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# Identifying competence characteristics for excellent communication professionals

## A work field perspective

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to clarify which knowledge, skills and behaviors are used to describe excellent performance in professional communication. As the demand for talented communication professionals increases, organizations and educators need an empirically defined set of performance criteria to guide the development of (potentially) excellent communication professionals (ECPs). This research aimed to render a competence profile which could assist in the development of recruitment, training and development to develop relevant programs for high-potential communication practitioners.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This mixed-method research was approached in two phases: first, a series of focus groups ( $n = 16$ ) were held to explore work field perspectives resulting in a concept profile, and second, a series of expert panels ( $n = 30$ ) following the Delphi method were conducted to determine the extent of agreement with the findings.

**Findings** – Participants clarified that excellent performance is characterized by competences which transcend normative technical skills or practical communication knowledge. The five domains, 16 item “SEEDS” competence profile describes that ECPs are distinguished by their compounded ability to be strategic, empathic, expressive, and decisive and to see patterns and interrelationships.

**Research limitations/implications** – Although a broad range of relevant professionals were involved in both phases, the study could be considered limited in size and scope. Research was conducted in one national setting therefore further research would be necessary to confirm generalizability of the results to other cultural contexts.

**Originality/value** – Although many competence frameworks exist which describe normative performance in this profession, specific criteria which illustrate excellent performance have not yet been identified. This competence profile clarifies characteristics which typify excellent performance in professional

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communication and can be helpful to educators and employers who wish to identify and create suitable training programs for ECPs.

**Keywords** Research, Career development, Communication excellence, Communication practitioner

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

We often hear about a “war for talent”: organizations engaged in a battle to hire the best and brightest professionals in their industry. These professionals excel at their tasks: they are regarded as initiators of innovation, leaders in their fields and inspirations to their colleagues. As they contend with new technology, economic pressure, and constant societal change, organizations need excellent professionals to craft effective strategy and tools to respond to these complex, interdisciplinary challenges (Stahl *et al.*, 2012). It is therefore no surprise that organizations are increasingly focused on finding and leveraging their talents to achieve their strategic, economic and societal goals (Combs *et al.*, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lawrence, 2015).

Regrettably, identifying the professionals who excel in managing these organizational demands is difficult (Wooldridge, 2006; Nilsson and Ellström, 2012). Although variables to identify excellent communication departments have been empirically defined (Verčič and Zerfass, 2016), specific competences which can be used to describe the individual who performs at an excellent level are not as clear. So, what is an excellent communication professional (ECP)? What competences do they possess and display which distinguish them as excellent and make them especially suited to excel at accomplishing these complex tasks? This exploratory research investigated the characteristics of an excellent individual communication practitioner, with the aim to assist organizations and educational institutions to more effectively steer their identification, training, and development efforts.

### Excellence in professional communication

Professional communication is an overarching term for a range of vocations focused on creating “purpose-driven communication” through writing, speaking, visual design, relationship management and change activities both in- and external to organizations (Schriver, 2012, p. 276). Communication professionals (CPs) work in every imaginable sector in the public, private, non-profit, and governmental spheres. A CP could be seen as the “voice” of an organization, tasked to engage with publics internally and externally, both on and off line. In Europe, the function of the CP is evolving from being mainly operational into a vital strategic position, with increasingly complex responsibilities evaluating and aligning strategic goals and stakeholder demands, educating and supervising staff, and managing change and crises (Zerfass *et al.*, 2012). The vital role of the CP is becoming more visible, as when organizations manage communication poorly, implications can be devastating not only for the organization, but for individuals, society, and the environment; for example, the recent notable cases of communication failure at ENRON (Seeger and Ulmer, 2003), BP’s Deepwater Horizon (De Wolf and Mejri, 2013) and Fukushima (Perko, 2016).

Many scholars have described aspects of excellence in the context of the communication profession. Possibly the most widely referenced is Grunig’s (1992) Excellence Theory, which describes three interacting spheres which influence excellent communication departmental performance: knowledge which exists within the communication department, the link between a communication department and senior management, and the environment or culture wherein these are imbedded. Although this theory describes excellence at departmental, organizational and cultural levels, it does not clarify with specificity the qualities of the individual practitioners within these spheres.

From another perspective, ECPs have been described as the “leaders” at the top of their field (Meng and Berger, 2013). Communication leaders display six major competence

dimensions (self-dynamics, team collaboration, ethical orientation, relationship building, strategic decision-making capability, and communication knowledge management capability) which have direct influence on not only professional outcomes, but also sphere of influence in the organizational context. Meng and Berger (2013) provide some insight into high level performance competences, however their focus lies predominantly with aspects of leadership as related to excellent performance. Although these specific leadership skills and being an ECP could be synonymous, however, one could question whether being an excellent leader or manager and being an ECP is one and the same. In the current research, we look at performance from a broader perspective, exploring competences beyond displaying strong leadership or managerial skills, as we argue that even professionals in a subordinate function could be excellent despite not fulfilling a supervisory or coordinating role, and that there could be additional performance or aspects of competence which are equally or more relevant for someone to be considered excellent in this field.

Recently, Tench *et al.* (2017) proposed a description of excellent communication based upon decades of research from European organizations. In their model, they discuss how high-level communication is accomplished at three levels from the individual, to the department and then the organization. In their research, they describe CPs who excel as ambitious professionals who are “sagacious, linked, and solid.” This infers that an excellent CP should possess additional competences or traits beyond what is normally expected from a competent CP. Their research indicates that focus on the individuals within the team is an important factor in building a strong department, and this confirms a relevant need to investigate which specific competences should be used upon which to base selection, recruitment and eventual training initiatives.

### **Professional communication competences**

Competences are a coherent set of specific skills, knowledge, attitudes (SKA's) and demonstrable outputs which are integral to performance in a particular professional function (Boyatzis, 2008; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Mulder, 2014). Competences should be measurable against a standard, or framework, and improvable through training and development (Lucia and Lepsinger, 1999). Furthermore, focusing upon the competences needed to perform well professionally instead of requirements for a specific role is advantageous, as competences describe more foundational aspects which tend to remain relatively constant whereas role descriptions fluctuate regularly (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011).

