, but then there are others who do, but don't have the support. So, where are we investing? What's most important to your organisation? And of course that whole measurement piece we talked about earlier. But I do think we're in a good position if we can focus on what matters most, and that is strategic communication planning, getting to know our audiences, building relationships and a focus on ongoing learning and a growth mindset, I think we will be well on our way to achieving the success that we dream of.

David Pembroke:

So, have you noticed in your educating role that there's a change in people who are interested in strategic communication, or is it still people coming out of the communication function looking to improve their skills?

Sia Papageorgiou:

I think it's a bit of both, but strategic is one of those words, David, that gets thrown around so often and people have it as part of their title, "I'm a strategic communication manager," "I operate strategically," "I'm really strategic." And then when you ask them, "Where's the strategy for communication? What audience insight have you gathered? How do you measure the value of your work? How do you sell that value to the organization's decision makers?"

"I don't have time for that." So, how are you being strategic then? So, it keeps going around and around. But I do think there are people that are committed to becoming more strategic and they're the communication professionals I love working with, because they have an open mind and they don't think they know it all.

David Pembroke:

No. No. And I think that notion of humility, we don't know everything, there's perpetual change in what we do in terms of technology and the impacts that technology then have on audiences and what their needs and preferences are. So, there's really no room to think that too much, because things are changing very quickly and you really do need to stay centred, stay grounded, you do need to think about those longer term strategic outcomes that you're driving towards. But context shifts so quickly that you really do need to stay clear and stay focused on what it is that you're trying to achieve. So, with that in mind, where then, or what are you seeing as the important qualities and skills that young communicators should be focused on in order for them to be valued in those senior meetings? To be addressed with respect and confidence and to be able to make the recommendations that are valued by organisations?

Sia Papageorgiou:

So, I think strategic planning is a key skill, because strategic communication doesn't happen, it's a result of structured planning. And so what are those elements that make up strategic communication planning, and look at the important things. What are you trying to do with your communication? Does it meet a business need? Is it solving a business problem? And having that really as your anchor moving forward. Because, again, we don't do comms because we've got nothing better to do, we do it because it fulfils a purpose. And then looking at your communication from an outcome perspective rather than an output perspective. So, instead of counting things and focusing on those vanity metrics, look at the outcomes. What do you want people to know? What do you want them to think and feel? What do you want them to do and say as a result of your communication? If you focus your communication around those outcomes, you will act and create more strategic communication.



So, the first thing is planning, and that includes measurement of course. I think change communication is a key skill that we need to get better at doing, and that's different to other communication skills. So, people just bucket that in with everything else. But the rate of change is just getting faster and faster. Organisations throughout COVID have transformed in a number of ways, and that transformation is not going away. The future of work is unclear, the way we are working is still not worked out. There is no consistent view in most organisations about what that looks like. So, change communication is a key skill.

And I think we need to get better as a function at taking our consultancy mindset or an agency mindset. So we are not the controllers of communication anymore, we are the facilitators of communication. If we want communication in an organisation to occur in a robust way, to be effective, for our leaders to be good communicators, for employees to know what a good communication practise looks like, we have to let go of the controls a little bit more and teach people about what that looks like. So, we really become coaches.

David Pembroke:

I totally agree. And this, again, is the world according to me, is the communication function is undergoing rapid transformation driven by digital technology, and this sense that central communication teams are going to be able to enable the level and the volume and the velocity of communication that is required at the speed that it's going to be required to meet the needs of audiences, I just can't see that's going to happen. And like edge computing where we're moving computing power closer to the edges of organisations to meet the needs of audiences, I think it's going to be the same with communication skills and capability. And it's got to be moved closer to audiences, because their requirements aren't slowing down, their demands aren't slowing down.

Sia Papageorgiou:

That's right.

David Pembroke:

And they're not going to wait, they're moving at warp speed. And so this notion of control and approvals and risk, I'm really interested in your views on that in transforming organisations, particularly public sector organisations. Because there's no presentation that you can ever make or no engagement with an audience that you can make in the public sector that someone doesn't roll their eyes about approvals and waiting for approvals and waiting for people to green light activities, which are sometimes, because they're not done when they need to be done, they're lost.

