

A close-up photograph of a white laptop keyboard and speaker grille. The keyboard keys are black with white symbols, including a home key and arrow keys. The speaker grille is a rectangular grid of small holes. The laptop is resting on a light-colored surface.

**How Irish Corporate Affairs  
executives are managing crisis  
communications and the  
response to a global pandemic**



■ ODGERS BERNDTSON

# How has COVID-19 impacted Corporate Affairs executives, and how will organisations manage internal and external communications beyond this crisis?

Odgers Berndtson checked-in with 18 leading Corporate Affairs executives in Ireland to find out how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted their role.

## Novel virus, novel approach

Corporate Affairs was already a rapidly evolving corporate function in a landscape where generational and technological shifts give rise to new communications platforms and messages are easily drowned out.

In a once-in-a-generation crisis, communicating appropriately and engaging with stakeholders becomes central to the mission of every organisation.

Communicating (and listening) authentically, empathetically, humbly and with a clear sense of purpose has never been so important.

## Corporate Affairs in the spotlight

According to the executives we engaged with, the Corporate Affairs function is in the spotlight more than ever and its importance and scope are growing by the day.

One leader noted that they are now “at the centre of decision making and an advisor to the most senior people in the business.” Another is finding the function increasingly “strategic and outward-facing.”

**“We have needed to become more proactive in supporting the organisation as it develops its voice.”**

Being able to advise an organisation strategically while in crisis mode is no small task. In the past, Corporate Affairs may have been focused on reputation management related to marketing, but today, reputation risks are more likely to relate to health and safety and showing solidarity with employees.

When asked what they needed in order to better deal with the myriad communications issues impacting their organisation in these unprecedented times, one respondent simply replied, “a crystal ball!”

## Pressing issues and current priorities

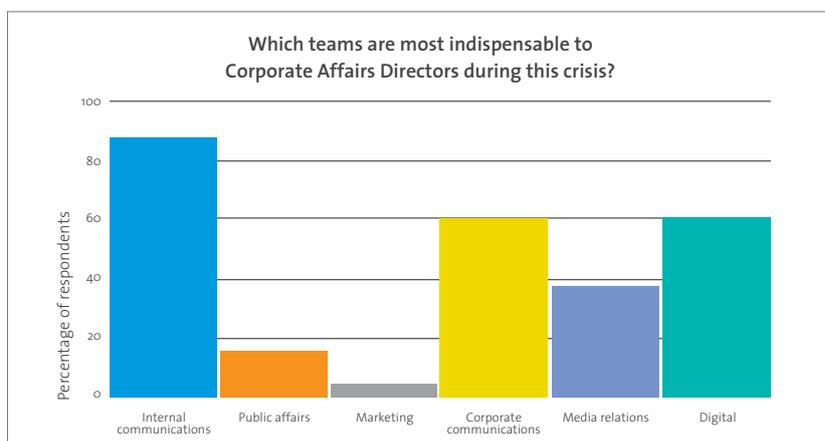
Like everyone else, Corporate Affairs professionals are concerned about the longer-term future, the wide-ranging effects this crisis will have on public health, the economy and society. But the specific issues that are worrying the executives we engaged with most during this pandemic are business continuity and employee welfare.

## Business continuity

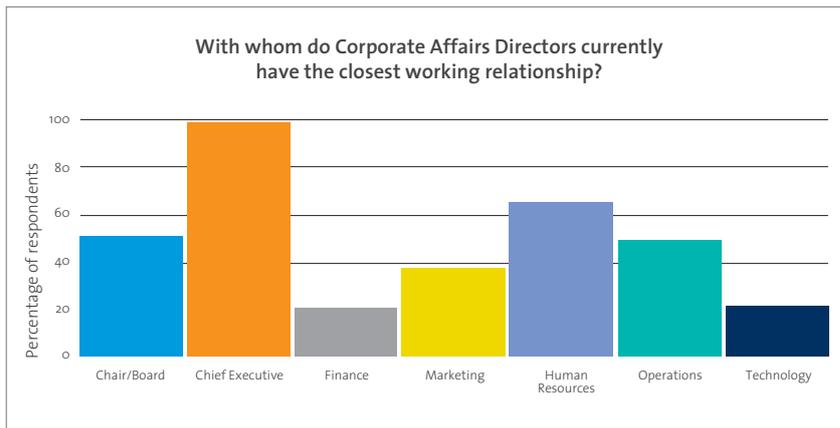
Maintaining operational continuity and resilience, addressing budget shortfalls and managing cash flows are top of mind for everyone. Some organisations are seeing reduced demand and severe business disruption and are making tough decisions to furlough workers and cease some operations.

**Others are dealing with unprecedented demand for their services and are scrambling to support clients and communicate operational changes quickly and effectively.**

Either way, adapting the provision of services and supply chains to meet the changing needs of consumers and comply with restrictions imposed by governments are the most pressing issues at the moment.



*Internal Communications is the most indispensable team to Corporate Affairs Directors during this crisis.*



*Corporate Affairs Directors currently have their closest working relationship with the Chief Executive.*

### Employee welfare

The Corporate Affairs executives we engaged with are also understandably very focused on employee welfare, engagement and morale. In these uncertain times, employees are dealing with stress on multiple levels, while also adapting to new modes of working.

For some, full-time caring responsibilities and fearing for their own health, and the health of their loved ones, is an added strain.

As such, Corporate Affairs Directors are working on finding ways to demonstrate solidarity with employees and to support them while keeping them informed and motivated in very challenging circumstances.

For some organisations that means announcing new safety policies and procedures for frontline workers, while for others it means communicating about support services and encouraging healthy working-from-home habits.