Beginning with Broom and Smith's (1979) proposal of four main roles for CPs, there has been an increasing drive to identify the specific competences which could best prepare professionals for their work tasks, both from education and the professional field. In the Communication field, competences have been described from functional, national and international perspectives, at varying educational levels or professional contexts. The focus of the matrices is diverse: some matrices describe SKA's through experience levels from novice to senior functions (Logeion, 2015; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association of Business Communicators, 2016; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016), others focus on describing competences attributed to a variety of roles which practitioners fulfill (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Logeion, 2015; Tench and Moreno, 2015) and still others describe end level competence requirements related to expected attainment of competences at different educational end levels (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008; National Communication Association, 2015; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016). Descriptions of competence can be applied to both national (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2016; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Logeion, 2015; National Communication Association, 2015; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016, and international contexts (Zerfass *et al.*, 2012; Tench and Moreno, 2015; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association

of Business Communicators, 2016). Although hardly an exhaustive list of all available communication competence profiles, the models reviewed for this study provide a broad general indication of the variety of specific skills, knowledge and attitude aspects which could be relevant for the CP.

When reviewing the content of the profiles, there appear to be seven main competence domains, namely: theoretical aspects of the communication discipline, technical communication skills, organizational environment and processes, peripheral context, research and analytical ability, interpersonal aptitude, personality or character traits. Within these matrices, there is significant variation. While one matrix explains requirements of a competence area in detail, others present the required competence in more general terms.

For example, while all explain that knowledge of communication theory is important for a general practitioner, some state that familiarity with the history of the profession is integral (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016; Global Alliance, 2015) or give examples of specific areas of theory which should be stressed, such as lobbying (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011) or crisis management (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016). Technical skills required for standard performance also vary, with some matrices stressing the ability to apply general skills to “create messages appropriate to the audience purpose and context” (National Communication Association, 2015) or “produce and deliver effective messages” (Zerfass *et al.*, 2012) and others listing specific skills to be mastered, such as presentation skills (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008), persuasive writing (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016), or the use of media and social channels (Global Alliance, 2015). General knowledge of the organizational environment and processes are covered by nearly all, however some stress project management skills very specifically (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association of Business Communicators, 2016). Nearly all matrices include factors relating to understanding the external environment or peripheral context, highlighting requisite knowledge and ability to consider society, culture and the community, however some profiles ask for specific consideration for understanding trends (Logeion, 2015; Tench and Moreno, 2015) identity issues (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016) or ethics (National Communication Association, 2015; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association of Business Communicators, 2016; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016). Research and analytical skills were explained in some form within all matrices. In the area of interpersonal aptitude, some descriptions emphasized managing or building relationships with stakeholders (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Global Alliance, 2015; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016,) while others focus on specific interpersonal skills like listening (Tench and Moreno, 2015; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016), advisory skill (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008), displaying empathy or empathic antenna (Zerfass *et al.*, 2012; Tench *et al.*, 2013), or the ability to communicate in more than one language (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008). Personality and character traits are mentioned in all profiles, for example, aspects such as self-efficacy (National Communication Association, 2015), curiosity (Tench and Moreno, 2015) being entrepreneurial (Vereniging Hogescholen 2008; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016).

While these matrices cover diverse areas of competences, no profile highlighted what it means to display excellent performance in any way. They remain limited to definitions of increasing levels of standard, normative performance throughout a professionals' career or education, and did not clarify what talent or excellent performance within these levels entails. In other fields, research which defines the constructs of excellent performance is emerging (Paans *et al.*, 2013; Witte and Jansen, 2015; Van Heugten *et al.*, 2016). However, a similar framework specific to the communication profession has not been defined. This is problematic for organizations which want to select and train CPs based upon competences relevant for excellence.

## Talent and excellence

Although organizations and institutions may differ in how they describe excellent performance or professional talent (Tansley, 2011), commonly they refer to how well an individual performs at their assigned task or their professional performance in general (Nilsson and Ellström, 2012). More than just content experts or highly experienced staff, excellent professionals possess a special “combination of tacit and explicit knowledge, behaviour and skills, that gives someone the potential for effectiveness in task performance” (Draganidis and Mentzas, 2006, p. 5). These individuals have further been described as possessing high level performance capabilities such as meta-cognitive knowledge, professional engagement, situational awareness and autonomy (Sternberg, 2001; Renzulli, 2003; Feltovich *et al.*, 2006; Goleman, 2006). Generally, performers who excel are more skilled than average performers in empathy, societal and contextual awareness, and relationship management competencies (Bambacas and Patrickson, 2008; Boyatzis, 2008; Howard and Bray, 1988; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Westerhoudt, 2008). This is relevant in the Communication field, as without developed empathic skills, professionals are not able to effectively translate stakeholder intentions into appropriate messages while reflecting organizational responsibilities, norms and goals, especially imperative during often emotional projects involving conflict and change (Goleman, 2006; Kellett *et al.*, 2006; De Jong and Lentz, 2007; Lentz and De Jong, 2009).

Gifted is often a term used synonymously with talent and excellence. Research indicates that gifted individuals differ significantly from their peers in factors essential for achievement in professional practice, specifically in terms of intelligence, creative thinking, openness to experience, desire to learn and motivation to excel (Scager *et al.*, 2012). Gifted individuals express superior natural abilities in their field and are among the top 10 percent of their peers when compared by intellectual, creative, socio-affective, or sensorimotor aptitude (Gagné, 2004).

