

THESIS

CORPORATE COMMUNICATION AND INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY

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## ABSTRACT

### CORPORATE COMMUNICATION AND INTRA-ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY

This exploratory study investigates the ways in which corporate communication professionals struggle to attain legitimacy within their respective organizations and what tools and strategies are used to navigate an illegitimate, intra-organizational state. This thesis works to connect the gap between the literature written about the field of corporate communication at its inception and the reality now lived by the thousands of individuals who declare corporate communication as their profession nationally. Using the constant comparative method to analyze interviews of corporate communication professionals, the researcher will share a broad interpretation about which areas the sample stated corporate communication professionals are currently struggling for legitimacy and what tools and strategies can be used to effectively navigate this tension.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

This thesis was motivated by my own personal experiences within a corporation. I remember being starry-eyed about the public relations profession when I began my undergraduate education on the topic and feeling ecstatic when I received a phone call offering me a summer internship with a Fortune 1000 company. On the job, it became apparent that not all professionals shared this opinion of the field, however. It seemed that upper-management specifically tended to be skeptical of the corporate communication department's capabilities, and I found it upsetting that my superiors were not given the autonomy to work independently without carefully noting their intentions and providing the analytics of results to justify their work—and ultimately their very positions—to the executive board. I remember my supervisor spending a lot of time wrapped up in trying to document that her work was worthy rather than just doing it and her saying at one point that it would be nearly impossible to receive an increased departmental budget.

At the time (this was in 2012), I questioned if this was a unique experience or if perhaps this was a trend across corporate communication—or maybe even specific industries or corporate environments. As I progressed through more internships and networked with other professionals in the field, I found that this experience, while not ubiquitous, was not at all an isolated occurrence. Initially, the objective of this thesis was to find those trends—to find under what circumstances corporate communication professionals found themselves in a situation similar to the one I experienced—but I found myself continually struggling to justify claims. Even though those in the industry with whom I spoke recognized my experiences to be a part of a larger

narrative, the academic literature on the issues I had faced is significantly underdeveloped.

Because of this, I decided it was necessary to take a step back and examine the underlying issues.

Due to lack of extant research, my objective transformed into exploring the experiences of corporate communication professionals in tandem with the theoretical concept of legitimacy. In the study of organizational communication, legitimacy is the constraining force (Suchman, 1995) that pushes members of an organization to conform to an established set of norms (Ruef & Scott, 1998). This conformity empowers organizational actors in their roles and can go so far as to justify the existence of their position in the organization (Suchman, 1995). Through this thesis, I aim to examine corporate communication professionals' descriptions of factors of legitimacy in the workplace and locate themes in strategies and coping mechanisms to gain legitimacy.

### **Rationale**

This area of study warrants further investigation because the individuals engaged in the quest for legitimacy may be negatively impacted while at work. Those who do not feel they are trusted to be autonomous have lower levels of self-esteem and produce work of lesser quality (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glyn, 1995; Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001). This negative affect could very well spill over in to individuals' personal lives, making them less engaged and negatively affected in their work performance (Keyton, 2013). Corporate communication departments viewed as illegitimate will likely be given less access to resources such as appropriate personal salaries and departmental budgets (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008), and, according to Poole (2014), organizational members with limited resources are likely to experience depersonalization, feelings of reduced personal accomplishment, and emotional exhaustion. This burnout could cost corporations money, as it could be related to increased rates of turnover or, at

the very least, keep corporations from getting their full return on investment due to decreased productivity.

An additional reason this area of research should be further explored is that it is greatly underdeveloped. While at the macro level it has been noted that communication professionals often have to legitimize their occupational identities (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1985; Moore, 2006), this tension has only been explicitly applied to corporate communication in the literature by two researchers (Hybels, 2008; Suchman, 1995). In both cases, this was not the main objective of their studies. Rather, these studies focused on the ways companies legitimize themselves with their publics and stated that corporate communication professionals have to situate themselves as productive members of their institutions, defending resources and personal reputation (Hybels, 2008; Suchman, 1995). Hybels had momentarily spoke of this theme in a previous work when musing on Weber's (1947) statement on how individuals often struggle to attain legitimacy if they are perceived as resisting submission to management. He noted that corporate communication, in particular, likely struggles with intra-organizational legitimacy because acting as key advisors to management is part of their job description, which could be seen as undermining the authority of their superiors (Hybels, 1995).

In total, the literature addresses the subject of intra-organizational legitimacy for corporate communication professionals explicitly twice, saying: (a) a struggle for intra-organizational legitimacy exists for some in corporate communication and (b) this struggle could be the result of complications that arise from advising upper-management. This study serves as a foundation for future research on corporate communication's struggle for legitimacy and provides insight to those whom the problem directly affects. Additional research in this area could ease corporate communication professional's transition to legitimacy, increase job



satisfaction, feelings of self-esteem, and return on investment from the perspective of employers. Before discussing relevant literature, I will first overview the current state of corporate communication within the United States.

### **The History of Corporate Communication**

Corporate communication is the task of communicating with internal and external stakeholders toward the end of instilling a favorable point of view of the corporation (Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Redding—who has been referred to as the father of the field (Meisenbach, 2006; Shelby, 1993)—was of the first to document the rise of the corporate communication in the 1980s (Redding, 1985). By the mid-1990s, corporations within the United States had embraced corporate communication departments enough for organizational communication scholars to feel confident the position would not be a fleeting trend, and Argenti published “Corporate communication as a discipline toward definition” in *Management Communication Quarterly* (1996). In the article, he operationalized the typical job responsibilities required by the role. These domains included image and identity management, corporate advertising and advocacy, media relations, financial communication, employee relations (now more commonly referred to as internal communication; see Welch & Jackson, 2007), community relations, corporate philanthropy (now referred to as corporate social responsibility, or CSR; see Roper & May, 2015), government relations, and crisis communication.

Between the early days of the field and now, the roles and responsibilities of corporate communication professionals have remained relatively stable. Comparison between Argenti’s definition of roles and Edelman’s 2014 corporate communication benchmarking study (Edelman is the top grossing public relations firm that serves many corporate clients, see “The Holmes Report,” 2014) revealed that, if anything, these roles have just become further specialized.

Edelman divides corporate communication functions into brand and corporate identity, creative and design, crisis and issues management, CSR, digital and social media, public and media relations, internal communication, international and regional coordination, investor relations and financial communication, product communication, and stakeholder relations (“Edelman”, 2014).

The exact number of professionals working in the field of corporate communication currently is not publicly documented, but on average, 35 individuals work in this capacity per U.S. corporation (“Edelman”, 2014). Additionally, the Public Relations Society of America (the worldwide professional association for all sectors of public relations, such as corporate communication) has a recorded 22,000 members, albeit made up of public relations professionals from across all areas, including agency and government relations (“About PRSA,” n.d.). Although it is likely the struggle for legitimacy spans across all public relations sectors and even permeates into related communication fields, I will be focusing on the role of in-house corporate communication in this thesis to keep a narrow enough scope, ensure a more consistent environment for study, and keep in line within my own research/career interests.

In the following chapters, I will review literature relevant this topic and discuss the methods that I used to collect my data. Then, I will discuss the results and implications of the study, in addition to proposing potential directions for future research.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

As a foremost guiding concept in this thesis, it is important to first understand the denotation of legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to “the normative and cognitive forces that constrain, construct, and empower organizational actors” (Suchman, 1995, p. 571). Ruef and Scott (1998) characterized legitimacy as “the social acceptance resulting from adherence to regulative, normative or cognitive norms and expectations” (p. 332). In other words, legitimacy is a prerequisite factor to organizational success endowed by the general public and/or respective stakeholders, poised on the condition that the corporation’s behavior is deemed appropriate. Suchman (1995) also discussed three types of legitimacy that can be endowed upon an organization: pragmatic, which focuses on self-interest; moralistic, which focuses on acceptance without incredulity; and cognitive, which is given based on perceived necessity. Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) argue that the best way to attain legitimacy is through conformity to values, expectations, and social norms. Legitimization, then, is the action of positioning oneself as legitimate. Those in the role of corporate communication may engage in this process with both internal and external audiences as they work to situate both the organization they work for and themselves as legitimate entities. While there are volumes of literature on external legitimacy, this thesis will only focus on aspects of internal organizational legitimacy.

The first mention of legitimacy in respect to organizational communication came from Weber’s (1947) sociological work as he studied how to motivate employees and maximize efficiency. Weber argued that an individual can work toward being perceived as legitimate through submission to authority/management. He later (1978) added to this by applying it to organizations, saying legitimacy is granted through compliance to institutional norms. Hybels

(1995) then took this application one step further and said that corporate communication departments specifically may struggle with intra-organizational legitimacy because part of their job responsibilities include informing management on proposed strategies and action, which could be viewed as resisting submission to authority. Of course, this may not always be the case, but especially in corporations with a large power distance, advising higher-ups could be viewed as inappropriate.

The fight for legitimacy in a communication role is not unique to those at the corporate level. Relative to disciplines such as the sciences, the field of communication has faced its own legitimization conflict, criticized for being unable to consistently produce quantitative data and being too subjective to researcher bias (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1985; Moore, 2006). Similarly, individuals within the field of corporate communication have had to situate themselves as productive members of their organizations, defending resources and personal reputation (Hybels, 2008; Suchman, 1995). Pfeffer and Salancik added (1978) “legitimacy need not be conferred by a large segment of society for the organization (or subject) to prosper” (p. 194).