As one Chief Marketing and Communications Officer put it, “Normally, crisis mode would last weeks at the most. Sustaining crisis mode for an extended period will be a real challenge for staff.”

### Business as usual?

Of course, alongside this sustained crisis mode, Corporate Affairs professionals are helping their organisations adjust to the ‘new normal’. Remote working is now de rigueur and video calls have replaced everything from business trips to staff coffee room meet-ups. Organisations are having to think creatively to accommodate previously routine events like shareholder meetings and media engagement.

Through all of this, there is a balance to be struck between keeping the lines of communication open and inundating stakeholders with information. Say too much and you may get ahead of evolving government advice, say too little and speculation and misinformation may fill the void.

Staying in touch can help homebound employees feel less isolated; overcommunicating with customers may be unwelcome.

**“We would always help organisations consider their message and communications activity, but now it is as much about telling them what not to say as what to say.”**

Corporate Affairs teams are at the forefront of helping organisations navigate these murky waters.

### Critical success factor

Of the Corporate Affairs leaders we polled, 60% report directly to the CEO and have a seat on the executive leadership team.

One of them reports into the Chief Communications & Marketing Officer but also has a seat at the leadership table. Everyone in that group agrees that having direct and regular contact with other senior leaders is a critical factor for success in the current environment.

**“Having a voice on the executive team is vital for strategic communications effectiveness.”**

One Corporate Affairs professional who reports into the senior management team instead of directly to the CEO notes, “Not sitting on our equivalent of the executive committee is an issue.”

### Looking on the bright side

Unquestionably, this is a trying time, but the Corporate Affairs executives we engaged with have observed some positive developments during this pandemic.

One is that organisations and their stakeholders have a new appreciation for the impact of effective communications and the role of Corporate Affairs professionals.

**“Our stakeholders better understand our role and have developed a more positive connection with us.”**



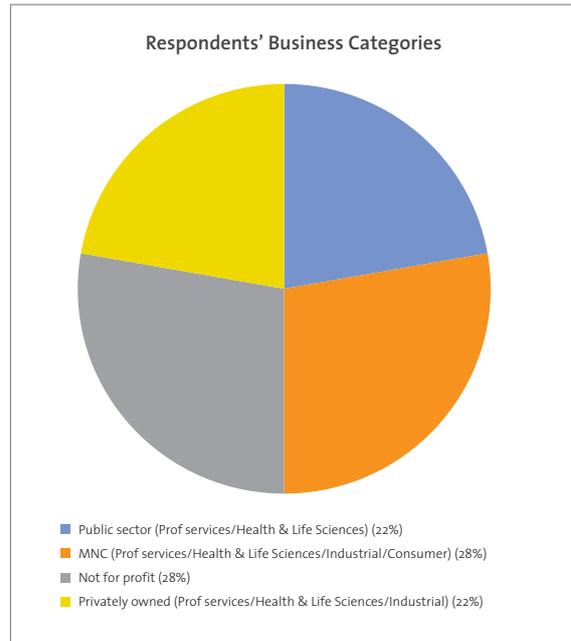
In addition, the executives noted a renewed sense of solidarity and common purpose. One leader was gratified to see a "high level of concern for employee welfare at the most senior level in the organisation." Another observed the "enormous solidarity employees have expressed for frontline workers." These feelings of camaraderie and working towards a common goal wouldn't be possible without empathetic and effective communications at all levels.

Finally, the Corporate Affairs leaders we engaged with were pleased with how quickly and well their teams and organisations had adapted to working remotely. While noting that challenges remain, one commented,

**“Our business continuity plan has proved very effective and we have been able to continue to service the needs of the organisation remotely.”**

Another said that a silver lining in this crisis is the knowledge that "working from home does work".

Seeing how innovative, flexible, collaborative and resilient an organisation can be is motivating and reassuring for all involved.



#### Who we are

For over 50 years, Odgers Berndtson has helped some of the world's biggest and best organisations find the senior talent to drive their agendas.

We deliver executive search, assessment and development to businesses and organisations varying in size, structure and maturity. We do that across over 50 sectors, whether commercial, public or not-for-profit and draw on the experience of more than 250 Partners and their teams in 29 countries.

## Odgers Berndtson Ireland Corporate Affairs Team



Deirdre O'Shaughnessy  
Partner

Deirdre is a Partner at Odgers Berndtson Ireland and is Head of the Corporate Affairs Practice. She specialises in senior executive appointments from Head of Function to Board level across a broad spectrum of industries and functions. Clients include Irish and international plcs, private and public organisations, and entrepreneurs looking to grow and scale their businesses. She has a particular interest in increasing the general diversity and specifically gender balance at decision-making levels in organisations and is the Champion of the Emerging Female Leaders Community of Practice developed by Odgers Berndtson Ireland.



Mark O'Donnell  
Managing Partner

Mark is Managing Partner of Odgers Berndtson Ireland. He specialises in high-level executive searches and appointments of senior management appointments from Head of Function to Board level across a range of industries and functions. He is particularly focused on assisting clients in the Consumer, Financial Services, Technology, Arts and Sports sectors. He is considered a leading consultant in the recruitment of all C suite positions in particular CEO, CFO, HRD, Marketing and Commercial Directors. Additionally, Mark leads our assessment practice where he is passionate about assisting clients to assess and develop their talent.



Rowan Hillis  
Principal

Rowan is a Principal Researcher at Odgers Berndtson Ireland, where she works to identify high calibre individuals for senior executive and board appointments across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. She has successfully contributed to a number of high profile appointments in Ireland, and has particular expertise in C-Suite Corporate Affairs and Board searches.