## Aim of the current study

Research therefore suggests that excellent performance is much broader than just deep technical or practical knowledge, and that excellent individual professionals may or may not possess inherent aptitudes for specific performance areas. Regardless of the whether aspects of professional excellence are natural or learned, if organizations aim to select and manage talent, or an individual intends to develop into an excellent professional, then a set of criteria to describe excellent performance is a necessity (Nilsson and Ellström, 2012). Therefore, in this research we aim to explore which criteria could best be used to describe individual excellence in the Communication profession.

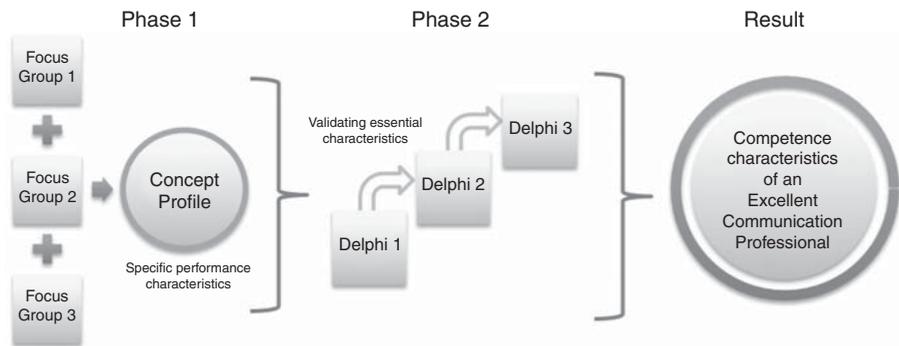
This exploratory study aimed to identify competences for excellent performance in professional communication using a mixed-method qualitative approach. The goal was to investigate the specific characteristics of excellent performance as valued by the professional field, and present these in the form of a conceptual profile which could be used to develop or improve the competences of focus in training and development programs. This led to the following overarching question:

*RQ1.* According to the professional field, which competence characteristics typify an ECP?

## Method

This mixed-method research was approached in two phases: first, three focus groups (FGs) were held to explore work field perspectives resulting in a concept competence profile, and second, a series of expert panels following the Delphi method were conducted to reach consensus about the relevant competences (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**  
Research phases



### *Phase 1: FGs*

First, a series of FGs were conducted to explore a broad range of views about excellent performance in a field comprised of diverse occupations. We chose to use FGs as this is a suitable method for the exploratory nature of this phase. FG discussions prompt participants to interact and think aloud, evoke discussion and encourage commentary on each other's views (Kitzinger, 1994; Burns and Bush, 2003). The discussion provides participants the means to interactively discuss a range of viewpoints and experiences on the topic of excellent performance and to help clarify group norms (Kitzinger, 1994; Lindhof and Taylor, 2002). This process reveals rich information that may not emerge in a survey or in individual in-depth interviews (Hennink *et al.*, 2011) and can reveal insight and nuances which may be less accessible using other methods (Morgan, 1997).

### *Participants*

Participants of the FGs ( $n = 16$ ) were professionals working in the communication field in the Netherlands. A broad representation of individuals from the professional networks of the lecturers of our research institute, the institute's advisory board, and members of national professional communication organizations were approached to participate. Inclusion criteria stipulated that participants possess enough relevant experience as CPs to express the differences between excellent and normative performance. By selecting participants from a broad range of communication professions and experience levels, the intention was to evoke discussion, debate and lively discourse from a variety of perspectives to arrive at conceptual definitions of excellent performance. Participants were recruited from a variety of occupations within organizational communication, marketing communication, public affairs, brand management, communication consulting, and multimedia design with responsibilities ranging from internal and external business communication, public relations, and multimedia content creation. Participants came from a variety of sectors: ICT, financial, government, marketing, retail, non-profit, education, training, services, event management and multimedia design. All were working in professional communication occupations: 6 as self-employed consultants (35 percent) and 11 employed by an organization (65 percent). Furthermore, selecting participants from throughout the country was essential to account for possible diversity in answers due to local professional culture. Participants were nearly equally distributed by gender (Female = 9, Male = 7) and ranged in age from 24 to 61 years old. Participants were informed of the nature of the research project and the intended methods in advance, and were provided with contact information to clarify any questions prior to the FG proceedings. Table I presents a summary of FG participant characteristics.

*Procedure*

Before the FGs occurred, a discussion guide was created. This discussion guide was used by the moderator to help introduce concepts, facilitate discussion and sustain focus upon the research topic during the FGs. The guide structured the approach to gathering information and to operationalized concepts found in literature concerning descriptions of normative communication competence, theory on excellent performance in professional communication contexts and educational theory regarding talent and giftedness development in general. The first set of probes aimed to elicit examples of behavior, attitudes or knowledge which a CP displays that typify excellent performance to look for convergence or divergence with the available competence matrices (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011; Zeffass *et al.*, 2012; Logeion, 2015; National Communication Association, 2015; Tench and Moreno, 2015; Global Alliance, 2015; International Association of Business Communicators, 2016; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016). Next, the probes explored topics concerning professional talent and excellent performance in the context of the profession (Grunig, 1992; Nilsson and Ellström, 2012; Meng and Berger, 2013) and indicators of giftedness in general, such as knowledge, experience, interpersonal skills, situational awareness, and autonomy (Sternberg, 2001; Renzulli, 2003; Feltovich *et al.*, 2006; Goleman, 2006).

Next, questions probed to what extent excellent behavior is classified by excelling in one specific area, or if there may be a combination of areas needed to be seen as excellent. Attention was also given to the contextual aspects of excellence, such as who determines whether or not a professional is excellent, if there is a correlation between someone's personal background and his/her potential for excellence, and which factors may be generic or profession specific indicators of excellent performance. Closing questions covered the awareness of measures used to identify excellent performance within the profession or organization, as well suggestions for discussion topics which may have been missed or which deserved attention in further FGs.