That contextual opportunity might pass by, because you weren't quick enough to be able to hit that opportunity. So, what's your view around that governance piece, around risk, around approvals, at a time where this transformation is taking place where audiences are increasingly demanding, particularly of public sector organisations who, as you mentioned earlier, do have a trust problem because they aren't as responsive as people want them to be?

Sia Papageorgiou:

We have a real opportunity to change the way we think about risk and things like approvals. I mean approvals aren't unique just to government organisations, but having worked in the government for 12 and a half years as I did back then, the ATO back then was very risk averse, and I'm sure many government departments are still very risk averse. I think we have an opportunity to get our governance processes up to scratch first. So, really defining what a robust communication function and how communication function should operate. So, again, in my work with organisations and running communication audits and reviews, I'm still surprised at the number of functions who don't have any formal process or procedures when it comes to communication.

How do you operate? What does good communication practise look like? How can my stakeholders use the tools and templates and the frameworks that I've got to then do communication themselves, which frees me

up to do more valuable work? But all of that, and using the information that we have at our disposal, including reports like the Edelman Trust Barometer around the impact of risk and being too risk averse and holding things up. I mean if you look at the latest Edelman Trust report, they did a special report, Trust in the Workplace, quality information matters more than fair pay.

That blew my mind. Let's anchor what we are doing in things like that so we can make a case for it. And I noticed that at the time that I was preparing to leave the ATO, we were focusing more on an experience for our citizens that mirrored the consumer experience. And I think that's what we also have to do in the communication space. People want information that is easy to digest, easy to consume, I get to choose what I want, and frame your communication around that. It's not this thing that takes three weeks. If you take three weeks to get something out the door, you've missed the boat. But that's something that takes time to do. You're not going to do it over time.

But if you have built the right relationships and you start building leadership communication competence, organisational communication competence, you can start to factor those things into your approach around let's have a communication experience that mirrors the consumer experience. And also just because we're a government agency doesn't mean we have to be boring and really stagnant in our approach. We have an opportunity to be creative and a little bit cheeky sometimes. What's wrong with that?

David Pembroke:

Well, there's nothing wrong with it at all. And again, getting the tone right is so important, depending what it is that you are talking about. But tone, context, that shape of the communication, the form, the format, the time, the channel, these are all things that need to be considered in developing effective communication programmes. But I'm interested in your observation there around change communication and the differences that you see in enabling effective change communication. Can you just expand on that for me a little?

Sia Papageorgiou:

So, as I mentioned earlier, the organisations are undergoing significant change right now. Many are still trying to figure out what the future of work looks like for them, getting people in the door, keeping them in the door, making sure they're doing what they're say they're doing, acting consistently, all of that sort of thing. And change communication is really one of those capabilities that has... it's similar but it has some nuances that communication professionals really need to understand. And that is, I mean if you look internally, for example, a lot of that around change communication is around listening. It's around ensuring that people understand what is going on, is giving them that context for change. And people always hide behind, "Oh, people don't like change."

It's not that they don't like change, they don't understand why it's happening. Because organisations just go hell for leather on the change without taking the opportunity to explain the context behind why something's happening. And so there's a key skill there for communication professionals to explain that to people. I think we also, again, going back to what I said earlier about taking an agency mindset and being coaches, is really helping leaders take charge of change, because ultimately that's their job. And what do people want? People want to play a part in the change, and people support what they help to create. And if you can give people a role to play in the change, then you are going to go a lot further in getting buy-in your messages and in ensuring the change happens and sticks.

So, from a communication perspective, there are some nuances that need to be accounted for that are different to the normal strategic communication planning, and there's a lot more psychology in change. And so that's the difference from a skilling perspective. When we teach courses in change, we go through the change curve and things like the reaction over time model and things like that. So, people think they can prevent people from having a reaction. You can't. But if you use your communication in the right way, you can shorten the time it takes from going from A to B, and that's the difference.

David Pembroke:

Clearly looking back, you've had a wealth of experience, public sector, private sector, education, being a part of a global excellence organisation such as the IABC, driving certification, encouraging people to test their skills and to stay on top of their skills as they drive towards further progress in their careers and having the value of that certification, which is really the proof that someone is able to complete a function to a particular level. But if I could ask you then to perhaps look into the future and give us your views on the communication function over the next three to five years, maybe even a little bit longer than that, where do you see it going, and how do we get there? How do a profession work together to be able to achieve our fullest potential?

