

Beyond the boardroom: The enduring value of corporate affairs



To be a corporate affairs director means many things — and many late nights.

From handling media crises to spearheading cyber attack communications to navigating disruptive legislation, corporate affairs directors operate at the very heart of an organisation. A role as demanding as it is varied, its patchwork of responsibilities stretches from the boardroom to the frontline and requires a unique blend of skills and traits, experience and nous.

At Spencer Stuart, we have long charted the evolution of corporate affairs and its shifting passage across the corporate canvas. In 2013, [A seat at the table](#), we spotlighted its growing influence in FTSE 100 companies. Then, in 2020, our report [Influence at the top: The expanding role of the corporate affairs leader](#), demonstrated how a well-resourced corporate affairs function is a vital business asset.

But where do we find it today? Is the role still in the ascent or are their voices getting lost amidst a cacophony of other leaders jostling for attention?

We have sat down with the corporate affairs directors of a range of FTSE 100 and FTSE 250 companies to help answer these questions and learn more about their evolving role and influence.

Here's what we found out.



The room where it happens

- » 64% of the corporate affairs directors we interviewed are on their ExCo
- » Every corporate affairs director who is an ExCo member reports directly to their CEO
- » ExCo members lead corporate affairs teams of around 200 people
- » Non-ExCo members lead corporate affairs teams of around 16 people
- » Time in role averages 68 months (approximately 5.5 years)

In recent years corporate affairs directors have often taken their place on their organisation's executive committee (ExCo). For example, our 2020 article found that two-thirds of those surveyed were members, up from 42% in 2013.

Now, though, the picture is somewhat more mixed.

This year, we have found that 64% are members of their ExCo, down slightly from our previous research, and several report a waning in the function's overall prominence. It's not that corporate affairs directors are no longer welcome — more that they now often make guest appearances, rather than take their place as a permanent member.

So, what's fuelling this trend? There are a variety of factors at play.

A disappearing seat at the table?

- » CEOs often prefer to operate with smaller ExCos in order to streamline decision making and reduce cost
- » Geopolitical turbulence can prompt organisations to shun the external spotlight
- » Covid represented the function's maximum impact — a decline was perhaps inevitable — but the expertise that corporate affairs offers remains vital

James Wyatt-Tilby, senior vice president for corporate affairs at Anglo American, says that CEOs are prioritising more streamlined operations — and this extends to their leadership ranks. “My sense is that the function has, in many cases, been consolidated with others at the ExCo table,” he says. “That tends to be for perfectly sound reasons, being that CEOs are trying to reduce the size of their ExCos. It makes sense in terms of time management, but you still need the expertise in the room — more so than ever.”

Caitlin Hayden, group communications director for BAE Systems, echoes his points. “This is anecdotal, but my sense is that what's taking people out of these seats is far more about CEOs realising they have too many directors — corporate affairs is not the only one to not be on the ExCo,” she says. “It's not that people are valuing the function less, (as we're often still in the rooms where ExCos are debating the big things,) but it's more around the need for consolidation.”



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CAITLIN HAYDEN
GROUP COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR, BAE SYSTEMS

Stephen Doherty, chief brand and corporate affairs officer at Aviva, also senses something of a decline and suggests the function can sometimes fall victim to the turbulence which arises during a CEO succession process. "When it disappears from an ExCo, it's often during a leadership transition when the new CEO doesn't understand or appreciate its importance," he says. "But without that voice at the top table, you risk having amateurs making critical decisions on communications and corporate affairs. That can be dangerous."

Steve John, chief corporate affairs and marketing officer at LSEG, says that the broader geopolitical landscape may be having an impact — but in different ways for different organisations.

"I believe that when the external environment is highly complex and challenging, it's essential to have a corporate affairs director at the table to help navigate those risks," he says. "Others may see the same situation differently. In a contentious world, some companies might decide to step back and therefore think they don't need a corporate affairs voice at the table. But, in fact these are precisely the moments when we can add the most value — by engaging in the debate, offering perspective and guidance, and acting decisively when it matters most."