Three FGs were held between January 2014 and April 2014 (N1: 3, N2: 6, N3: 7). All FGs lasted approximately 90 minutes and were recorded for later transcription. The sessions took place in quiet conference rooms at a university campus or conference center, and all occurred without disturbance. The moderator was selected from outside the communication profession. For consistency, the same moderator was present at all sessions to ensure that the same questions, process and protocols were applied to each group. A note taker was present as a non-participating observer, to ensure that all discussion was properly recorded and any additional relevant annotations were made. The moderator began each FG with the same question, specifically: "How would you describe excellent performance in the communication profession?". To encourage response, participants were asked to envision a CP in their network whom they considered excellent, and then to give examples of behavior, skills or abilities which were indicative of excellent performance. Furthermore, participants were asked to describe the difference between normative and excellent performance.

Gender	Age range	Education level	Relevant professional experience	Function level	Geographical scope of work	
Female	9 20-29	5 Vocational	1 ≤ 5 years	4 Operational	5 Regional	3
Male	7 30-39	6 Higher Professional	8 5-10 years	5 Managerial	4 National	9
	40-49	3 University (academic)	7 > 10 years	7 Strategic	5 International	4
	50-59	1		Director/Executive	2	
	60+	1				

**Table I.**  
Focus groups 1-3  
participant  
composition

The moderator intervened minimally, and only to ensure that all topics were covered, clarify ambiguous terminology used by a participant or to redirect conversation if it diverged from the research topic. Care was taken to stimulate equivalent participation from all participants, explore difference of opinion and response diversity.

### *Data analysis*

The analysis conducted using the systematic method of Grounded Theory using a continuous cycle of collecting and analyzing data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Four researchers independently coded the first transcript using Atlas.ti software, applying an inductive approach to identify codes and categories of concepts emerging from the data. Researchers then performed axial coding to categorize codes and concepts and group them into domains and subsequent items.

Following independent coding, a team consensus meeting was held wherein each researcher presented their own results to the research team. Results were compared and any discrepancies solved through discussion to maintain dialogical reliability (Sandberg, 1997). Next, the researchers paralleled the data set with relevant literature to look for contrasting information or similarities. Researchers discussed data arising from the verbatim text, as well as dynamics between participants, and variables such as emotion, frequency and specificity of response. After each FG, the research team evaluated whether there were aspects which required further attention in subsequent FGs. After any annotations were clarified, the next FG was organized.

The second FG was conducted, recorded, and transcribed, and another cycle of independent data analysis followed by a consensus meeting was repeated. After three FGs had been conducted and analyzed, the research team concluded that no new data were emerging from the discussions (cf. Hennink *et al.*, 2011) and data collection concluded. At this point, results from all three FGs were combined. Results were organized into a preliminary conceptual profile to be used in the second phase of the research.

### *Phase 2: Delphi panel*

During the second phase, the concept profile was set before a panel of professionals ( $n = 30$ ) according to the Delphi method. This method offers a structured approach to arrive at a statistical representation of the level of group consensus concerning a particular concept (Linstone and Turoff, 1975). The Delphi approach is a suitable method for this phase of the research as the aim was to verify whether the concepts to describe excellent performance emerging in the first phase were supported by a broader group of professionals. First, panelists are presented with a questionnaire and asked to assess the concept profile. Responses from the entire panel are analyzed to determine whether the panel responses converge. Should responses fall outside predetermined criteria, the questionnaire is amended and offered again to the panel for experts for review. This cycle continues until consensus by the panel is reached.

### *Panelists*

Inclusion criteria for panelists specified selection of CPs and persons employed in senior roles who work closely with CPs. Panelists came from a broad range of sectors and occupied mid to senior level positions, including executives, managers, researchers, consultants and policy makers. All FG participants were excluded from participation in the panel. In total, 47 professionals were asked to join the panel, resulting in 30 responding panelists. As illustrated in Table II, panelists were evenly represented by gender (15/15) and ranged in age from 25 to 66 years old, with a majority (60 percent) of panelists between 30 and 49 years old. Panelists were predominantly highly experienced professionals, with more than

65 percent having ten or more years of experience in the field. They represented a variety of sectors (medical, government, agriculture, services, education, multimedia, energy, non-profit, consultancy and IT) with half (16) holding a management position. All but one had completed tertiary education at an academic or higher professional level (29). Half (15) of the panelists conducted work on both the national and international level, and only three stated that their work was predominantly regional.

*Procedure*

Using the conceptual profile derived from the data in phase 1, an online survey instrument was constructed following the guidelines for the Delphi technique according to Lawshe (1975). The concept profile was presented in the form of an online questionnaire. Panelists were asked to give their opinion of whether the separate domains and items of the profile are essential characteristics of excellent performance, and whether the domain and item composition are comprehensive. First, they were asked to assess if the items and domains in the concept profile could be deemed “essential,” “important but not essential” or “not necessary” to characterize excellent performance. Subsequently, using a four-point Likert scale, panelists were asked if they “completely agree,” “agree,” “disagree” or “completely disagree” whether the items were located in the correct domains, and if the domain titles accurately described the items within it. The survey was available for response during a three-week period. After two weeks, non-responsive panelists were sent a reminder. Once the minimum of 66 percent response rate was reached, conclusions could be drawn from the results.

*Data analysis*

At the end of each Delphi round, content validity ratios (CVR) for each item were calculated using the formula where CVR represents the content validity ratio, *ne* = the number of panelists in the round who indicate a respective item or domain to be essential, and *N* = the total number of panelists (Lawshe, 1975):

$$\left( \text{CVR} = \frac{ne - \left(\frac{N}{2}\right)}{\frac{N}{2}} \right)$$

CVR values range from +1 to -1, with a value of +1 representing that all panelists indicate an item or domain to be “essential.” Values below zero (negative values) indicate panelists reject a domain or items for inclusion. In this research, only domains and items which were valued above 0.00 were included in the profile. Domain headings and items were changed if more than half of the panelists indicated rephrasing, repositioning or relabeling was necessary.