The literature is explicit that legitimacy is directly related to allocation of resources. In addition to the above statements by Hybels (2008) and Suchman (1995), Deephouse and Suchman (2008) wrote that individuals or organizations can garner resources through conforming to prevailing social norms. Zimmerman and Zietz (2002) added to this, saying “legitimacy—a feature of organizations highlighted by institutional theory—is necessary for resource acquisition and, thus, is an important means to foster . . . survival and growth” (p.428). Meyer and Rowan (1977) ranked legitimacy and resources as tools of equal importance necessary for survival. Meyer went on to write on the subject with Scott (1983), saying there are no alternatives to legitimacy that can have such adverse effect on one’s status.

## **Corporate Communication's Fight for Legitimacy**

As professional communicators, one may think it natural that those in corporate communication would use their communication skills to their advantage during the process of legitimization. Indeed, Vaara and Monin (2010) found that one strategy individuals use in attempt to legitimize themselves in an organizations are “selling speeches,” or oral persuasion (p. 2). In their study, they found this tactic to be unsuccessful, though, and it often gave rise to false expectations. Although oral persuasion skills alone have not proven viable enough to legitimate the field of corporate communication, the literature points to two trends that may be utilized by corporate communication professionals as they attempt to legitimize themselves: redefining their role and measuring their work quantitatively.

**Redefining job responsibilities.** Moss, Newman, and DeSanto (2005) analyzed the ways in which job responsibilities of corporate communication managers have shifted over the years and found that role responsibilities had greatly reduced in one area: management advisement. Although the authors did not suggest that the findings could be indicative of institutional changes due to struggles experienced in the pursuit of legitimacy, this explanation seems plausible when examined in combination with extant literature on organizational legitimacy.

The previously mentioned works of Weber (1947) and Hybels (1995) stated individuals may struggle to attain legitimacy if they are perceived as resisting submission to management. Hybels argued that corporate communication, in particular, likely struggles with intra-organizational legitimacy because it is the nature of a portion of their role to act as key advisors to management on issues of strategy pertaining to stakeholders and the public. When considering this with Deetz, Hatch, and Miller's (1999) finding that the modernist perspective of public relations theory privileges upper management as an unquestionably legitimate entity, it is

plausible that corporate communication professionals are retracting from management adviser roles out of the anxiety of being perceived as illegitimate and being rejected (in whatever form that manifests) from the organization because of it.

To further complement, Vaara and Monin (2010) argued that a communication department that is viewed as legitimate will be included more in corporate decision-making and asked to be a part of more projects/work to accomplish more initiatives. When considered with Weber's postulations (1947; 1978) one might conclude that once legitimacy is attained—and only then—may corporate communication professionals carry out their traditional role responsibilities. While this literature may give readers an idea of how interactions proceed for those perceived as legitimate intra-organizationally, it leaves one to wonder what a basic plan of action may be for those still struggling toward the pursuit of it.

The literature as a whole seems to indicate that only avenues to proceed for those caught in trap of illegitimacy is through conformity to institutional myths and by manipulating the work environment. With lack of options to justify their worth, the idea that corporate communication departments are illegitimate and ill-equipped to advise management may have become ingrained as an institutional myth in itself. Aware that conformity to institutional myths is a precursor to legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), corporate communication professionals may choose to “conform to environments” and then manipulate their environment toward the goal of change (Suchman, 1995, p. 587). In this case, on an international scale, corporate communication professionals have withdrawn—or been removed—from acting as key management strategy advisors, perhaps toward the end of achieving legitimacy. This literature and the trends of the field together suggest that once legitimacy has been achieved, then, and only then, the department may once again lay claim to the responsibility of advisers of management.

**Quantifying qualitative work.** The next strategy I propose that is enacted by corporate communication departments in pursuit of legitimacy comes as the result of organizational pressure applied by upper-level management to produce quantitative results for what is often qualitative work. This concept builds on the dialectical tension between corporate communication professionals and “old-style” managers that are trained to operate in their role using an exclusively quantitative mindset (Argenti, 1996, p. 76; see also Cappelli, Hamori, & Bonet, 2015). Although some work can be easily quantified thanks to improvements in technology (social media analytics, for example; see Hoffman & Frodor, 2010), it is not so simple to judge impact or return on investment (ROI) on something like a news release. Even social media has been critiqued for the numbers it produces not really meaning much in terms of ROI (Fisher, 2009). Regardless, article counting, annual reports, social media analytics, etc. serve as quantifiable measures, produced toward the end of legitimizing corporate communication professionals and their work output.

The prevalence of those Argenti termed “old-style” managers could be the root of the push for quantitative measures (1996, p. 76). In what follows, I will discuss the plausibility for top management lack of diversity impacting the drive toward quantitative results before proceeding to discussing the implications upon performance. Although this application of scholarship has not been looked at previously through an organizational communication lens, literature exists to support the assertion that much of corporate communication’s legitimacy crisis could stem from a lack of diversity among management.

When envisioning a corporate executive board, one may think of tenured, white, business-minded males. This demographic of “old-style” managers (1996, p. 76)—although not as prevalent in top management as it once may have been—still prevails. As of 2011, 74.4

percent of corporate leadership was composed of white males. When coupled with their female Caucasian counterparts, this number rises to 87.7 percent (Zweigenhaft, 2013). This is not to say that in order to be “old-style” a manager must be white. “Old-style” is a mentality. Among executives with education levels greater than that of a bachelor’s degree, the MBA has held steady as the predominant degree across U.S. top management teams (Cappelli, Hamori, & Bonet, 2015). This fact is troubling for corporate communication legitimization both because “old-style” managers are traditionally educated with MBAs, but also because there is a documented tension between the business-minded and those that prefer qualitative methods (Sinkovics & Ghauri, 2008). Thus, “old-style” members of upper-management are likely to be unwilling to perceive corporate communication professionals as legitimate because the very nature of their work does not line up with organizational norms and expectations of delivering concrete deliverables in the form of ROI. In light of this, and in addition to the great amount of literature on the value of intra-organizational diversity, management literature indicates that corporations with younger executive teams and higher education levels are less likely to engage in narrow-minded approaches to negotiation (Wiersma & Bantel, 2002). Additionally, diverse management teams are both better equipped to adapt to change (Hambrick, Cho, & Chen, 1996) and lead more innovative companies (Bantel & Jackson, 1989). The conclusions of these studies may support the possibility that more diverse management teams may be more open to viewing those in corporate communication as legitimate.

Further, the work of Deetz and colleagues (1999) emphasizes the impact power distance has on this issue. Recall his aforementioned literature that suggested most public relations theory reveres upper management as sovereign and indisputably legitimate. Burrell and Morgan (1979) posited that viewing the relationship between communication professionals and management as



one on a steep organizational lattice privileges communication strategies that produce quantifiable outcomes. Deetz and colleagues found that this seems to be particularly the case in North America (1999).

The work of corporate communication is not easily, nor inherently, quantifiable, though. Take, for example, that the corporate communication department of a particular company publishes a news release in the local paper about the drop of a new product line. Although an uptick in sales around the time the article was published may have a correlation to readership of the article, causation cannot be proven—at least not in the way alternatives, such as digital marketing can be traced to webpage exposure and click through rates. Extant literature has examined only two of the tools and strategies used by corporate communication professionals to legitimize themselves within their corporations. While it seems clear that media monitoring tools are used to produce data (since this is part of their capabilities) and oral legitimization is likely a key strategy (see work by Vaara and Tienari, 2008), only use of annual reports and article counting to legitimize have been discussed in respect to the role of corporate communication within their organizations. One may think social media may be an easy way to produce numbers, as most platforms now have built-in analytic gages (see Aggarwal, 2011 for an overview), but research has found that most executives accept social media as valuable while simultaneously confounded by how, or if, the measurements actually translate to in profit (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011).

The first quantifiable tool used to legitimize is annual financial reports. Legally, each public corporation is mandated to produce an annual financial report for public review (Argenti, 1996). Moss and colleagues (2005) claimed that most corporate communication professionals

claim they are charged with tasks such as this.<sup>1</sup> These reports are shared with stakeholders, both internally and externally, to align values and convey updates, achievements, and financials each fiscal year. According to ReportWatch, a website that catalogs corporate annual reports and compiles best practices:

Stakeholders use them to help inform their opinions [sic] which ultimately influences their decision making processes. Along with company brochures and websites, the annual report is a key corporate communications tool. It has evolved from a financial information conveyor to a reputation management device. The annual report has the power to influence the way companies are perceived by those that matter to them. . . . Reports should be the first link for stakeholders by providing more than a financial picture – giving clear insight into the companies [sic] values, strategy, vision, internal structures and operational aspects. Annual reports thus become an essential tool in reputation management allowing companies to enhance the way all its readers perceive them on all fronts. (Larsen, n.d.)

While it stands to reason that annual reports may increase intra-organizational perceptions of legitimacy through readership, these publications are primarily intended for the general public and key stakeholders (external audiences). Increased external perceptions of legitimacy can increase that of the communication department internally—at least from a management perspective. Research has found that as corporate reputation increases, communication spending also does (Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001).

The second tool, article counting, is a more archaic legitimization tool. Several sources have cited that the greater the number of articles published about an organization, the greater their perceived external legitimacy (Archibald, 2004; Carroll & Hamal, 1989; Hybels, Ryan, & Barley, 1994). Questions about this method’s utility have been raised, though, specifically regarding the potential for unreliability. Anderson and Itule (1994) and Shoemaker (1996) found

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the correlation between agreeing with the statements “I prepare regular reports about the operation of communication function for senior management.” and “I am responsible for monitoring performance of the PR/ Communication function against targets.” were highly significant.

that the most legitimate companies have very few articles written about them because they have already successfully integrated into their respective markets, so the previous mentioned studies seem to only hold true up to a certain threshold. Regardless, article counting has not been documented as being a phased out method for internal legitimization for the corporate communication department. Arguments in favor of this quantifying mechanism exist because most articles published are likely written and pitched by those working in communication, so being published—and how many times over—is a directly quantifiable measure to present to management.