Sia Papageorgiou:

I think we have an opportunity to be a lot more consolidated and connected. At the end of the day from an organisational perspective, I think in the future collaboration and conversation are going to become even more important given the current way we're working. So, we have a role to play in facilitating that connection, facilitating that humanity, telling those stories so people feel aligned to their organisation, they stay in their organisations longer. And I also think that we have a key role to play in helping our organization's leaders seriously break down silos in organisation.

And you get that everywhere. Silos exist everywhere. But you can't work collaboratively if you're working in a silo or you have a silo mentality. And so I think that is going to feature more heavily. As I said earlier, I think we need to take more of an agency mindset and think like an agency. We're there to provide the advice, we're there to provide the frameworks, the resources, the tools and the templates, and facilitate communication, not control it. Obviously technology is going to feature heavily in our future. Artificial intelligence, we've been talking about it for years, but communication professionals are not so good at taking the control.

We always wait for others to say, "Okay, well, it's fine to use this now, it's important that we do this and let's go ahead and do it." Rather than taking control and saying, "Well, I don't want this to damage what I'm currently doing or to derail my efforts. I have to look into is this important to what I'm currently doing?" And then focus on what truly matters to your organisation, building our business acumen so we can make sure that we are solving business problems, prioritising listening, and keeping learning at the centre of everything we do. And finally putting this measurement piece to bed, because we've been talking about it for decades and we just put a different spin on it. Let's just put it to bed. Measure what matters, find out what's important, demonstrate your results, focus on outcomes and you can't go wrong.

David Pembroke:

Would you say that you are on balance very optimistic, optimistic, neutral, pessimistic, very pessimistic? Where would you put yourself on that scale?

Sia Papageorgiou:

In terms of what the future holds?

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, probably not so much what the future holds, because the potential is obvious, the opportunity is clear, but on that scale from a communication profession point of view, in terms of on that scale, where do you think we're going to land? How are we going to be able to grip up these challenges and opportunities in a way that positions communication as a far more influential fundamental business function inside an organisation?

Sia Papageorgiou:

Look, I am optimistic, I'm naturally an optimistic person. So, I would like to think that communication professionals have heard it loud and clear, particularly through COVID. I mean at the end of the day, as a profession, we are exhausted, we're tired, COVID has really impacted our mental wellbeing. And I'm not sure if you've seen my report, but I looked into that.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. No, no, I contributed to that. And actually why don't we just quickly jump into that, because it's an important piece of work. Just to summarise to the audience, what was the findings, or what were the findings of your state of mental wellbeing in the communication research that you did?

Sia Papageorgiou:

Yeah, so that was a study I kicked off last October to coincide with World Mental Health Day. And we had responses from almost 800 communication professionals in 40 countries, and around 12% of those respondents were from government. And what we found some really alarming results from this study, and that is that communication professionals overall are stressed, they're anxious, and they're frustrated. What I found most alarming though is almost half of respondents said they've considered leaving the profession for their sake of their mental wellbeing. That I found very, very alarming and something that I think as a profession we need to address as a matter of urgency.

Two-thirds of respondents said their mental wellbeing has declined since the beginning of the pandemic. Less than half at the time were optimistic about their mental wellbeing going into 2022. And here's another key opportunity for communication professionals, almost three quarters believe their organisations should do more to support mental wellbeing in the workplace. One in 10 organisations are seen to offer no mental wellbeing support to their employees, and only 55% of managers are seen to actively ask their team members, their communication professionals, how they're going, and even less are seen to actively listen to their people.

And similar results for our peers and colleagues. We are not listening to our peers and colleagues, we're not supporting our peers and colleagues. We're not checking in to see how they're feeling. And so these are key opportunities. I also spoke to seven communication leaders around the world, including Russell Grossman, who is the director of communication at the office of Rail & Road in the UK, about what they were doing to support the mental wellbeing of people in their organisation and also the mental wellbeing of their communication professionals.

And it was really clear that those organisations that were getting it right had three things in common. They actively create a working culture that normalises the topic of mental wellbeing. And one of the leaders I spoke to was Danielle Bond, who is the Director of Comms at Aurecon. And at Aurecon they start each meeting with a health, safety and wellbeing share. So, they're starting to embed those conversations into their daily practises. The organisations also prioritise listening, and they do that in a number of ways. It's not just structured listening, but it's also informal listening.