Following calculation, the research team examined the results and, if necessary, the profile was amended according to the guidelines of the Delphi method by removing rejected components, repositioning or relabeling domains and item locations. Adjustments to the concept profile were made based on analysis of the responses and a revised concept

Gender	Age range	Education level	Relevant professional experience	Function level	Geographical scope of work
Female	15 20-29	3 Vocational	1 ≤5 years	4 Operational	7 Regional 3
Male	15 30-39	13 Higher Professional	15 5-10 years	5 Managerial	8 National 14
	40-49	7 University (academic)	14 > 10 years	21 Strategic	7 International 13
	50-59	5		Director/Executive	8
	60+	2			

**Table II.**  
Delphi panel  
composition

profile was then set before the panelist in another round of the process. This cycle repeated until the panel concurred that all items and domains were suitable for inclusion in a final profile. In total, three Delphi panel rounds were conducted (Round 1 = 30, Round 2 = 23, Round 3 = 19). In all three rounds, the same group of panelists was approached until agreement was reached and a definitive profile established.

## Results

In this section, the outcome of the FGs which formed the input for a concept profile will first be described and then the results of the Delphi rounds during which a final version of the profile was established.

### *Phase 1: FG results*

In all FGs, the question arose whether being excellent meant that a professional was performing at a “level” higher than their peers who perform to standard. As competence standards exist for normal performance at various experience levels, could being excellence mean that one demonstrated higher level skill than is expected at their functional level or than their educational background would attest? Participants resolutely agreed that being excellent meant having qualities in addition to and beyond those expected for general, normative performers. It was specified that the practitioner could function at a normative level at their technical tasks, but that an excellent professional possessed and displayed additional competences beyond those expected. One participant offered that excellent performers possess “extra sensors” which make them more in tune with their environment than normal performers. Participants agreed that expertise (possessing depth of knowledge or skill in a specific area) was not the same as being excellent. According to the participants, an expert is a professional who “focuses on one thing” and “has deeper understanding about how one thing works,” and is someone who could be approached for “specific knowledge” about a subject. According to the participants, an excellent professional is something different: they are able to connect knowledge from several areas and can understand the “dynamic nature of a given (professional) situation.” Being an excellent professional is, therefore, determined by different characteristics than the depth or intensity of a professional’s technical knowledge.

Based on analysis of the FG data, a conceptual profile was developed consisting of 18 specific items grouped into five conceptual groups: strategic, shows self-awareness, expressive, acts with sensitivity, and sees patterns and interrelationships (Table III). This concept profile formed the starting point for the second phase of the research, wherein the profile content was presented to a further set of panelists.

### *Phase 2: results of the Delphi panels*

*Delphi round 1.* Panelists indicated that decisiveness and integrity are two very different concepts. Therefore, in the second round, the two aspects were separated to clarify their relevance. First, the concept domain was relabeled “decisive” and the item describing aspects of integrity was moved to the concept domain “acts with sensitivity” as comment from the panelists indicated that this would be a more suitable position. Within this concept domain the item “knows own personal boundaries” was rejected (CVR = -0.33) and was removed from the profile. In the concept area “expressive,” the item “motivates with their use of language” (CVR = -0.04) was also modified to include a broader description of language including sound and visual imagery based on panelist feedback. By very slim margin, the domain title “shows self-awareness” (CVR = -0.08) was not supported by the panel, however within this concept domain the item “handles decisively and with integrity” was indeed a relevant component. All other aspects were accepted and remained unchanged for the next round. The result of this round was a profile containing five concept domains and 17 items (cf. Figure 2).

**Table III.**  
Concept competence  
profile

Domain/item	Description
<i>Domain 1</i>	<i>Shows self-awareness</i>
1.1	Can reflect critically upon own actions and decision
1.2	Knows own personal boundaries
1.3	Asserts professional distinctiveness (dares to stand out)
1.4	Handles decisively and with integrity
1.5	Actively seeks opportunities
<i>Domain 2</i>	<i>Acts with sensitivity</i>
2.1	Perceives situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives
2.2	Is aware of implications of own actions in relation to others
2.3	Adapts behavior and language to the context
<i>Domain 3</i>	<i>Expressive</i>
3.1	Motivates with their use of language
3.2	Can clearly articulate opinions and attitudes
3.3	Communicates ideas with confidence and transparency
<i>Domain 4</i>	<i>Sees patterns and interrelationships</i>
4.1	Has expertise within and outside own professional field
4.2	Intentionally conscious of the changing world, and acts accordingly
4.3	Quickly integrates emerging knowledge, trends and patterns to professional practice
4.4	Can differentiate relevance of major and minor issues
<i>Domain 5</i>	<i>Strategic</i>
5.1	Purposefully focuses and reflects on their own professional development
5.2	Understands the complexity of (organizational) goals and context, and acts accordingly
5.3	Has developed personal vision on the professional practice

*Delphi round 2.* In the second round, the profile was offered to the same group of panelists as in round 1, resulting in 23 panelists completing the online survey. The panelists established that the concept domain title “acts with sensitivity” (CVR = -0.05) did not describe the corresponding items correctly. After reviewing the comments and original FG data, this domain was labeled “empathic” as this term better described the concept area. Although accepted in round one, the item “has expertise within and outside own professional field” (CVR = -0.39) was now rejected and subsequently removed. The revised five domain, 16 item profile was then offered for a third time to the panel (cf. Figure 2).

*Delphi round 3.* In the third round, 19 panelists ( $n = 19$ ) completed the survey online. In this round, only the concept domain title changes from round 2 were put forward for validation, as all items had been previously accepted by the panelists. All changes offered in this round were accepted and the final profile was established. Figure 2 provides a detailed overview of the CVR, acceptance or rejection of each item and concept domain, and actions taken by the research team throughout the three Delphi rounds.

*Final profile.* At the conclusion of the Delphi rounds, a final profile consisting of five domains and 16 items was established. This “SEEDS” profile clarifies that for a professional to be considered an “ECP,” he or she should display a set of characteristics which distinguishes him or her from peers. As Figure 3 illustrates, the profile highlights five domains of performance characteristics typical to ECPs, which are their ability to be strategic, empathic, expressive, decisive and to see patterns and interrelationships.

