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A report from Ragan & Arthur W. Page Society

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE AI PARADOX:

Faster Work, Greater Risks and the 'Verification Tax'



As AI takes on more of the work, what will make human communicators indispensable?

About Ragan

Ragan Communications has been delivering trusted news, training and intelligence for more than 60 years to internal and external communicators, HR professionals and business executives via its conferences, webinars,training, awards, subscriptions and membership divisions.

Its daily news sites — PRDaily.com and Ragan.com — are read by more than 600,000 internal and external communicators monthly. Its Communications Leadership Council is one of the fastest-growing membership groups for communications executives and its conferences, webinars and workshops are attended by more than 5,000 communicators a year. Ragan Training is the leading learning portal among communicators, offering more than 800 hours of training and development for communicators. Ragan is also the producer of Communications Week, which is held each November. Ragan is headquartered in Chicago, with team members spanning the country and loyal customers worldwide.

Visit us www.ragan.com.

About Page

Page is the premier global professional association for senior strategic communication leaders. The organization brings together the world's best communicators to become stronger leaders by learning together, helping each other, imagining a better future for corporate communication and bringing that future to life.

This elite community includes the chief communication officers of leading global companies, non-profit organizations, and government agencies; the CEOs of public relations firms and other companies that serve the strategic communication function of major corporations; and distinguished educators at leading business and communication schools. Membership is selected through peer nomination only, with strict nomination criteria.

For more information, visit www.page.org.

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Marlene Neill is a professor and graduate program director at Baylor University, where she teaches courses in public relations and advertising. Her research interests include public relations leadership, internal communication and ethics. She has published more than 40 journal articles and three books on public relations ethics and leadership.

She has been inducted into the PRSA College of Fellows, is a member of the Arthur W. Page Society, and has received the Outstanding Educator Award from PRSA, the 2023 Teaching Excellence Award from the Media Ethics Division of AEJMC, and was selected for the 2026 Pathfinder Award from the Institute for Public Relations. She received her Ph.D. in advertising from the University of Texas at Austin, her M.A. in journalism from the University of Missouri at Columbia, and her B.S. in journalism from the University of Kansas.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As organizations race to embrace artificial intelligence, communicators are discovering unexpected consequences. There's the "verification tax," the time spent fact-checking AI-generated work that can erase promised productivity gains. There's the "middle squeeze," as mid-career professionals face growing pressure from employers who see AI-fluent graduates as a less expensive alternative. And there's a troubling dilemma for the next generation: If AI handles the entry-level work, how will young communicators develop the judgment and skills they need to become tomorrow's leaders?

The disruption doesn't stop there. Some communications executives report cutting agency spending by 40% to 50%, while others are rethinking the skills they hire for and even bringing back old-fashioned writing tests to evaluate candidates without AI assistance. Senior leaders are experimenting with AI-powered "chiefs of staff," even as they confront tools that invent facts, reinforce executive biases and introduce new security risks.

Meanwhile, the role of the communicator itself is evolving, from "messaging strategist" to "reach strategist," as AI transforms how people discover information, engage with brands and make decisions.

These are among the revealing findings of new research from Ragan and the Arthur W. Page Society, based on seven groups with 21 senior communications executives in the United States, United Kingdom and China between March and May 2026. Their experiences paint a picture of a profession at a pivotal moment: AI is creating new efficiencies while challenging traditional career paths, team structures and the value of human expertise. The findings raise a critical question for every communications leader:

As AI takes on more of the work, what makes us indispensable?

While research indicates that nearly 40% of standard tasks in the communication industry can be completed or accelerated with AI assistance, enterprise adoption across the corporate communications function remains predominantly in a "pilot, testing, or sandbox stage." Most experimentation is driven by individual curiosity rather than broad, system-wide workflow integration.

Although 75% of communicators actively use generative AI tools, fewer than half have established formal, AI-enabled workflows. Senior executives face growing challenges around governance, technology integration, "shadow AI" security risks, and the imperative for continuous human oversight.

~40%
Of communications tasks can be completed or accelerated with AI

75%
Of communicators actively use generative AI tools

Top-level Highlights and Recommendations

CURRENT STATE OF AI ADOPTION IN COMMUNICATION

1. Core Tool Usage & Functional Applications

Communication leaders report using enterprise versions of ChatGPT, Anthropic Claude, Google Gemini, and Microsoft Copilot primarily for research, text summarization, competitive analysis, creative brainstorming, and initial drafting. More advanced use cases include:

Agentic AI & Custom "Chief of Staff" Roles

CCOs are training custom AI agents on departmental strategy, brand messaging, and historical transcripts to act as 24/7 thought partners, run metrics analysis, and more.

Executive Voice Cloning

Teams are feeding speech transcripts into custom GPTs to maintain a consistent executive voice across town hall remarks, op-eds, and social media posts.

Workflow Automation

Organizations deploy agents for formulaic, high-volume announcements.