The ripple effects of the pandemic have also influenced how the function is perceived within a business — a point-made by Rachel Hopcroft, chief corporate affairs officer for NatWest Group. "I don't get the sense that the function has declined, and that's certainly not my personal experience," she says. "But Covid presented huge opportunities for communications and corporate affairs professionals to show their value because its unprecedented nature, scale and impact meant that the function was at the right hand of the CEO. I think that has created a high point in the memory — helping navigate the unknown — so inevitably has contributed to the perception of a decline since then."

Chris Hogwood, who leads the corporate affairs team at Landsec, also pinpoints the pandemic's impact. "Its reputation was at such a critical height during Covid, in part because of all of the problem solving that was needed," he says. "It wouldn't surprise me if there is a broader cyclical change, similar to HR which was also so prominent during the pandemic."

But do corporate affairs directors actually need to be at the table to exert considerable sway? Well, not necessarily.



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JAMES WYATT-TILBY
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR CORPORATE AFFAIRS,
ANGLO AMERICAN



It's really about the access...

- » Corporate affairs directors don't always need ExCo status to establish a close working relationship with their CEO
- » From WhatsApp to quick corridor chats to diarised meetings, CEO access can take a variety of forms

While those corporate affairs directors who continue to serve on their ExCo truly value and savour their position, those without this status need not worry — just as long as they still enjoy unfettered access to their CEO. Like in so many situations, proximity means power.

One of the corporate affairs directors we spoke to, who is on the ExCo, nonetheless points to a variety of ways they informally communicate and connect with their CEO. “I talk to our CEO every single day,” he says. “It might be a WhatsApp exchange, a telephone conversation, or a quick visit to my office, or vice versa. I don't aspire to their job, so there's no succession dynamic at play, and that allows me to provide advice which is received only on the basis that I am simply trying to help them succeed in leading the business — there's no other agenda.”

A similar scenario exists for Chris Hogwood. “I think it's pretty rare that I'll have a day where I don't have some kind of either informal or formal kind of one-to-one,” he says. “I think that's a really critical for a corporate affairs function because you get so much of your mandate from the CEO.”

It is precisely these types of interactions which demonstrate why corporate affairs remains so vital, according to Gill Hammond, who recently moved on from her role as global communications director at Dr. Martens. “If you do not know what's going on, you cannot possibly provide the right strategic advice,” she points out.

“If you're not at the table or if you're not close to the CEO, one of the first questions I would always ask is, ‘What do I need to know?’ It's ironic that in some scenarios the comms director is the last to know about things. It's eye-rollingly frustrating. That's why the role needs to be aligned at the very top of the business.”

Much then hinges on the relationship that a corporate affairs director enjoys with their CEO. The good news is that in the majority of cases, this particular example of stakeholder management appears to be flourishing.



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GILL HAMMOND
FORMER GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR
DR. MARTENS



Bridge-building with the boss

- » A CEO's genuine understanding of corporate affairs can be a cornerstone of an effective working relationship
- » Those who are on the ExCo all reported that their CEO fully understands the value of the function
- » But not every CEO can be guaranteed to grasp the importance of corporate affairs

Of course, a good working relationship requires strong foundations. Mutual respect and trust are pre-requisites. So, too, are open communication, collaboration and a clear understanding of goals and objectives. But this doesn't always happen.

For corporate affairs directors, what really helps is if the CEO can grasp what the function actually does. Victoria McKenzie-Gould, corporate affairs director at M&S, has little to worry about on that score. "Our CEO completely understands corporate affairs and why it is represented on the leadership team — he has a real focus on customers and colleagues, and we are the most public of public companies," she says.

Yasmin Diamond, executive vice president of global corporate affairs at IHG Hotels & Resorts, also enjoys a good dynamic with her CEO. "He really values the function and understands what we do in terms of reputation, communication with broad groups of people, and how you land a message," she says. "He also appreciates that our expertise extends beyond corporate affairs — we possess a deep understanding of the business itself and our role in delivering on our growth strategy."



Part of it is protecting the name and reputations of the executives, but fundamentally, you're safeguarding the business's reputation, which should be a multi-decade exercise."