Each of the five concept domains contains descriptive items derived from data during both the FGs and Delphi panel rounds (DR) which describe characteristics and competences of each domain in more detail.

*Strategic.* According to the data, ECPs know how their added value could be best applied as advisor to an organization (FG1) and understand what both internally and externally to an organization is at play (FG3). When considering the correct communication approach, they “understand not only the consequences of their input, but the influence and the impact

ROUND 1 (Concept Profile)	CVR(E)	action	ROUND 2	CVR(E)	action	ROUND 3	CVR(E)
STRATEGIC	0.67		STRATEGIC	0.14		STRATEGIC	0.58
purposefully focuses and reflects on their own professional development	0.36		purposefully focuses and reflects on their own professional development	0.36		purposefully focuses and reflects on their own professional development	0.36
understands the complexity of (organizational) goals and context and acts accordingly	0.71		understands the complexity of (organizational) goals and context and acts accordingly	0.91		understands the complexity of (organizational) goals and context and acts accordingly	0.91
has developed personal vision on the professional practice	0.33		has developed personal vision on the professional practice	0.33		has developed personal vision on the professional practice	0.33
ACTS WITH SENSITIVITY	0.42		ACTS WITH SENSITIVITY	-0.05	<i>renamed</i>	EMPATHIC	0.47
perceives situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives	0.11		perceives situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives	0.11		perceives situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives	0.11
is aware of implications of own actions in relation to others	0.46		is aware of implications of own actions in relation to others	0.46		is aware of implications of own actions in relation to others	0.46
adapts behavior and language to the context	0.78		adapts behavior and language to the context	0.78		adapts behavior and language to the context	0.78
			acts with integrity	0.48		acts with integrity	0.48
EXPRESSIVE	0.25		EXPRESSIVE	0.33		EXPRESSIVE	0.89
motivates with their use of language	-0.04	<i>rephrased è</i>	uses language, images and sounds to activate and inspire	0.13		uses language, images and sounds to activate and inspire	0.13
can clearly articulate opinions and attitudes	0.26		can clearly articulate opinions and attitudes	0.26		can clearly articulate opinions and attitudes	0.26
communicates ideas with confidence and transparency	0.50		communicate side as with confidence and transparency	0.50		communicates ideas with confidence and transparency	0.50
SHOWS SELF AWARENESS	-0.08	<i>renamed</i>	DECISIVE	0.24		DECISIVE	0.37
can reflect critically upon own actions and decision	0.56		can reflect critically upon own actions and decision	0.56		can reflect critically upon own actions and decision	0.56
asserts professional distinctiveness (dares to stand out)	0.26		asserts professional distinctiveness (dares to stand out)	0.26		asserts professional distinctiveness (dares to stand out)	0.26
actively seeks opportunities	0.56		actively seeks opportunities	0.56		actively seeks opportunities	0.56
knows own personal boundaries	-0.33	<i>removed</i>					
handles decisively and with integrity	0.71	<i>split - new concept title and item</i>					
SEES PATTERNS AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS	0.92		SEES PATTERNS AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS	0.62		SEES PATTERNS AND INTERRELATIONSHIPS	0.79
intentionally conscious of the changing world and acts accordingly	0.48		intentionally conscious of the changing world and acts accordingly	0.48		intentionally conscious of the changing world and acts accordingly	0.48
quickly integrates emerging knowledge, trends and patterns to professional practice	0.15		quickly integrates emerging knowledge, trends and patterns to professional practice	0.15		quickly integrates emerging knowledge, trends and patterns to professional practice	0.15
can differentiate relevance of major and minor issues	0.48		can differentiate relevance of major and minor issues	0.48		can differentiate relevance of major and minor issues	0.48
has expertise within and outside own professional field	0.50		has expertise within and outside own professional field	-0.39	<i>removed</i>		

**Figure 2.**  
Results at each stage of the Delphi panel rounds

of their solutions (FG1) strategically, tactically, operationally and from a societal perspective.” ECPs have the ability to think beyond prior decisions to “break free from usual models and standards to see where opportunities lie” (FG2). Characteristics to describe excellent performance in this domain offer that ECPs:

- purposefully focus and reflect on their own professional development;
- understand the complexity of (organizational) goals and context, and act accordingly; and
- have developed personal vision on the professional practice.

Empathic. Data indicated that ECPs have ability to be “exceedingly sensitive to the environment and organization” (FG1). They have a well-developed ability to listen, to deeply understand the culture and environment in which they operate (FG2). They have the ability to understand the perspectives of others (FG2), while making certain that “their own personal culture or views do not influence the situation” (FG2). They are able to tailor their communication dependent on the organizational or environmental level (FG2), and do not



**Figure 3.**  
“SEEDS” profile:  
domains of  
competence

place themselves centrally, but look for ways to connect and keep the “other” the principal focus (FG2). By being sensitive and empathic, ECPs are far more effective in the execution of their tasks (FG3). Delphi panel participants did not agree that the term “acts with sensitivity” properly encompassed these aspects. (DR2). Consequently, the domain name was changed to “empathic” which was supported by the panel (DR3). Within this concept, ECPs exhibiting excellent performance:

- perceive situations from diverse professional and cultural perspectives, are aware of implications of their own actions in relation to others;
- adapt behavior and language to the context; and
- act with integrity.

**Expressive.** Data suggest that, compared to their average counterparts, ECPs are far more advanced in their abilities to argue, express, substantiate and persuade (FG1, FG2, FG3). An ECP is a “language powerhouse” (FG3), in the applicable native or foreign dialect, who can “play” with words, pictures and sounds because they have a deeper understanding of their meaning for the audience (FG1). One participant relayed an experience with an ECP, noting her abilities to “paraphrase and translate stakeholder comments in such a way that stakeholders would come to feel engaged with the objectives of the project” (FG2). ECPs must know how to use their voice, to know the manner in which they want to communicate message. Even when dealing with complicated material, ECPs can make the material “more human” (FG3), while remaining “suitable to the educational or intelligence level of the receiver” (FG3). Delphi panelists felt that the item “motivates with their use of language” should be described to include visual language and sound (DR2). Data highlights that ECPs:

- use language, images and sounds to activate and inspire;
- can clearly articulate opinions and attitudes; and
- communicate ideas with confidence and transparency.