So, they have lots of one-on-one catchups, group catchups, check-ins, a series of questions they can ask each other and that type of thing. And thirdly, they have leaders who role model the behaviours they want to see, that support a psychologically safe environment. So, they're the three things that they had in common. But some wonderful insights, and I think what we do next is really going to determine how successful we are as a profession. We need to look after each other more, we need to care for each other more, we need to have more conversations about how we're feeling, and then focus on high value work, the strategic work. And through the report as well, David, workloads and demands featured heavily as what impacts the mental wellbeing of communication professionals, which gives us an opportunity, are we focusing on the right work?

Are we focusing on the high value work that's going to elevate our value and visibility and make sure that we stay at the top? Or are we just going to sink back into doing the doing? Ask any communication professional what they're up to, and their answer is usually, "I'm busy." And one of my colleagues said around the time I

was conducting this study, "Hard work is valued in our profession and worn like a badge of honour." And another colleague said, "Yes, but we have to remember how to be human." And I just think that nails it, like those two comments prove where we're at as a profession right now.

David Pembroke:

It's interesting, isn't it? Because if the profession doesn't grip up these types of problems and identified by those alarming statistics, it'll never reach its potential, because it'll never be mature enough to be able to grow towards that potential. Because you won't be able to hold onto the people, people won't be able to perform to the level that you need them to perform at to deliver on that high value, more impactful work. So, it's a credit to you that you've laid out the challenge and the opportunity and the solution, and really it's for every leader and even participant really in the profession to really have the courage to talk about it more and make it something that is normalised.

Sia Papageorgiou:

Absolutely. And this is why I feel so passionately too about certification, because that's what's been missing from our profession, consistent standards. And that's what certification gives us. It elevates our profession. It's a profession that has standards and ethics and a clear purpose. And if we can wrap ourselves in what we do around a global standard of strategic communication excellence, well, then automatically the value of what we do increases.

David Pembroke:

Very true, Sia Papageorgiou, very true. And thank you so much for giving up some of your time today. It's been a wonderful conversation and I love talking to you because, again, that authenticity, that empathy, that leadership, that love of the game, so to speak, always comes out in conversations with you. And you are to be congratulated for stepping forward into that leadership role, that educator role, and the impact that you're having across not just in Australia, not just in Victoria, but around the world. Fantastic.

It's just wonderful to know you, to admire you, and to see the ongoing contribution you continue to make. And there's just so much value in our conversation today. The purpose of the GovComms Podcast is really to learn and to gain the benefit of the wisdom of people such as yourself. And thank you so much on behalf of the audience for sharing that with us today. We are very grateful for that.

Sia Papageorgiou:

Thank you so much, David. It's been an absolute pleasure speaking with you, and I love what you're doing at GovComms. Absolutely. Well done.

David Pembroke:

Thank you so much, Sia. And to you, the audience, thank you for sticking around. That one went a little bit longer, but come on, it was good fun and so much value there. And really, go back and listen to it again. I've just made a pile of notes that I'm going to go away and read now and reflect on, because again, we have just had the benefit of sitting with one of the best in the business and she's taught us all so much today. And again, that's what the podcast is all about, that if we can take some of this knowledge and wisdom away and apply it in our daily lives to be more courageous, to do this higher value work, to be strategic, the frameworks are there. We know how to structure this stuff together, to get off that hamster wheel of the busy, of the doing, and get out and build those relationships and make sure you are curious and make sure you invite yourself along to all sorts of discussions.

Audience, it's the first, second, third, fourth, and fifth most important thing when you're thinking about your communication. So, where are those opportunities to learn more inside your organisations? But also, as Sia

said, where's the data? It's everywhere. There are reports everywhere. So, go out, equip yourself, be ready to add value so you can be in those conversations. And learn from Sia, what she said in that meeting where she was called upon to step forward and she just didn't quite have the confidence to be able to step up and do it, well, make sure that you are ready for when your Sia moment comes, that you step into that opportunity and you have the impact that communications can have.

Because I tend to agree with Sia, that our time has come and now it's up to us to really take this opportunity. But anyway, sermonising over, time to get back to work, time for you to get back to work, time for me to get back to work. And a big thanks again to Sia Papageorgiou for helping, and also to Olivia Casamento who does such a great job pulling these programmes together. We'll be back at the same time in a fortnight, but for the moment it's bye for now.

Outro:

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