Performing normative rituals like quantifying data and counting articles in the vein of achieving legitimacy is not unique to only corporate communication professionals. Many other organization members have attempted to legitimize themselves over time and institutional theory works to explain that process. In what follows, I will define institutionalization as an organizational communication theory and describe ways it can be applied to the concepts covered in this thesis. Institutional theory works to help explain what may feel like isolated incidents and place them in a larger conversation with patterns seen time and time again within organizations.

### **Institutional Theory**

Before beginning discussion on this theory, it is first important to understand what is denoted by an institution. Institutions are “constellations of established practices guided by enduring, formalized, rational beliefs that transcend particular organizations and situations” (Lammers & Garcia, 2013, p. 195). Institutional theory, then, uses the concept of “institutionalization” to explain the way communication constitutes the ritualized norms within organizations. This theory can be understood through four interrelated constructs: functionalism

and limited rationality, external environments, attenuated consciousness, and the symbolic life of organizations (Lammers & Garcia, 2013, p. 196). In what follows, I will apply each of these constructs to the struggles experienced by corporate communication professionals that are striving for legitimacy and lay the foundations of this theory to provide a lens through which to view the results section of this research. Then, I will explain how the fight for legitimacy parallels that of institutionalization, making this theory particularly fitting to guide the discussion.

Functionalism and limited rationality is underpinned by Tolbert and Zucker's (1996) assertion that "components of a system must be integrated for the system to survive" (p. 176). The component of the corporate communication department has an effect on all other components of the organization. While operational functionality allows the organizational entity to perform routinely, dysfunction can cause other organizational components to misfire. Consider if, for instance, the corporate communication department stopped performing its role responsibilities. Without communication with the organization's publics, be it via news release, corporate social responsibility, traditional media, or social media, financial or even legal repercussions could occur. Similarly, without the function of internal communication, other components, such as human relations or management, would have to shift their own roles to compensate.

The second construct of institutional theory, external environments, focuses on "the boundary between authority in the organization and the legitimacy bestowed by the institutional environments" (Lammers & Garcia, 2013, p. 197; see also Meyer & Rowan, 1977 and Selznick, 1949). This is to say that outside of internal potential for success, institutions must conform to the standards the public holds for them because public expectations for the particular type of

organization have already been formed (Lammers, 2011; Lammers & Barbour, 2006; Lammers & Garcia, 2009). Corporate communication professionals, in many ways, act as border patrol agents mediating the boundary between internal authorities and external audiences. Corporate social responsibility, in essence, is a signal of conformity to the values of society. Lammers and Garcia (2013) said that CSR is a standard aspect of institutionalized corporate communication that was established as a practice to legitimize an organization externally with its publics. Crisis communication—another responsibility of corporate communication departments—also works to signal conformity in attempt to legitimize a corporation whose legitimacy is being openly questioned.

Attenuated consciousness composes the third construct, which considers the taken-for-grantedness of institutionalization (Lammers & Garcia, 2013). The key principle is that organizational actors are not conscious of the institutionalized processes on which their company is built. Fruition of this construct may be seen through taken-for-grantedness of the corporate communication department. Although in many ways the job functions of corporate communication are, in part, responsible for successful day-to-day operations, many corporate communication professionals still feel like their worth is questioned intra-organizationally (Hybels, 2008, Suchman, 1995).

The fourth construct closely resonates with the nature of corporate communication: symbolic life of organization. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) explained this as the emblematic role of formal organizational structures, as opposed to the informal. Meyer and Rowan (1977, p. 355) coined the term “ceremonial activities” to describe the tools and strategies used by those in organizations to legitimize themselves. These performances of institutional norms are used to signal conformity to normative practices to management in hopes of increasing perception of

legitimacy (Bertels & Peloza, 2008; Levis, 2006; Truscott, Batlett, & Tywoniak, 2009; Winn, MacDonald, & Zietsma, 2008). The dynamics of legitimization parallel that of institutionalization in attempt to become an established, unchallenged field of work (Lawrence, Winn, & Jennings, 2001).

The practices and even ceremonial rituals of corporate communication professionals show evidence of how the field has undergone institutionalization. In 1947, the Public Relations Society of America was formed, and stands active today with 22,000 members internationally (“About PRSA”). In addition to the social legitimization messages communicated through this membership, individuals may also apply for Accreditation in Public Relations (APR). This is the most prestigious title that can be carried by someone in the field and denotes their expertise and mastery of the field of public relations, as granted by a Universal Accreditation Board (“Accreditation in Public Relations”).

PRSA both works to apply and relieve pressures regarding corporate communication’s intra-organizational legitimization crisis through the institutional theoretical concept of isomorphism. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), isomorphism is “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face this same set of environmental conditions.” The authors also explained that the *coercive pressures* in this process are applied by individuals holding more power, *mimetic pressures* push those influenced toward imitating others regarded as successful, and *normative pressures* come from associated professional associations via shared practices. So, while PRSA applies pressure upon those communication professionals who are members to conform to their own institutionalized standards, it also works to relieve the pressures asserted on them by their organizations by providing standards guidelines for members to mimic. Together, these mimetic and normative

pressures may help individuals combat the coercive pressures applied by management in their professional roles.

Institutional theory is present in nearly all aspects of the legitimization process. In bringing with them rules imposed on them by PRSA/professional training, operating under a proscribed collection of duties, and conforming to standards imposed by both management and the public, the profession of someone working in corporate communication can be viewed as working toward what Abbott (1988) referred to as one of the “institutionalized occupations” (p. 323). Garcia (2009) said those working in these fields bring norms and rules with them to work. While this may be true of those in corporate communication, the inconsistencies of field’s struggle toward legitimacy likely do not qualify it as stable and enduring enough to earn this title. Still, the embedded process of legitimizing factors underwent by those in this field display many of the attributes of institutional theory.

### **The Argument for Corporate Communication’s Legitimacy**

There are many benefits to the intra-organizational acceptance of the corporate communication department as a legitimate entity. Research shows that organizational members who are satisfied with the communication between leadership and themselves have greater levels of overall satisfaction in the workplace in interpersonal, group, and organizational contexts (Mueller & Lee, 2002). Additionally, when individuals feel they are valued members of a workgroup, feelings of self-esteem increase—even to the extent that corporate communication effectiveness shows an increase (Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glyn, 1995; Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2001). This means that being treated as a valued department actually increases productivity. This could be speculated on from the managerial standpoint too, as management with legitimate views of the communication department may experience less anxiety about the quality of work being

produced and can take advantage of the functionality of their communication department. In what follows, I will address miscellaneous critiques of the illegitimacy of corporate communication before providing support for why this profession should be accepted as a legitimate entity intra-organizationally.

It is possible that a part of why this corporate communication is called in to question is that the academy is not even sure where to situate this profession. Communication and journalism departments both argue that corporate communication is better situated under their academic umbrella. Journalism scholars claim it was journalists who first filled the positions as they arose in organizations and communication scholars rebut that the study of journalism is too narrow in scope (Argenti, 1996). Additionally, those in the realm of academia leave the profession to fend for itself. Argenti (1996) writes:

. . . no other corporate communication subfunction offers more of an opportunity for genuinely sought-after research than employee communication<sup>2</sup>. Companies eagerly await research in this area, editors of journals in human resource management are desperate for new developments, and researchers conducting a literature review continue to turn up the same few articles over and over again. One would think that our colleagues in organizational behavior, and even more logically organizational communication, would have jumped on the bandwagon by now, but the area remains a wasteland in terms of research. (p. 94)

It would seem that although many programs claim corporate communication to be an area of their expertise, all have left research on the profession underdeveloped.

Consistency struggles also exist in the field outside of academia. Even the departmental title of corporate communication changes, with some referring to it as public affairs or corporate relations (Hutton, et al., 2001). As evidenced in the Moss et al. (2005) study, role responsibilities vary from organization to organization. Due to this, one may wonder how legitimate can a corporate role be if their job description does not even come standard. Frequently, and at

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<sup>2</sup> Another title for internal communication.



minimum, government relations and investor relations branch off into their own specialized departments (Hutton et al., 2001). An analysis published by the public relations firm Edelman (2014) found that through

Examining companies across the size spectrum, the Corporate Communications team becomes more concentrated by function in larger organizations. In companies under \$5 billion revenue, the range of activities represented in Corporate Communications spans all 13 functions in the study; however, in larger companies with more headcount, Corporate Communications teams tend to cover fewer functions.

Variation in the responsibilities for corporate communication professionals is just another way that the profession is not as standardized as many other corporate players.

It is possible that because smaller corporations have fewer employees within the corporate communication department, their staff performs cross-functional duties out of necessity, while larger corporations can have staff specialize, making it easier to quantify their productivity. Many times corporations allocate job responsibilities to other departments (such as marketing or human relations) that are traditionally handled by corporate communication (“Edelman”, 2014). Although these professional discrepancies may add to management’s questioning of the field, they do not lessen the value of the role of corporate communication or the work carried out by the department.