NICK LAKIN

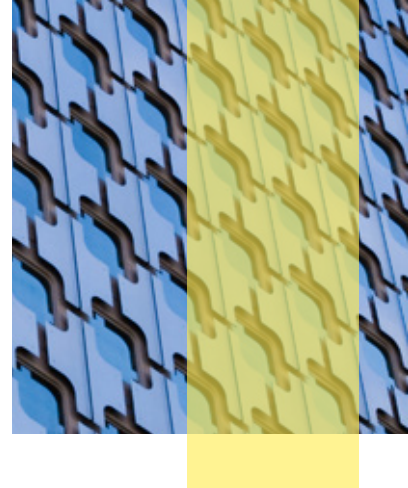
FORMER GROUP DIRECTOR FOR CORPORATE AFFAIRS
AT KINGFISHER GROUP

And Ashley Sweetland, vice president, global corporate affairs at Convatec, can also count on the function being valued by senior colleagues across his organisation. "Corporate affairs has been described as a 'Swiss Army Knife' — a function with a range of capabilities, that cuts through, and gets stuff done," he says.

But not everyone can count on a strong rapport.

Gill Hammond points out that much is contingent on the CEO themselves. "Do CEOs truly understand the corporate affairs role? I think it depends on the CEO," she says. "In particular, in terms of UK businesses, do they understand media dynamics and what journalists need — being helpful in this regard is important. Understanding the game you're in and how to play it is crucial."

Helping CEOs traverse challenging news cycles is one way that corporate affairs directors can demonstrate the value of their function — but there are also plenty of other ways for them to prove their worth.



Corporate affairs: *still* valuable

- » Addressing upcoming regulatory shifts and navigating unexpected external events are just two ways corporate affairs directors can demonstrate their value
- » The length of time corporate affairs has existed at a company is often a testament to its enduring value and importance

Ed Petter, chief corporate affairs officer at Haleon, says that the constant threat of changing regulations is a vivid example of why corporate affairs remains so important.

“Corporate affairs obviously matters to regulators who shape our business quite significantly,” he points out. “It also matters a lot to what we call the ‘expert channel’ — in our world, doctors, dentists, and healthcare professionals are incredibly important for influence and recommendation. They want to know that the corporate brand is something that is ethical and that they can trust.”

Then there are those moments when unexpected events occur and businesses have to pivot quickly and effectively — a point made by Kingsley Weaton, chief corporate officer at BAT. He argues that without the steady hand of corporate affairs at the tiller, navigating external threats is so much harder.

“In corporate affairs, if something happens — whether a crisis or not — you have to drop everything and respond,” he says. “You never quite know what you’re walking into on any given day. Many businesses, including ours, can be very internally focused. That can blindside you. The external world can creep up without you noticing. If you don’t maintain an external view of risks and challenges, you might get away with it for a time — but you could be skating on thin ice.”



The job of comms is often to set or change the narrative and perceptions — and AI cannot create the new yet, it has to use what has already come before. Use of it must be careful in terms of authenticity.”

VICTORIA MCKENZIE-GOULD
CORPORATE AFFAIRS DIRECTOR, M&S

Nick Lakin, former group director for corporate affairs at Kingfisher Group, believes that how a function is valued is often connected to how long it has been in place at any given company.

“In many businesses where the function has been established for a long time, its importance is inherently recognised,” he says. “The focus is more on how effectively it is being run. Some of this scrutiny is healthy. If the function is integrated and treated like other essential departments, such as legal or finance, it is a sign that it is well-established and functioning effectively.”

Remuneration

Corporate affairs directors remain well rewarded members of an organisation's C-Suite. The average base salary of those we interviewed is around £418,000, which is consistent with other senior executive leaders. Reflecting the influence of an LTIP in retaining high-performing and ambitious leaders, the average for the corporate affairs directors we spoke to is nearly 130%, compared to an average 105% STIP. Their average notice period is six months.