2. The Accuracy Imperative & The "Verification Tax"

While AI offers speed, it introduces a significant "verification tax;" the time gained in rapid drafting is frequently lost during mandatory fact-checking and validation. Because generative tools are probabilistic, they produce authoritative-sounding outputs that contain subtle, critical errors.

"Every single one of them sounds authoritative... And you're introducing that into a corporation that depends on reliability, like 99.99%... You wrestle with a clear verification tax that comes along with AI."

VIRTUAL GROUP #4 PARTICIPANT

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3. Governance, Shadow AI, and Unapproved Tools

To manage privacy risks, organizations establish AI governance councils, led by general counsel and IT, to enforce secure enterprise sandboxes and prohibit feeding confidential corporate data into public models. But some employees skirt the rules anyway.

Tool Dissatisfaction:

Communicators frequently express frustration with mandated enterprise tools like Microsoft Copilot, describing them as clunky or substandard for creative drafting. This friction drives staff to use unauthorized public tools like Claude, Gemini or ChatGPT to achieve better stylistic outputs.

Zero-Tolerance Policies:

Leaders report firing employees not for using AI, but for lazily submitting unverified AI outputs (i.e. AI slop) without proper human auditing.

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4. The High-Stakes Boundary ("No-Fly Zones")

Chief communications officers explicitly prohibit AI usage in high-consequence operational areas, including live crisis response management, raw financial earnings scripts and SEC disclosures, and patient-facing pharmaceutical communications.

IMPACT ON HIRING, WORKFORCE, AND ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES

The Entry-Level Dilemma & The Middle Squeeze

Automating foundational tasks, such as media monitoring, routine drafting, media list compilation, and translation, creates a structural paradox:

1. The entry-level void

If AI handles junior execution, emerging talent loses the foundational experience required to cultivate senior-level strategic discernment.

2. The middle squeeze

Mid-level managers face displacement because they are more expensive than entry-level staff and less AI-native than recent college graduates.

TRANSFORMING AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS & CAPITAL ALLOCATION

Communicators are fundamentally redefining their relationships with outside public relations firms:

Reduction in Execution Spend:

Organizations are insourcing routine "arms-and-legs" support such as basic slide formatting, press release drafting, multi-language translation, and media monitoring by leveraging internal AI tools.

Some report they have reduced their execution spend by 40-50%.

Shift to Strategic Advisory Models:

Traditional execution retainers are being eliminated. CCOs still value strategic insights and are asking agencies to shift from telling them what something says to providing high-level strategic counsel, global/local market nuance, and crisis analysis:

"Tell us what it means."

SHIFT IN CORE COMPETENCIES

As first-draft writing and AP Style memorization become commoditized, the essential skill profile for corporate affairs shifts toward high-level cognitive oversight:

↓ DEVALUED CORE SKILLS

- **First-draft copywriting**
- **AP Style & grammar memorization**
- **Manual media monitoring & clipping**
- **Basic text translation**

↑ ESSENTIAL COMPETENCIES

- **Human judgment & strategic discernment**
- **Prompt architecture & context engineering**
- **Business acumen & financial literacy**
- **Data storytelling & narrative intelligence**

PRACTICAL RECRUITMENT SOLUTIONS: "UNPLUGGED" WRITING TESTS

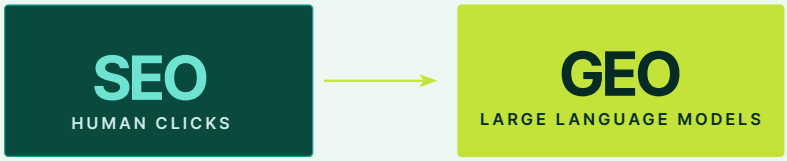
To filter out candidates who rely on AI to mask a lack of critical thinking, CCOs are returning to proctored, unassisted hiring evaluations. Candidates are placed in a room with a blank laptop, no internet access, and no phone, and given 45 minutes to complete a writing task. This evaluates authentic reasoning, problem-solving, and writing capabilities.

45
MINUTES. NO INTERNET. NO PHONE.

EMERGING STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: GEO & EXECUTIVE COUNSEL

Generative Engine Optimization (GEO)

Communicators are pivoting digital strategy from Search Engine Optimization (SEO), targeting human clicks, to Generative Engine Optimization (GEO), targeting large language models. Because LLMs serve as a single point of influence for stakeholders, corporate affairs teams must structure owned websites, white papers, and press releases with high-signal citations, authoritative data, and structured formatting so AI models accurately ingest corporate messaging.



Combating Executive Confirmation Bias

As C-suite executives run their own drafts through AI tools, they frequently receive ego-stroking, polished responses that validate flawed assumptions. The CCO's role is evolving into a reach strategist and trusted business advisor who holds up the mirror to executive leadership, delivering the contextual business judgment, ethical grounding, and human empathy that algorithms lack.