There is hope for the field, though, and evidence of how and why it is a legitimate corporate entity. Zimmerman and Zietz (2002, p. 417) argue “survival is the most frequently recognized effect of legitimacy.” In the case of corporate communication, this is true both internally and externally. Corporate communication scholar Coombs (1992) remarked that legitimacy is necessary for external issue management. Without it, corporations are less likely to be able to confront and control the crises that are sure to arise, and the same could be said intra-organizationally. Perks of external legitimacy include increased efficiency, growth, profit, size,

liquidity, market share, and leverage (Murphy, Trailer, & Hill, 1996); increased initial public offerings (IPOs) (Cohen & Dean, 2005; Deeds et al., 2004; Higgins & Gulati, 2006; Pollock & Rindova, 2003); stock prices (Zuckerman, 2000) and stakeholder support (Choi & Shepherd, 2005). Despite corporate communication professionals working to earn external legitimacy on the job through media relations, CSR, crisis communication, etc., they often are caught fighting in their own battle for legitimacy intra-organizationally. Corporate communicators are legitimators by trade.

When successful, corporate communication can strengthen a company internally in a wealth of ways. Overall, it can be said, “Corporate communication can support the development of corporate legitimacy. Communication is the most significant element in the process of developing solid stakeholder relationships internally (with employees)” (Scherer, 2012, para. 6).

Goodman (2001) found that

Culture is vital to organizational health. Intangibles such as the culture of the organization form an inviting environment that can attract and retain quality people; or create one that encourages people to be less productive or to leave. A positive culture has become a gold standard for global companies. (p.118)

In short, successful corporate communication professionals can create an attractive organizational culture, decreasing turnover.

Reflecting this sentiment, Smidts, Pryn, and Van Riel (2001) found that perceived reputation is tied to feelings of belonging. This builds the case for the legitimacy of corporate communication on two fronts: (a) as corporate communication professionals legitimize the organization externally, employees will gain a stronger identification with the company and (b) as the corporate communication department experiences the gratification of legitimacy, its corporate brand identification will increase. Both of these factors could have a positive effect on employee turnover. Welch (2012) adds to this dialogue, saying poor internal communication can

be damaging to an organization, but when executed well, it can strengthen manager-employee relations.

Finally, in feeling the pressure to achieve legitimacy, corporate communication managers often create a false dichotomy between the work of managers and technicians (Holtzhausen, 2002). This rhetoric situates managers as being strategic in nature, building similarities between themselves and what is likely the mindset of upper management in a divisive attempt to at least legitimize themselves, if unable to do so for the whole department. This process undercuts many of the job responsibilities their department is responsible for, as managers focus much of their time on administrative tasks like meetings and planning, whereas technicians perform much of the work required by their department. Holthauzen (2002) contends that the postmodern view of public relations, which seeks to avoid racism, sexism, and hegemony, supports both public relations managers and technicians as important players in providing communicative support to both internal and external audiences. He writes, “Public relations practitioners are in particular used to create symbolic capital, which is the only way through which economic capital can be accumulated” (Holtzhausen, 2002, p. 257). By further understanding the consequences of not granting corporate communication legitimacy, one can not only grow appreciation for those in this role, but also find motivation to heal the breach between management and corporate communicators.

### **Goals of Expressed Research**

The literature reviewed thus far shows several benefits of corporate communication departments being recognized as legitimate within their respective organizations. While there were tools and strategies proposed that individuals may use in the process of institutionalization, there remains a gap in the literature on which of these mechanisms are most frequently used or

most successful toward the goal of legitimating intra-organizationally. This brings us to my research questions.

***RQ1:*** In what areas do corporate communication professionals struggle with intra-organizational legitimacy (if any)?

***RQ2:*** What tools or strategies do corporate communication professionals use to establish their legitimacy?

## Chapter Three: Methods

This study seeks to explore how corporate communication professionals experience the struggle of illegitimacy within their professional roles and better understand what tools and strategies they use to achieve legitimacy within their organizations. A qualitative, descriptive methodological approach was employed in order to reach a “broad interpretation” of emergent themes (Creswell, 2003). In the sections that follow, I disclose my process for recruiting participants and my interview procedure.

### Participants

For this exploratory study, my goal was to recruit 10-15 participants—the amount I estimated would be needed to reach data saturation. I contacted 42 individuals in total in fall of 2016 through LinkedIn InMail. Of the 13 responses I did receive, one individual told me she did not qualify under my conditions (which will be discussed later in this section), another sent his regrets due to a busy schedule, and a third agreed to be interviewed, but did not reply to my secondary attempt to contact him. After completing interviews for the 10 remaining people I was in contact with, I concluded saturation was obtained. According to Morse (2000):

Estimating the number of participants in a study required to reach saturation depends on a number of factors, including the quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful information obtained from each participant, the qualitative method and study design used. (p. 3)

Due to the amount of questions, use of probing follow-up questions, quality of participant responses, and exploratory nature of the study, 10 interviews allowed for data saturation.

The 10 corporate communication professionals who participated were from diverse geographical regions, and industries. To help limit confounding variables and to mimic the conditions I experienced that motivated this thesis, I restricted my scope to corporate

communication professionals within publicly traded companies in the U.S. One study found that managers in publicly trading companies are always seeking to maximize profit and therefore expect the corporate communication department to deliver a maximum return on investment (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Being under the constant scrutiny of management could certainly be tied to feelings of intra-organizational legitimacy, so because I have a limited sample size, I chose to look at this segment of organizations specifically. While I did not enter the data collection process with set quotas for the specifications of the diversity I was hoping to bring into this study, I was intentional about reaching out to individuals from different sized companies, industries, U.S. states, sexes, and racial backgrounds. While I was purposeful about reaching out to males, only two agreed to participate in the interview, with the remaining eight participants being female. While this may initially seem unbalanced, it should be noted that this reflects the industry composition on sex in public relations, 85 percent of the industry being composed of women (Ragan, 2013). The final criteria for participation, was that individuals were required to have been in their role for a minimum of six months so that they likely have had enough time to experience the internal pressures of organizational life. All participants were required to be over the age of 18.

To recruit participants, I employed the help of social media and used LinkedIn to “InMail” individuals who listed their job title as a corporate communication(s) professional. This platform allowed me to engage in what Lindlof and Taylor (2002) refer to as *purposeful sampling*—handpicking individuals and, as a result, increasing the likelihood of a diverse sample. My LinkedIn “InMail” recruitment script is included in Appendix A, along with a confirmation email script in Appendix B, and a reminder email script, which I sent to participants one day prior to their interview, in Appendix C.

Participants represented the Midwest, East Coast, South, and Western regions of the United States. Their titles ranged from manager to chief communications officer and a wide variety of industries were represented. Ages ranged from 41 to 62. Two participants were male; eight female. A chart of demographic information collected on each participant is included in Appendix D.

## **Procedure**

**Data collection.** Creswell (2003) argued that interviews can provide the researcher with enough data to garner a broad interpretation of the subject being analyzed and are ideal when participants cannot be directly observed; interviews also allow the researcher more control over the direction of the conversation to maximize time effectiveness. In addition, conducting interviews via phone allowed me to reach a diverse sample. Before conducting my interviews, I conducted a pre-test protocol interview with a communications manager with corporate experience. No data was collected during the course of this mock interview, and the experience helped me ensure that I was providing my participants with an accurate time window for the interview and safeguarded appropriateness of questions.

Interviews consisted of six sets of questions: a warm-up question, feelings of intra-organizational (il)legitimacy, environmental variables of (il)legitimacy, tools/coping strategies, demographics, and wrap-up questions. Questions were modeled after relevant literature and are included in Appendix E. I chose to include a warm-up question in attempt to build rapport and establish my credibility with interviewees, per the guidelines of Creswell (2003). The section on feelings of intra-organizational (il)legitimacy was written with the intentions of teasing out the specific state of (il)legitimacy the individual experiences in their role. The environmental variables of (il)legitimacy section was drawn from aforementioned literature on diversity (Bantel

& Jackson, 1989; Hambrick, Cho, & Chen, 1996; Sinkovics & Ghauri, 2008; Wiersma & Bantel, 2002) and the effects of role responsibilities (Argenti, 1996; Hybels, 1995; Moss et. al, 2005; Weber 1947). The second and third sections work together to help answer the first research question. The fourth section, tools and coping strategies, incorporates questions to detail of the presence of institutionalization and mechanisms employed toward this end, including a question on the use of article counting based off of literature (Archibald, 2004; Carroll & Hamal, 1989; Hybels, Ryan, & Barley, 1994). This section was designed to garner participants' descriptions of the tools and strategies they use in attempt to gain legitimacy, research question two. During the interviews, questions were both open and closed-ended and additional follow-up probing questions were asked. Demographic data was collected last, along with wrap-up questions, to prevent participant burnout.

Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participant. In an attempt to maintain conditions of confidentiality, I asked participants if they would like to supply a pseudonym to be used in reporting results, and I assigned them one if they elected not to self-select one. I distributed informed consent information in the confirmation email (Appendix B) and obtained it verbally before beginning the interview. I took notes as ideas occurred to me throughout the interview, both to reference later and to remind myself of where to direct future probing questions. I engaged in memoing by recording my thoughts on how their answers compared to my expectations and what relevant concepts they were talking about, both to record ideas I would like to include in my final analysis and to keep my inherent research bias in check. This was done immediately after each interview. Altogether, interviews resulted in 5 hours and 15 minutes of audio content, averaging 30 minutes each. There was 87 pages of transcribed content.