**Decisive.** A substantial amount of commentary was given surrounding the aspects of professional identity and self-awareness. ECPs are seen as professionals who are focused and passionate about their craft. ECPs have “a defined understanding of what the profession entails, and what it means for them as an individual, and have made a conscious choice about

how to apply their own skills effectively” (FG2). Participants described an excellent performer as unique, authentic, or having a “special sauce” (FG1) which sets them apart, and “have courage and confidence” (FG1) enough to “know precisely how to demonstrate this individuality” (FG3). They are someone who “stands up for their opinions” (FG1) and “has the courage to bring them to the table” (FG1). Not only do they have strong cognitive abilities, but also possess “sound judgement”: they “know how to make decisions, know when to voice them” (FG1), and “react quickly and effectively.” (FG1). Panel participants affirm that these characteristics describe excellent performance, but felt that the domain title “shows self-awareness” was not suitable (*RQ1*), and therefore the domain was titled “Decisive” according to their comments. This concept domain explains that ECPs:

- can reflect critically upon their own actions and decisions;
- asserts their professional distinctiveness, dare to stand out; and
- actively seek opportunities.

Sees patterns and interrelationships. As indicated from a very high acceptance ratio by the panelists (DR1), curiosity and analytical abilities are key for an ECP, specifically in relation being able to deeply understand the context of the professional situation. Participants felt this had also to do with the ECP’s attitude: their perpetual desire to remain actively learning about their profession (FG3), being interesting in “how things are connected,” (FG1) and aware of what is happening in society (FG1), and then be “able to correlate these with what is happening within their own organization” (FG1). Not only are ECPs about to recognize these patterns and interrelationships, but they are able to consistently challenge their own ideas and assumptions (FG2). Panelists felt that expertise was not a requisite aspect (DR2). Excellent performance characteristics related to this domain describe that ECPs:

- are intentionally conscious of the changing world, and act accordingly;
- quickly integrate emerging knowledge, trends and patterns to professional practice; and
- can differentiate relevance of major and minor issues.

The five domains are symbiotic aspects which collectively form a description of what excellent performance in this profession entails. In other words, although an individual might stand out for exceptional strength in one area, an excellent professional should demonstrate strength in all five domains which typify excellent performance.

## Discussion

Our research aimed to render a profile for excellent performance in the communication profession which could be used as a framework to support the development of training programs for high-potential communication students or professionals. The conceptual profile derived from the data provides an indication of the characteristics and professional behavior, which distinguish an ECP from an adequately performing professional. The conceptual profile should not be viewed as a set of end level program learning outcomes *per se*, rather a list of competences, which could be applied in a variety of professional contexts.

Current competence matrices for the communication profession infer that adequately performing professionals must have a solid grounding in their vocation. In other words, a professional demonstrates the acceptable level in the seven basic competence areas noted in literature, namely: theoretical aspects of the communication discipline, technical communication skills, organizational environment and processes, peripheral context, research and analytical ability, interpersonal aptitude, personality or character traits. But to be recognized as an “excellent” professional, additional characteristics should be demonstrated which supplement or

strengthen the basic competence profile. Professionals from the communication field in this study concur that these five competence domains and 16 items together form a profile of excellent performance indicators. These competence domains are not directly associated with specific technical knowledge or skill areas, but describe broader personal behaviors and capacities, specifically to think strategically, be expressive, empathic, and decisive, and to see patterns and interrelationships.

When the outcome of this research is compared with current general competence matrices, it could be argued that competences related to developing interdisciplinary, expressive, and strategic competences are to some extent described in the national and international competence matrices. However, the general competence matrices do not express the depth of complexity or understanding of context comparable to what is expected for excellent performance, nor do they describe a difference in level between standard and excellent performance levels. Interdisciplinary skill is often described as the ability to analyze and work within different contexts, disciplines cultural settings. With regard to peripheral or contextual competence, the SEEDS profile stipulates more than just ability to see the patterns and interrelationships: an excellent performer can creatively act upon and synthesize contextual knowledge, which is not a focus of the profile for a general practitioner. With regard to expressiveness, some matrices describe the necessity for skills to present or publicize communication information or processes (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2016; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016), but the ability to inspire through language or the degree of transparency is not mentioned in the basic level descriptions. Strategic abilities are described with relation to general organizational abilities (International Association of Business Communicators, 2016; Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016) but lack the aspect of personal vision and the ability to act upon the complexity of their understanding on organizational and societal contexts as indicated for excellent performers.

The aspect of decisiveness seem underrepresented in the standard matrices. Decisiveness in the SEEDS profile refers to a professionals highly attuned ability to critically upon their own actions and decisions, asserts their professional distinctiveness, dare to stand out, and actively seek opportunities. When we look at the basic performance matrices, we do not notice these competences *per se*, however there are some aspects which could be similar. Critical reflection capability could be similar to the ability to be evaluative (Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008). The closest reference to “daring to stand out” could be to the personal attributes of risk-taking or daring (Tench *et al.*, 2013). The aspect of “actively seeing opportunities” seems similar to the criteria of being enterprising (Public Relations Institute of Australia, 2016; Vereniging Hogescholen, 2008). However, none of the profiles seem to include all of aspects of decisiveness as described by the SEEDS profile.