"I'll use a generic executive. There's a risk of confirmation bias, right? Because they go, Oh, thanks for this speech...this is what I'm thinking, and it gives them an answer – Wow, I really like that. Of course, you do, right? It's just stroking your ego, and you're getting your own confirmation bias. And then this is great, isn't it? Well, if you don't have us to hold up a mirror and go, *really*?"

GROUP 1 PARTICIPANT

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR SENIOR LEADERSHIP

01 Engineer Rigorous Knowledge Grounding to Prevent "Agent Assumption Drift"

ACTION

Establish strict knowledge-base indexing and explicit system prompts that forbid agents from making logical leaps or assumptions when synthesizing executive data. Advanced leaders must implement "permission boundaries" and audit protocols requiring agents to cite source files before presenting strategic summaries.

RATIONALE

Custom AI agents access enterprise data and can synthesize unverified connections across disparate files, resulting in "agent assumption drift" by presenting inferred speculation as truth and introducing high-risk fabrications into workflows unless agents are strictly constrained to verified knowledge bases and forced to provide source citations for claims.

02 Program Chief of Staff Agents as "Sparring Partners" to Counter Confirmation Bias

ACTION

Explicitly instruct executive agents to critique strategic briefs, generate counter-arguments, and simulate auditor or adversary perspectives (e.g., "What will regulators or hostile media challenge in this plan?") rather than simply polishing executive drafts.

RATIONALE

Custom agents trained on an executive's voice and strategic plans risk becoming "confirmation bias machines" that stroke executive ego and validate flawed assumptions. Advanced CCOs must configure agents to actively identify blind spots and challenge executive assumptions.

03 Establish Data Access Boundaries to Exclude Draft & Privileged Content

ACTION

Partition enterprise agent memory so agents cannot index raw working drafts, unapproved M&A notes, or sensitive email threads without explicit clearance.

RATIONALE

Deeply integrated enterprise agents (like Microsoft Copilot or custom internal GPTs) automatically scan connected cloud drives and mailboxes. This creates significant risk of referencing incomplete or outdated working drafts as truth or inadvertently exposing legally privileged discussions during automated content generation.

04 Define Explicit "No-Fly Zones" for Autonomous Agent Execution

ACTION

Enforce strict policy boundaries prohibiting agents from autonomously managing crisis response communications, raw financial earnings scripts, or patient-facing/regulatory disclosures.

RATIONALE

Beyond privacy and data leaks, custom crisis agents or legal response models present severe legal discovery risks if subpoenaed during litigation. High-consequence moments require human discernment, empathy and contextual judgment.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR SENIOR LEADERSHIP (CONT.)

05 Transition Team Talent from "Content Writers" to "Agent Builders" for Routine, Low-Stakes Communication

ACTION

Shift hiring and upskilling criteria toward "context engineering," process mapping and building specialized functional agents.

RATIONALE

Advanced teams move away from single-prompt copywriting toward designing automated workflows. The most valuable communicators are no longer those who can only write first drafts, but those who can develop custom AI assistants to execute end-to-end departmental tasks.

06 Enhance Digital Reputation for Bot-to-Bot Ingestion (Agentic GEO)

ACTION

Optimize corporate web assets, white papers and press releases with structured data, explicit citations and machine-readable frameworks designed for external AI agents and LLM scrapers.

RATIONALE

As stakeholders increasingly rely on personal AI agents and LLMs to research brands, corporate communications transitions to "communicating to the machine." High-signal cited content ensures external agents accurately ingest and represent the organization's official narrative.

07 Incorporate Knowledge Transfer Protocols for Departing Experts

ACTION

Use structured agent training to capture the institutional knowledge, technical expertise and decision-making logic of senior specialists before they leave or retire.

RATIONALE

Custom agents provide a scalable mechanism for knowledge management in complex, highly technical or regulated industries. Training agents on historic case studies, past speech transcripts and crisis responses preserves institutional memory for emerging talent.

08 Implement Agent-to-Agent Governance & Cross-Functional Alignment

ACTION

Establish interdisciplinary governance protocols with IT, Legal, and CISO to regulate how custom agents interact across departmental silos.

RATIONALE

As multiple departments deploy their own AI agents, uncoordinated agent-generated communications can create conflicting corporate messaging or unmonitored "bot-to-bot" feedback loops. CCOs must lead their own function's oversight for internal agent alignment.

FOR COMMUNICATORS, THE MANDATE IS CLEAR:

Move beyond experimenting with AI and start redesigning how teams work, the skills they develop and the value they deliver.

That means establishing clear guardrails for responsible AI use, investing in critical thinking and strategic judgment, rethinking career paths and hiring practices and identifying where automation can free employees to focus on higher-value work.

It also means redefining relationships with agencies, preparing for a world where AI increasingly influences how audiences discover information and ensuring communicators have a stronger voice in business decisions. While AI proficiency is essential, the organizations that succeed will be those that combine the speed and scale of AI with the human judgment, creativity, empathy and credibility that technology cannot replace.

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