**Analysis.** To better understand corporate communications' struggle for intra-organizational legitimacy, I used elements of Creswell's (2003) steps for data analysis and interpretation for qualitative research, melding it with the structure of Glaser's (1965) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) constant comparative method. Though these methods are usually used toward the end of reaching a grounded theory, I used them toward the goal of reaching a "broad interpretation," rather than a composed grounded theory due to my sample size (2003, p. 182). After transcribing all the interviews, I analyzed the data using open coding and axial coding, followed by delimiting theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Creswell wrote that through this process, a "general pattern of understanding will emerge as it begins with initial codes, develops broad themes, and coalesces into a grounded theory or [in this case] broad interpretation" (2003, p. 182).

For my first step of analysis, I engaged in what Strauss and Corbin referred to as "open coding," or noting themes that emerged from the data for each question independently (1990, p. 61). To do this, I created a separate word document with the categories of questions composing sections. I then pasted in any themes that were repeated in participants' answers to the appropriate sections. In some cases, more than one theme arose per participant answer. Next, I engaged in "integrating categories and their properties" or "axial coding," wherein I noted themes that were repetitious throughout the text (Glaser, 1965, p. 439; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). In this step, I took my data and arranged it into the proper category under sections for research questions one and two. The third step was to "delimit theory" (Glaser, 1965, p. 439). Strauss and Corbin considered this aspect to be "selective coding"—a process through which I engaged in "paring off non-relevant properties; integrating elaborating details of properties into the major outline of interrelated categories; and most important, reduction" (1990, p. 116;

Glaser, 1965, p. 441). Several trends were pared off in this process because their findings were not indicative of a greater trend toward the vein of responding to the research questions. For example, I specifically probed for issues with autonomy because the literature suggested it could be an issue, but participants' responses did not significantly indicate this area to be problematic. For the second research question, trends emerged around social media impressions, article counting, and annual reports because I asked questions about these facets; however participants' responses indicated they felt they were no longer relevant to legitimacy, so I delimited them. Following this process, I documented the trends that emerged, which you may read in the following chapter.

## Chapter Four: Results

“There’s really no one to stop me,” one participant said with a quick laugh when asked about the level of autonomy he was given at work. Another participant laughed when asked this same question too, but her response was, “Oh, gosh. I wish you were asking me this about another employer!” as she joked about how little autonomy she feels she receives on the job. Legitimacy is a strong force in the workplace and one I will detail for a sampling of corporate communication professionals in this chapter.

Before discussing the results, I would like to preface that legitimization is not a black and white concept that applies or relieves organizational pressures across the board. Rather, legitimization can be looked upon as a spectrum—and even then—it is possible to feel like one is given legitimacy in some areas of their work and still striving for it in others. Take for example Mary, a tenured communications director with previous experience as a journalist, who has been with her organization for five and a half years. She expressed she feels she is given a high level of trust in the workplace and that her opinion is regarded as expert, but feels she is given a low level of autonomy. Within my sample, however, there were trends that emerged in which the corporate communication professionals interviewed stated they struggle with legitimacy and, to complement, there were trends in tools and strategies used to gain legitimacy within an organization. To begin, I will explore participants’ current conditions of legitimacy in the workplace.

### **The Struggle—or Lack Thereof—for Legitimacy**

Participants in this study said they felt like they were perceived as legitimate entities within their organizations. Many interviewees did note, however that this has not always been the case for them, sharing ways in which they gained legitimacy throughout their career. As a

reminder, the first research question asked: “In what areas do corporate communication professionals struggle with intra-organizational legitimacy?”

Of the two main areas I discussed in chapter one as being potentially tenuous for corporate communication professionals struggling to attain legitimacy, autonomy and budget, participants expressed significantly more issues with being under-budgeted than not receiving the appropriate amount of autonomy. I would like to point out the areas where participants felt they were not struggling intra-organizationally: value, salary, and autonomy.

Of the 10 participants interviewed, all participants said they felt their department was valued as a part of their organization, many responding with statements like “absolutely” and “definitely” in response to this question. I did not follow up with additional questions on this because answers were so resoundingly certain, but rather, probed throughout the interview in search of where the separations were in individuals who felt they had legitimacy in some parts of their roles, if this separation existed.

Nine out of 10 participants felt they were given an appropriate salary. The majority cited benchmarking as their rationale for feeling this way. One participant, Erma, the chief communication officer and global vice president of a food corporation, provided a bit more in-depth explanation:

Historically, salaries of chief communications officers have been. . . going up, you know. . . that c-suite job didn't exist maybe 20 years ago and now it does. . . I think the salaries in general of people at lower levels in the function have been going up, as well as the expectations have increased. I'll give you a perfect example. Twenty years ago I might have hired somebody in for an entry level communications role and what I primarily would have been looking for was somebody with great writing skills. Now that's table stakes. Now that's like, you know, we don't do writing tests. I'm like are you kidding me? . . . That's like asking them if they can breathe.

Erma pointed out that the expectations have continually risen for corporate communication professionals, alongside the list of expectations in their job descriptions. She also added that

corporate communication professionals now often have a spot in the c-suite, where they have not had the legitimacy to be welcomed to previously.

As previously stated, most participants felt like they were given appropriate compensation in this area. One participant, R.M., the managing director and global head of executive and internal communication of a financial services corporation, said she feels she is compensated appropriately, despite a documented issue in this area for her industry:

I think in financial services compensation is good, I mean it's from a total comp perspective. I think from a salary perspective, I think it's well known; it's kind of public information: we're not always the strongest hand on the base salary.

R.M. stated that in terms of overall compensation, she feels she is paid adequately, but overall, the financial services industry is not well known for providing a large base salary for employees. The vast majority of participants did not feel like they were struggling for legitimacy in this area.

In terms of autonomy, eight participants stated they felt they were given an appropriate amount for their role, although many noted that this has not always been the case. Rabia, an organizational communication manager who has been with her retail and distribution corporation for 15 years, explained how her level of autonomy has consistently grown since she came under a new supervisor three years ago. She stated:

I think when you're new to a company, new to a position, new to a supervisor, you know—learning all that... sometimes knowing what to do, knowing what you can do, what you can't do, you know. You may need to think about things in a different way or look at them holistically, so I think there's always a learning curve that you need to kind of gauge yourself on.

After Rabia offered this explanation, saying that there is a learning curve to aligning with management and gaining legitimacy, I probed her with a follow-up question, asking her if she agreed with the statement that “autonomy generally increases with the amount of time spent in your position.” She responded, “Oh, definitely.”

Another participant, Reese, a director of corporate communication in the manufacturing industry, stated that as the sole external relations communication person for her company, she felt she was afforded an incredible amount of autonomy. When I asked her if she felt the degree of autonomy she receives is normal for the field, she said:

No, I don't think so. I think it's really different from organization to organization. I know some people I have talked to—they are in an environment where they are micromanaged, if you want to say. So, they have someone who is overseeing absolutely everything they do. So I think this is kind of unique situation from what I've heard.

According to Reese, she feels that extremely high levels of autonomy in the field are not common to corporate communication. Yet, most all of my participants felt the level of autonomy they were afforded was appropriate.

In light of the aforementioned reasons that participants did not tie to issues with legitimacy, one area that the literature linked to struggles with legitimacy that several participants stated they experienced was lack of appropriate budget for their department. Other trends that emerged were the concept of “enlightened management” and the struggle to work with management who did not possess this trait, organizational structure, and loss of job responsibilities. I will expand on these trends below.

**Budget.** As discussed in the literature review, corporate communication departments perceived as illegitimate are likely be given less access to resources such as appropriate personal salaries and departmental budgets (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Although overall, the participants felt they were given appropriate salaries, the majority of them did not feel they were given appropriate departmental budgets. A total of three out of 10 participants felt they were given an appropriate budget to work with, and one additional stated she felt the budgeted amount was fine, but that it was allocated incorrectly.

Mary felt that being under-budgeted is a problem across the board for corporate communication, but is not necessarily tied to one's legitimacy in their role. When asked if she felt she was given an appropriate budget to work with, she replied:

No (laughs). No, but I do—I'm going to preface that by saying, I don't think anyone does. The appropriate budget would include money for people or staff and if not full-time, agency people to help, you know, shore up what you need and I just, I think that that's a universal problem, though.

While Mary was under the assumption every corporate communication professional struggles with being under-budgeted, Jack, the vice president of corporate communications of a chemical company, shared Mary's feelings, but did feel that there was a tie to legitimacy, with the amount of budget a department being dependent on this.

So, so, your budget—no matter what you're doing, you're always going to be asking for more money. . . Having said that, you know, like, like sort of a perception around your value that you bring. I mean, I've been successful in increasing our budget. I've been here now through two budget cycles and I've increased it two times and the reason I've been able to do that—in a business that doesn't typically do that—the reason I've been able to increase the budget is literally because I've delivered something that they see as valuable and they want more of it. . . When you start to show value, that's how you increase your budget.

One might consider Jack's description of "value" he adds to the company as being in line with gaining legitimacy over time. Melissa, a director of employee communications at a healthcare company, echoed his answer, stating she was happy with the current amount her department is budgeted:

Yes, and it's getting even better. That's one thing that's changing for the better. We have been given the budget to bring on the right technology tools, to reward our employees, to share our programs in a very professional manner. We've been given the budget to outsource certain things. You always want more, but given where we started, I think we're in a pretty good place.

Melissa shared extensively about how she was able to gain legitimacy in her position overtime and her statement regarding the way her budget has increased reflects Jack's sentiment that budget increases with perception of legitimacy. Although it would seem that most all participants would like a larger departmental budget, Jack and Melissa's statements show the way they feel they have been able to successfully increase their departmental budgets as they gained legitimacy over time. Dissatisfaction with the amount budgeted to the communication department was the largest area that participants expressed a struggle with, linked to intra-organizational legitimacy.