Empathy is indicated as a relevant competence for excellent performance not only by our research as having a “social and empathic antenna” is mentioned as one of the top three desired personal attributes for communication managers (Tench *et al.*, 2013). Our findings support available literature that purports excellent performers are more skilled than average performers in empathy, societal and contextual awareness, and relationship management competencies (Bambacas and Patrickson, 2008; Boyatzis, 2008; Howard and Bray, 1988; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; Westerhoudt, 2008). Our research explains that not only having empathy or displaying it is important, but also being aware of the implications of their own empathic responses and having integrity, which are not aspects made explicit in the studied matrices. Although empathy is a necessity for effective professional performance (Tench *et al.*, 2013), CPs demonstrate weak empathic skills in practice (De Jong and Lentz, 2007; Lentz and De Jong, 2009). As organizations pay increasing attention to the impact of their messages in societal discourse, professionals must understand how the messages concerning their organizational goals impact society (Deetz, 2003). For example, a company extracting natural gas causing earthquakes which

damages thousands of homes should be highly attune to how information concerning their activities is received by the local community. Empathic competence, is therefore an integral aspect should ECPs intend to craft relevant, focused messages to balance both organizational and social interests.

### Limitations

When interpreting these results, some limitations could be considered. With qualitative research, an amount of subjectivity is common, however the research team attempted to minimize this by approaching this using two different data collection methods and approaching two different participant groups. Furthermore, data were individually coded by four independent researchers and compared in several consensus meetings during data collection. The size and scope of the participant group could be an issue of question, however, the research team took care to select a broad range of professional voices, spread both geographically, by function and sector. In the final Delphi round, one fewer participant responded than our criteria specified. However, as the last round only sought approval for three changes in terms, the number of responses was considered adequate.

One might query the international or intercultural replicability of the profile. This study was conducted in the Netherlands and spanned a variety of roles within the communications profession. The profile could be applicable in countries where the role of the CP is similar to that in the Netherlands. However, there are differences in how the CP role is defined in different countries (Zerfass *et al.*, 2012). In countries where the content and focus of the communication profession is different than in the Netherlands, there may be other competences which are more relevant for excellent performance. Similarly, as this study was conducted in the Netherlands, a culture wherein direct and open communication is valued (Hofstede, 2001), results may not be immediately applicable to a culture where indirect communication is the norm. Although more than 50 percent of participants involved in this study work in international contexts, and therefore it could be fair to assume their consideration of excellent performance extended beyond the cultural or national groups to which they belong, further research would be necessary to explore generalizability of the results in other cultural contexts.

After the final Delphi round, during which Dutch language versions of the concept and final profile were employed, an English language version of the profile was created by a native English speaker of the research team. Accuracy of the translation could be considered a limitation however this was verified by conducting a back translation into Dutch with a certified English/Dutch translator.

### Practical implications

Although a specific training for ECPs is highly valued in the profession, there seems to be a discrepancy between what is taught and the organizational needs regarding management, business and communication qualifications (Tench *et al.*, 2013), and many organizations still struggle with a definition for talent or excellence (Wooldridge, 2006). Recruiting (pre-) professionals who excel at not only understanding but responding to the complex business environment (Grunig, 1992) is an issue of more than strategy, but organizational survival (Combs *et al.*, 2006; Collings and Mellahi, 2009; Lawrence, 2015). Human resource departments can actively support their organizations by selecting the right mix of competences to support a communication employee's professional development, especially for those who have the motivation to exceed general performance expectations. The practical relevance of this profile is twofold: for educators, it offers guidelines for assessment and curricular development, and for the work field, it describes competences which could be used for strategic selection and development of high potential candidates. Further research could explore the way in which these profile domains specifically influence

performance in practice, how this profile could be implemented in selection processes and development programs.

For university level education programs, the SEEDS profile can serve as an instrument to define learning outcomes and stimulate innovation in curricular development. Although they lack detailed competence frameworks which describe the SKAs of excellent performance, educational institutions often provide supplementary talent development or “honours” programs (Clark and Zubizarreta, 2008) which target the estimated top 5-10 percent of higher education students who work at a level that could be considered “potentially excellent” (Van Eijl *et al.*, 2005). These programs exist at approximately 50 percent of US universities and colleges (Wolfensberger, 2012) and are increasingly prevalent at European higher education institutions (Wolfensberger, 2015). These programs endow students with additional competences beyond those offered in their regular curricula (Wolfensberger, 2015), and could therefore be designed to focus on specific excellence competences.

A conceptual profile describing excellent performance from a professional perspective provides educators with a set of characteristics to determine relevant competences, define learning outcomes and select appropriate assessment methods. This will help to ensure that educational goals are in line with work field expectations. For example, one approach that curriculum developers could consider to increase competence in the areas of “seeing patterns and interrelationships” and “empathy” could be the creation of more interdisciplinary projects and coursework. By creating opportunities to learn with students and faculty from other disciplines, students are likely to increase both their understanding of other’s perspectives, a key component in empathy development, and their exposure to modes of thought in other fields. As research indicates that the ethical behavior of students often decreases during business education programs, coursework in behavioral ethics could be a way to positively influence ethical decision-making capabilities sorely needed in practice (Drumwright *et al.*, 2015). Such a program might then come close to what was recently conceptualized as the ideal communication curriculum for professionals of the future in which educators “help people learn when and how to be nimble – when and how to pay attention to the codes that call for a shift in attention, when and how to draw on uncommonly used communicative resources” (Dannels *et al.*, 2014, p. 11).

## Conclusion

Identifying and training CPs to excel is a shared goal of industry and higher education (Beechler and Woodward, 2009). Organizations and educational institutions agree that professionals must be trained to contend with the challenges of an unknown and complex future. For organizations, this is of critical importance, as they must do this within a rapidly changing media, economic, social and technological landscape. Using a two-phased approach, this research presents new findings for communication science, presented as the five domain SEEDS profile highlighting performance characteristics of ECPs. This research promotes a connection between the professional field’s expectations and training offered to prepare potentially excellent individuals for professional practice. Without evidence-based descriptive characteristics derived from professional practice, any training initiatives may risk falling short of work field expectations.

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