He goes on to suggest that those who work in the function should not pay too much heed to those who might question their role. "You can get a bit existential about this, but it's unhealthy to do so," he says. "You and your team should know you're adding value and demonstrating it. More importantly, you're there to serve the business, with it for the long haul. Part of it is protecting the name and reputations of the executives, but fundamentally, you're safeguarding the business's reputation, which should be a multi-decade exercise."

Yasmin Diamond is happy with how corporate affairs is viewed within IHG Hotels and Resorts. "You hear of other organisations scaling back the role of corporate affairs teams but that is not the case at IHG," she says. "I find that the value placed on corporate affairs is as a strategic role within the organisation, the expectation stakeholders have of it, and the respect for the function, remains as strong and significant as ever."

Such reports suggest that reports of corporate affairs' demise are exaggerated, especially when one considers its influence on other organisation-wide priorities.

Spotlighting sustainability

- » Sustainability — while nowhere near as visible as in recent years — remains a route towards strengthening market reputation
- » Commitment to external targets help ensure sustainability remains a priority — but the pace at which organisations are moving on this agenda has slowed dramatically

One area that can help showcase the value of corporate affairs is sustainability, an issue which falls into the remit of 65% of the corporate affairs directors we interviewed, as it represents an opportunity to strengthen their company's reputation and financial performance. Dan Mobley, global corporate relations director at Diageo, cites two key areas.

“The first is anything to do in the communities where we operate around world, particularly focused on public health and how alcohol is regulated,” he says. “We have to prove to stakeholders that we are continuing to drive down alcohol related harm. And the second is anything to do with water in the community; we have to sort out water and sanitation needs before we can make anything in areas where there are water shortages.”

Such examples show why sustainability remains important, even amidst an environment where ESG has less prominence than in recent years, as Kingsley Wheaton explains. “I’ve drawn a clear distinction between ESG and sustainability,” he says. “I remember sitting here during Covid in 2021, when ESG really surged. It felt like a tsunami. That momentum is less pronounced but ‘doing the right thing, right’ as a corporate actor is a perennial boardroom discussion.”



Corporate affairs leaders tend to be better with tenure. That tends to lead to more maturity, perhaps wisdom, and experience. So don’t be too impatient — enjoy the mastery you’re building.”

KINGSLEY WEATON
CHIEF CORPORATE OFFICER, BAT

In many cases, companies are unable to move away from their sustainability commitments even if they wanted to — the power of official targets has limited their manoeuvrability. But even so, as Chris Hogwood explains, they can adjust how they get there.

“Sustainability is still very much part of the conversation because we have a science-based target to achieve and we’ve signed up to it,” he says. “What is more up for debate is the pace at which people are pushing things through. We’re not just going to run after things where we spend a lot of money in the short-term on new

technologies without a clear sense of how it relates to our returns. Our long-term target is the same. It’s just the speed at which we get to it.”

Stephen Doherty has deployed a similar approach. “None of the budgets or activities have been cut, but we no longer talk about it as much,” he says. “Since December 2023, we’ve recalibrated both the volume and tone of our output. We’re still wholly committed to sustainability, but we’re not evangelising as much anymore.”

For Yasmin Diamond, it is about being more realistic about what an individual organisation can achieve and tailoring their tactics accordingly. “In the last couple of years, the pendulum has swung to a more realistic place taking in the broader global environment we are operating in,” she says.

“It had swung very much towards setting overly ambitious targets without a detailed roadmap of how to achieve them. As a business, we have to be ambitious but also realistic and prioritise the strategic goals of the business. At IHG we’ve focused on what we can control, what we can advocate for and what we can influence effectively.”

The looming prevalence of AI

- » Corporate affairs functions are increasingly embracing AI for both routine and more strategic priorities
- » While those individuals who have learned how to use it have increased their value, human involvement remains paramount

Of course, no analysis of today's corporate affairs jigsaw would be complete without considering the ever-larger piece that is artificial intelligence — which is fast being integrated into the function's playbook.

"AI tools have been part of the tech we've deployed for some time," says Ashley Sweetland. "What's different now is an appetite to go even further. There's momentum behind platforms with AI capabilities that deliver tangible benefits for colleagues and the company — driving stronger engagement, accelerating content development and personalisation, elevating campaigns, and using AI as a target audience."