**“Old-style” versus “enlightened” management.** In organizations with high concentrations of “old-style” managers<sup>3</sup>, legitimacy may be a fleeting concept for corporate communication, a field that operates much more quantitatively and cannot readily provide spreadsheets, documenting their ROI to the company (Argenti, 1996). Since this article was written, the data I collected makes it seem like management has progressed in their openness to the qualitative style of corporate communication (i.e., work that is not directly measurable in terms of ROI). A word that more than one participant used to describe this openness was “enlightened.” According to Melissa, these managers “get it.” When contemplating organizations where this style of management is prevalent, she said:

I think it just depends on the maturity of the organization, and, in the end, it depends on the leadership too. Does the culture at the top of the organization get it? Do they understand the power of this and that it can make or break you in a number of critical situations for your organization? So I've been working mostly for tech companies, where they're easier and more enlightened and they get it. I always had the resources; I never had to justify anything. I had built trust with the people in the organization that we were there, you know, to make them look good, to protect the company and to help engage our employees in the mission of what we were trying to accomplish, but I hear that it's still pervasive in some areas. I think it depends on the industry. . . our profession, as a whole, really has evolved and I would say to people who feel like you're in an organization

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<sup>3</sup> Quantitatively-minded, likely to be resistant to corporate communications, as detailed on pgs. 10-11.



where it hasn't it's easy—I would say go find another organization because there are people in organizations that do appreciate what we bring and we do have a seat at the table with senior leadership and they value what we do. And so you have to make that decision about it—is it worth fighting and waiting for things to improve as I've done here, or do you need to leave because you're in an organization that's just not enlightened?

Melissa points out that “enlightenment” of management on the legitimacy of corporate communication professionals can vary from industry to industry and organization to organization. The lack of enlightenment that Melissa speaks of is in line with the institutional theory concept of attenuated consciousness. Attenuated consciousness considers the taken-for-grantedness of an institutionalized aspect of an organization, such as corporate communication. In this instance, management is so used to the services that the department provides they may not realize the value of them or the importance of the department to the overall success of the organization. This theme recurred throughout participants' answers.

Mariana, an executive vice president of corporate communications for a financial services company she has been with for 12 years, pointed out that this “enlightenment” can be contagious among management once it takes hold, as the department's display of their own legitimacy can act as a case study for “old-style” managers to learn from:

We've had some recent changes in leadership roles and those folks are pretty enlightened, so when you have somebody like that and they go “Hey! I want to start communicating more routinely with my department and reach lots of people and I want to start reaching our hospitals differently” and they want our support and it goes well, when the other leaders see that, they go “Oh, wait a minute.”

In essence, Mariana is explaining that once some executives buy into the idea that the corporate communication professionals department in her organization performs their roles legitimately, “old-style” managers' then begin to question if they were right to write them off as an

illegitimate entity, and begin seeking to understand the true legitimate nature of corporate communication.

In addition to leaders catching on once they've seen the corporate communication department in action for other members of management, Erma reiterated that once the department displays their importance to the company, it is likely their legitimacy will not be questioned again. She said, "So, there's a funny saying that we say in the corporate comms world: 'Show me an executive that's been through a crisis and you never have to sell them on PR again.'" Indeed, as they are responsible for crisis communication, the corporate communication team is often the department tasked with pulling an organization out of a crisis. Perhaps the immediate payoff of this duty is enough for some managers to get over their quantitative preferences and see value in the more quantitative methods of the corporate communication team. Certainly, since Argenti's 1996 article, it would seem more and more "old-style" managers have become "enlightened."

**Organizational structuring.** Vaara and Monin's (2010) finding that a communication department that is viewed as legitimate will be included more in corporate decision-making and asked to be a part of more projects and initiatives proved to be the case with participants in my study. Specifically, participants felt that as they gained legitimacy, they were included on more conversations with upper-management and, ultimately, (re)structured in the organizational hierarchy to be directly under their management, allowing these conversations to take place more readily. Reese shared:

Well, our team—my boss reports directly to the CEO so I think just that segment means that it is important to our organization; it is something that they see value in, so that automatically gives our team credibility. . . I think having that direct reporting relationship to the CEO is a big deal in our organization and in lots of other ones. I think you know, if you are reporting up to HR, if you're reporting up to marketing or wherever

it might be, I think that kind of indicates how the organization values that role and where, you know, how important they see it.

Reese indicated that reporting directly to upper-management is a result of value and credibility, aspects that go hand-in-hand with legitimacy, whereas separation could indicate that management perceives a lack of value in the function. Peter, a senior vice president of corporate communications in the entertainment and hospitality industry, agreed with this sentiment, and shared that he restructured the communication department in his organization to be more closely aligned with the CEO as he gained legitimacy in his role. Here are some details he shared:

We report directly to the chairman and CEO, but, you know, authority and credibility have to be earned and we have a reputation of delivering and so, we have a high degree of credibility in the organization. . . I think if there's intermediation between the CEO and the communications function, then it's not gonna be as effective.

Peter and Reese's statements support with Vaara and Monin's (2010) findings that corporate communication departments perceived as legitimate will be included on more corporate decisions, and therefore, structured closer to the CEO. The next section will focus on another aspect of Vaara and Monin's (2010) assertions, discussing job responsibilities in respect to legitimacy.

**Job responsibilities.** While my postulation that corporate communication professionals have moved away from the job responsibility of management advisement leading up to Moss, Newman, and DeSanto's publication on the topic (2005) did not arise in the data set, most participants felt they were afforded decent amounts of legitimacy. Overall, interviewees did mention, however, that loss of job responsibilities can occur if a department is struggling to be perceived as legitimate—and conversely, job responsibilities can migrate to the communication department with increasing amounts of legitimacy.

Jack indicated that any number of responsibilities may be shifted to other departments if the corporate communication team is perceived as being a “weak function,” which can happen “in the absence of leadership or the absence of responsiveness” from the corporate communication team. In other words, underperformance or lack of performance altogether can lead to a status of illegitimacy. This is directly in line with institutional theory’s concept of functionalism and limited rationality, which posits that “components of a system must be integrated for the system to survive” (Tolbert & Zucker, 1996, p. 176). Losing components of job responsibilities can come with lack of legitimacy, which is necessary for survival. When the corporate communication department loses ownership over job responsibilities, that can come about by way of lack of legitimacy, which in severe cases, can even result in outsourcing the department altogether. Melissa stated this occurred in her organization prior to her hire when they “gutted the communications department.” Jack explained in his interview how his predecessor was not responsive in his leadership, so now that Jack has taken over the department and has shown responsiveness, the communication function is more closely aligned with business objectives, is included in on top-level discussions and decisions, and given a more appropriate budget.

In reference to loss of job responsibilities, many participants mentioned the inverse of this occurring as they have gained legitimacy in their roles. Mariana described this trade off as a “constant flux” for her department, specifically where the PR team was lumped under or separate from the marketing function. When discussing the reasoning for this, she said:

A lot of time it really depends on what’s going on with the company strategically and what is the best fit for the leadership for the department at the time. . . [When the team was with marketing] it felt like PR was losing its line-up with our corporate messaging and it was getting a little bit out of sync with how the CEO and CFO were talking about business strategy, so we moved it back into my area and at that time the former leader had left and I was now the head of the team and I welcomed it back. So yeah, a mix of

the company strategy shifting a little bit, but then also having different leadership capabilities in different roles.

Mariana described a trade-off of her organization's public relations team between her department and marketing to whichever department was perceived to be more legitimate at the time over her 12 years with her company. She described two conditions this could take place under: (a) alignment with company goals and strategy—a theme to be discussed more in the next section on RQ2 and (b) leadership capabilities—which resounds well with Jack's explanation on why responsibilities may shift.

Now that we have discussed the findings related to the first research question, I will explain the findings of the second research question, which looks at tools and strategies used to gain legitimacy intra-organizationally.

### **Legitimizing Tools and Strategies**

While a legitimate state is no doubt a goal for anyone in their workplace, the big question is *how*? Although tools and strategies have been briefly discussed in segmented areas of organizational communication research, the second research question works to consolidate and bring current the answer to “What tools or strategies do corporate communication professionals use to establish their legitimacy?” Four themes emerged from this research: strategic approach, building credibility, intra-organizational education, and diversity in experience.

**Strategic approach.** As one might expect, the tools and strategies used in alignment with legitimization have evolved with the field. Article counting, social media impressions, and annual reports were tools that the participants of my study felt were no longer relevant to establishing legitimacy. While all interviewees still employed the tools to some degree, they felt this was done as an inter-departmental benchmarking tool, rather than a legitimizing tool with management. Erma said:

It's kind of like table stakes. That's like writing. That's like breathing. You know, we don't count them. I mean we don't sit there and go, "How many articles do I have?" I mean that's from the 1920s, but as far as knowing what the chatter is about your company externally, whether you placed or not, that is like the core reason for your function to exist...

To Erma, media monitoring and annual reports are "very tactical" aspects of the job, and not anything that corporate communication professionals do to go above and beyond to gain legitimacy.

Similarly, social media analytics were collected by all participants' organizations, but they were viewed as a tactical practice, rather than a quantitative measure. Many participants said they use them as an internal gauge for their own departments use, but do not share them intra-organizationally. Participants nodded to their use, but did not feel like they should be used as measures of success due to the inability of a corporate communication department's ability to eliminate extraneous factors contributing to the analytics.

Participants' views varied widely on PRSA and other professional organizations, with some interviewees saying they felt their professional development involvement added a great amount of legitimacy to them in the workplace and several others stating they discontinued their membership because they saw no value in it.