One of the ways Steve John's team at LSEG is using AI is to ensure they remain aligned with the tone of voice and brand guidelines of the company. "We've taken some initial steps towards building bespoke agents for the function, and currently have four use cases," he explains.

"For example, we've fed our style guides and high-quality examples of our work into an LLM to train it. Colleagues can input text, and the model provides enhancement suggestions. In another use case, we have developed a channel optimisation model to analyse our social media and paid media performance to enable faster, data-led decisions."

Kingsley Wheaton, meanwhile, is excited about what might be accomplished in the future. "Imagine corporate regulatory affairs — from market insight to messaging — being automated through an AI platform," he says. "That could free up resources and allow more people to focus on engagement and communication. I see a technology-enabled future as a way to think about shifting organisations toward the more highly value-added end of our work."

Dan Mobley has a similar viewpoint. "We're not replacing people — we're replacing tasks. But it's making people who have learnt these new tools to be more effective than their peers. They are the ones who will be replaced because they haven't learned to use it, not because AI is replacing them."

But there is an important word of warning from Victoria McKenzie-Gould. "AI is transformative for business operations," she says. "For communications, AI already supports simplification and efficiency and can help create assets — but the job of comms is often to set or change the narrative and perceptions — and AI cannot create the new yet, it has to use what has already come before. Use of it must be careful in terms of authenticity."

What's next for corporate affairs directors?

- » Corporate affairs directors are well placed to move into future advisory roles by leveraging their relationships and sectoral expertise
- » Tenure means greater knowledge and impact — corporate affairs directors should be in no rush to move on too frequently

While AI will doubtless form an important part of the future of the function, what might be next for corporate affairs directors themselves? Where might their career trajectory take them in the years ahead?

Gill Hammond predicts that a shift to an advisory role might be on the agenda. “I think it’s something to do with advisory and consultants,” she says. “Continuing to have that seat at the table and being more of a trusted partner but it depends on how people value the role and ultimately the advice you give.”

Nick Lakin, meanwhile, says there are several options to consider. “There are interesting parallels, whether that’s chief of staff, which I’ve seen some peers go into, or whether it’s working advising multiple organisations or returning to sector specialisms you’re most passionate about,” he says.

Our research has found that corporate affairs directors have been in their role for approximately 5.5 years, which suggests that many have had time to build systems, teams and long-term stakeholder relationships, all of which point to multi-year horizons for succession planning and change agendas. Kingsley Wheaton certainly believes that his peers should be in no rush to move on.

“Corporate affairs leaders tend to be better with tenure,” he points out. “That tends to lead to more maturity, perhaps wisdom, and experience. So don’t be too impatient — enjoy the mastery you’re building. There aren’t an abundance of truly world-class, global corporate affairs leaders. The best are very valuable.”



Certainly, there is little doubt that the role of corporate affairs directors remains multifaceted and much needed. While the function may not enjoy the visibility that it had at the height of the pandemic, it nonetheless remains a critical component of many successful organisations.

However corporate affairs also remains in flux. As priorities shift, technologies advance and communication channels evolve, not every CEO prizes its value, its place among the top echelons of every FTSE 100 company is far from guaranteed.

But corporate affairs directors should draw solace from the knowledge that their function remains at the very centre of the arena. Their ability to unlock new opportunities, to turn crisis into opportunity, and to be a source of certainty in a deeply uncertain world, means that theirs are voices which will continue to echo across and beyond the boardroom — both now and long into the future.



Checklist for corporate affairs directors

1. **Cultivate direct access to leadership.** Proximity is more important than formal titles — don't risk being out of sight, out of mind.
2. **Think beyond the function.** Be a strategic leadership advisor — focus on the big picture and how commercial realities impact the external environment.
3. **Master crisis management.** Managing external threats in high-pressure situations makes a real difference.
4. **Stay focused on external events.** Be the early warning system for incoming risks, regulatory changes and shifting public sentiment — make yourself indispensable.





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