With social media impressions, article counting, and annual reports considered tactical exercises, many participants expressed that employing a strategic approach over tactical ones were in fact critical for gaining legitimacy personally and/or departmentally. Many of the participants said that members of their organizations have misunderstood the responsibilities of the department and were asking them to complete tasks that were not an effective use of time. Completing said tasks without a larger discussion on strategy could be a sign of an illegitimate communication function.

Mariana summarized this tension well when speaking about members of her department:

I think what they find themselves doing more often than not is trying to get alignment or agreement on what the role is. Like, you know, it's more a matter of, well, we will get requests occasionally from a VPR or an SVP and somebody has told them they need to send a note to the board or a note to the board or a note to our management committee explaining their project of what they're working on and the results that they see and you might get a request that says, "Hey, can you help us with that. You're the communication department." (laughs) And so, more often than not, if we're having that type of conversation where we're finding people—"Hey, we're not the only ones allowed to communicate. You know, communication is everyone's job—it's our department name. And trying to focus and help people figure out our time should be spent on higher value activities than that. The business we can bring in through a well thought-out PR campaign is going to be worth more than helping you clean up that PowerPoint deck, so it's more helping them understand what the value is specifically than helping them figure out whether or not there is value.

Regardless of the size of a corporation's communication department, their resources are expendable. Strategic communication departments move from completing tasks without question to helping organizational actors understand how the communication department's time is best spent and what communications will most effectively accomplish internal client goals. Peter said that acting strategically was the number one factor for him in being perceived as legitimate, and it was only through acting strategically that he was able to achieve his level of legitimacy with the CEO of his organization. He stated:

First and foremost, I think it's about understanding the company strategy and being a part of it. And as a result of that working with the CEO to mobilize and communicate their view, their strategic intent, the culture, the tone—both internally and externally.

Certainly, a corporate communication department is not able to be fully legitimate without aligning with company strategy. Once aligned, the education process still may need to be a strategy employed in effort to legitimize, however. As Jack brought up, this process may be easier for some than others based on tenure:

I think that when you're younger or are a more junior person in these roles, your orientation is one of service and so you try to make people happy, but as a consequence of doing that, what often happens is the communication associate or whatever, they end up being very task-focused and often times what people need is very basic administrative things, and so that further delegitimizes the communications function...

Indeed, legitimization can be particularly tricky for junior corporate communication professionals. Someone feeling like they are already lacking in legitimacy may not feel comfortable walking management or other associates through a conversation on strategy, but it is exactly what is needed in order to gain legitimacy. If the communication function were to only handle administrative and basic communication tasks, one could see how their weight in the organization is of minimal value. According to participants, education of value-added tasks and strategic approaches to communication is one tool to legitimize the role. Of course, this process comes easier to those with more experience and/or legitimacy, as these individuals are less likely to experience push-back to the same extent.

Having conversations about strategy and education internal stakeholders on value-added communications ties in with the next theme in this research, which is examined on a broader scale: intra-organizational education.

**Intra-organizational education.** Although most all the participants felt they were treated as legitimate entities at work, they also spoke of times where it was an uphill battle to educate their organizations on the function their department performed. A foremost theme in the interviews that took place was the need to educate both management and associates intra-organizationally and come to an agreement on the responsibilities that should go along with the role of corporate communication.



One participant, Melissa, said that at one point management completely gutted and outsourced the department, drastically devaluing the work of the department. She said with the agency,

There was no strategic approach to communication, so we had a number of very bright people in contract roles that worked for the agency, but people would just throw anything over the fence at them. So they would say “I need you to create this brochure. I need you to write this memo. I need you to do whatever.” And it was an agency mentality. They didn’t care; they were like, “We’re making money, we’ll just do it.”

To Melissa, that’s where agency mentality differs from in-house corporate roles: she feels agency public relations professionals will do whatever you ask them to do, whereas corporate communication professionals differential themselves and gain legitimacy through providing strategic counseling on how communication plans can better all aspects of the company. Melissa did not elaborate on the effectiveness of the communication team prior to their removal from the company, but perhaps because management did not understand the value an effective in-house communication team could bring, they did not see a difference in work being done. Thankfully, Melissa said that changed. She elaborated:

So a few years ago they rebuilt the department, which was a good things as we are going along here, but we still had this process of re-educating other departments and quite frankly, even re-educating our top leadership—even our vice president and some of the top executive leaders within the company. It’s changing now for the better, but the first two years that I’ve been here has been very frustrating because people would get their arms into this stuff in order to say what it should be without relying on the expertise.

Melissa’s statement shows us, that at least in her case, the process of legitimizing her department has been a slow progression. In cases such as Melissa’s, educating an organization on the function of a corporate communication department cannot be completed with one lecture. Only over time, through showing the value the department adds to the company, was Melissa able to move closer and closer toward agreement on and legitimacy of the role.

While Lena, a communications manager who has been with her automotive corporation for 16 years, expressed feeling much more of a sense of legitimacy in the workplace, she said keeping management educated on the actions of her department was crucial to maintaining that treatment. She stated:

I do believe that one of the biggest factors is to let management understand the importance of communication. I think the game is sharing information with them, so keeping them on top of the discussion before and after any kind of action you do. So if you implement these kinds of communication processes with the top management, then they will understand the importance of public communication.

Keeping management from being surprised by external actions affecting stakeholders and helping them understand the value of corporate communication by keeping them informed of the initiatives taking place is thus crucial to attaining legitimacy. Aside from keeping management informed of departmental tasks and accomplishments as Lena mentioned, participants also stated that educating fellow associates in the company was something they readily ran into. Reese said:

I think for other associates it's more of just educating them or bringing awareness to what they [referencing corporate communication professionals in her department] do because it seems like once they have an understanding of that then they're slowly on board. But there's a lot of people who, you know, look at communications and just think that all this stuff happens automatically, and don't really think about the function or the people behind, and then once they do know, then they're there and then they usually are you know, they kind of turn into a client and they're somebody that starts coming to us all the time going "Hey, can you help me with this?" or "What do you think about this?" So yeah, it's definitely an education or an awareness process....

To Reese, getting associates on board, means helping them see the legitimacy of the corporate communication department. Through this process, members of the organization not only stand behind the corporate communication department, but the department's customer base also increases as associates come to realize the number of services the communication departments is able to provide to them. Without knowledge of the functionality and legitimacy of corporate

communication departments that perform legitimately, members of the organization may feel that they are just as qualified and competent to make communication-related decisions and execute these types of tasks. R.M. expressed her frustrations:

I think what is classic in corporate communications, and this applies, you know, whether you're—whichever sort of discipline, whether you're on the comm strategies side, media side, or you know, internal, is that everybody thinks they can write and everybody thinks that they know—as human beings we communicate. So, I think sometimes there is frustration within the role and particularly in an in-house role, where you're often having to negotiate and. . . everybody thinks that they're the expert in the room.

Without an explanation of what corporate communication professionals do, it may be easy to take for granted the work that they do and undermine the complexity of the tasks they perform; surely everyone communicates. What corporate communicators do is way beyond typing memos and making phone calls, however. Helping internal stakeholders understand the function of the communication team is imperative to being perceived as legitimate members of the organization.

**Building credibility.** Beyond acting strategically and helping others understand the nature and value in communication, corporate communication professionals must be viewed as credible. In a foundational article on credibility and communication effectiveness, Hovland and Weiss defined having credibility as possessing “prestige” and being “trustworthy” (1951, p. 635). In this context, I am using credibility to describe the power of a corporate communication professional to inspire other organizational actor's belief in their efficacy to do their job.

Indeed, one could imagine how credibility plays into the perception of legitimacy and vice versa. The participants in this study echoed this sentiment. Succinctly put by Mary: “Gaining legitimacy starts with doing a good job. So if you, if you don't do a good job, all of the other stuff isn't gonna matter.” Creditability and legitimacy are closely tied together. Suchman, whose definition of legitimacy is used as a foundation in this thesis, wrote: “Legitimacy

enhances both the stability and comprehensibility of organizational activities” (1995, p. 574). In other words, through conforming to expected norms and increasing legitimacy, corporate communication professionals are also increasing the predictability of their behaviors and other organizational actors’ understanding of their work and the professional choices they make. He said, “Continuity and credibility are usually mutually reinforcing” (p. 575). He went on to say that “Audiences perceive the legitimate organization not only as more worthy, but also as more meaningful, more predictable, and more trustworthy.” (p. 575) So, as legitimacy increases, credibility does also. Likewise, if an individual or department were to prove themselves legitimate, or trustworthy, their legitimacy level is likely to rise intra-organizationally as well.

Reese added that credibility is not something that you start with the first day on the job.

When asked about why she thinks she is given a high level of autonomy, Reese said:

I think it’s probably my experience and their trust in me. I think just overall, the credibility that our department has. We are very trusted to do a good job. . . It’s definitely about credibility we’ve built over the years and the trust in our level of expertise.

Reese said that this credibility was built through management recognizing the way she handled herself and her job responsibilities in different scenarios over the years. Essentially, consistent satisfactory (or above) performance helped her gain legitimacy in her role.

In corporate communication, being good at what you do is not only derived from skills and experience, though. It takes time to understand a company brand, their culture, and goals.

Peter speaks to this necessary synergy by saying:

I have a significant amount of autonomy, and the requisite for that is assuring that the communications function has full awareness and alignment to organizational objectives and strategies.

To be successful in corporate communication, one must not only have the skills to succeed, but the know-how to be able to apply those skills to their specific organization/industry.

Finally, it is important to note that once credibility is established, it is not intransigent.

Jack explained:

So, you've probably heard this a lot. I mean this is one of the functions that everyone thinks they can do better. And, you know, everybody has an opinion about what you should or should not do. . . I mean, you have to earn it. Right, right? I mean, look, I have to earn it here every single day. Every single day. No matter what I did yesterday, I have to earn it again tomorrow. . . So I guess this a long way of saying, you have to build your credibility in every job. Unless you're in a company that values it. I mean the company I came from, frankly the corporate communications function had nearly as much sway—*nearly*—as some of the lawyers, depending on the topic, because you know we had proved what effective looked like and the value we could bring over time. . . So you, you know, as a communication person, you literally have to... you have to understand how to do PR for yourself too.

Jack's statement shows the spectrum of legitimacy and the various ways it can manifest in the corporate communication sector from organization to organization. Like any relationship, the relationship between corporate communication and other members of the organization requires maintenance, and building credibility is likely to increase perceptions of legitimacy along the way.

**Diversity of experience.** Although work and educational experience is not something that can be changed by an individual on the spot toward the goal of legitimacy, it is something that participants mentioned as emerging in importance to management, and it is the final theme that emerged from this research. There are several aspects to how diversity can help with legitimacy. First is simply that overall in the workplace, many members of upper-management are “focusing away from business and economics and focusing back on liberal arts backgrounds and also focusing on engineering and technology,” as R.M. put it. Peter also noted that the same is true for recruitment of upper-management themselves, indicating a movement away from executive boards made up of almost exclusively MBA backgrounds, as discussed in the literature review.

To contrast, Erma feels like more MBAs have been moving into the realm of corporate communication and that other diverse backgrounds are now becoming more standard to the field than the overwhelming journalism and communication degrees one might have seen historically.

Erma explained:

Twenty years ago, I might have hired somebody in for an entry level communications role and what I primarily would have been looking for was somebody with great writing skills. Now that's table stakes. Now that's like, you know, we don't do writing tests. I'm like are you kidding me? I mean that's like, you know. I'm going to be seeing so much of the person's work and real life examples and communication back and forth—all sorts of things to know what their writing skills are, but that—that's like asking them if they can breathe. Okay? So, many, many more MBAs in the function, many more people who have spent time really embedded in businesses doing strategy. A lot more social scientists, people with var—you know, like anthropology and psychology and sociology backgrounds. Okay? That's the sort of, you know, sort of stuff that—and, and then you add onto that the actual technical expertise of social media skills, marketing, knowing advertising, knowing how to create multimedia storytelling. All of those things are the actual, you know, kind of like the skills. So of course you're paying more for people that have those sorts of, you know, really comprehensive skills that supply and demand, other people don't necessarily have.

Erma's statement seems to show that within her department, the demands for a corporate communication professional have grown over the years and diversity in experience is now something that is of emergent importance. Jack works in a highly-regulated industry and illustrated how diversity in experience is particularly important for corporate communication departments in organizations such as the one he is a part of. He said a “shift is taking place in this profession” and explained how media people were the ones management wanted in communication roles because, inherently, they would understand how to talk to the media. Jack then gave several examples of how this is no longer the model in hyper-regulated industries such as the chemical production industry he is a part of. He shared that he's seen political communicators be headhunted by corporations because:

A journalist isn't gonna get you there. So what you're seeing increasingly are people who have political experience who can literally do government affairs, corporate communication—you know, the triple threat of skills is really having a political background or mindset... political-regulatory, having a communications mindset, so understanding how to do that and being a very, very strong organizer and manager. And if you do those three things, you're well positioned broadly.

Jack felt that because of his political experience, he is able to be a better communicator in his role because he understands the side of political external stakeholders. Whether it be integrating team members of political or liberal arts backgrounds to the corporate communication team, this has been a recent trend that has added legitimacy to the function.

Between having a diverse background across the department and from a leadership perspective, acting strategically as opposed to tactically, educating organizational members on the value of the communication function, and carving out credibility for oneself, these were all ways that participants felt they were able to gain legitimacy within their roles. This chapter also showed budget to be the largest area that participants struggled with legitimacy, in addition to the struggles those who are perceived as illegitimate could face in regard to organizational structuring, tenuous relationships with “old-style” managers, and loss of job responsibilities.

## Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this exploratory study was to get a pulse on the current state of legitimacy in corporate communication. The study yielded different results compared to both dated, under-developed literature and my own personal experiences. As a whole, this thesis contributes to the body of literature on legitimacy and corporate communication through its discussion on the factors that may contribute to intra-organizational illegitimacy and the tools and strategies that may be used during legitimization. The findings of this study are explained by institutional theory.

While in some ways, the results of this study were consistent with the literature, in many ways, they were not. Budget proved to be an area of contention for participants in this study and salary, the other component Deephouse and Suchman (2008) tied to legitimacy, did not. These findings play into Hybels' (2008) and Suchman's (1995) argument that corporate communication professionals have to situate themselves as productive members of their institutions defending resources, but it did not play out so much in terms of having to defend personal reputation—beyond that of positioning oneself as a strategic member of the organization. Further, this study did not replicate the findings of Moss, Newman, and DeSanto (2005), wherein corporate communication professionals were being separated from the traditional role of advisor to management. Nine out of 10 participants said they act as management advisors, one participant (Erma) even noting that she does this hourly. Jack's response indicated this was an area he hopes to see continued growth in, as he stated he advises management "when I'm at the table," referencing that he does not always get invited to strategic conversations. Although my study did not have the sample size to be able to lay claim to generalizability, if these participants'



experiences are indicative of a larger phenomenon, it could be possible that we are seeing a growth in this area of corporate communication legitimacy. If this is true, it would support Vaara and Monin's (2010) argument that a communication departments viewed as legitimate are included more in corporate decision-making. Finally, the breakthrough of "enlightened" upper-management, as opposed to "old-style" managers could be a result of a mixture of "old-style" managers retiring and corporate communication professionals successfully legitimizing themselves (at least to some degree) with management.

In addition to these two factors contributing in the shift from "old-style" to "enlightened" managers, it is important to note that "enlightenment" of managers may have been noted by participants because there has been a shift in the type of legitimacy managers bestow on corporate communication departments. Whereas "old-style" managers could be perceived as assigning pragmatic legitimacy on the corporate communication department, "enlightened" managers likely assign moral legitimacy. Suchman defined pragmatic legitimacy as being based on "self-interested calculations" (1995, p.578). So, when "old-style" managers are not supplied with spreadsheets of ROI from the corporate communication department justifying their worth, they would not be likely to assess the department as being a legitimate entity. In contrast to pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy "reflects a positive normative evaluation" because it is "the right thing to do" (1995, p. 579). Under this type of legitimacy, the corporate communication department would likely not be looked upon critically from a fiscal perspective, but would rather be valued due to the holistic value it adds to an organization. "Enlightened" managers see the value of the communication department, and per the participants in this study, did not express interest in pressure-generated quantitative analytics. This shift in the type of

legitimacy bestowed—from pragmatic to moral—may be indicative of a larger organizational behavior trend.

### **Connection to Institutional Theory**

At its heart, institutional theory works to explain “the elaboration of rules and requirements to which organizations must conform if they are to receive support and legitimacy” (Scott & Meyer, 1983, p. 140). Within the context of this thesis, institutional theory helps us understand the way the group of corporate communication professionals respond to and interact with the institution of the corporations in which they reside. Indeed, corporate communication in and of itself mirrors some of the aspects of institutions, as it works to become a legitimate, enduring principle of the business world through institutionalization. (Lawrence, Winn, & Jennings, 2001). To do this, corporate communication professionals must conform to certain rules to gain legitimacy within the workplace. As mentioned in the literature review, there are four components of institutional theory, and it is worth repeating them now that I have discussed the findings of this exploratory study, using these four components to frame our discussion of the content.

The first construct, functionalism and limited rationality is underpinned by Tolbert and Zucker’s (1996) assertion that “components of a system must be integrated for the system to survive” (p. 176). In this way, the corporate communication department must be an integrated member of its organization for survival, lest it be outsourced as was the case in Mary’s company. To be fully integrated, the corporate communication department must be aligned with business goals and initiatives, as Peter mentioned, and the department must practice strategically, as opposed to tactically—the first trend discussed in relation to RQ2. As Lena stated, the corporate communication department needs to share with management the work they do so the importance

of their accomplishments can be realized and, in turn, so legitimacy can be attained. Indeed, a corporate communication department must be integrated to be legitimate.

The second construct of institutional theory, external environments, focuses on “the boundary between authority in the organization and the legitimacy bestowed by the institutional environments” (Lammers & Garcia, 2013, p. 197; see also Meyer & Rowan, 1977 and Selznick, 1949). While corporate communication departments are responsible for treading this external boundary line on behalf of their organization, there is also an internal parallel to be seen here. In the same way external stakeholders have expectations for corporations, corporations have expectations for corporate communication departments. When organizational actors do not understand the value of communication teams, budgets are low, job responsibilities are taken away, and stratification occurs between communication professionals and upper-management. When corporate communication professionals successfully legitimize themselves, however, the expectations of the organization are met.

Attenuated consciousness composes the third construct, which considers the taken-for-grantedness of institutionalization (Lammers & Garcia, 2013). This construct is applied in corporate communication when other members of the organization take for granted all the success and smoothness in operation that is brought about by the corporate communication department. When one is not aware of how integral this department is for overall corporate success, it may be easy to take them for granted, which is why intra-organizational communication is crucial for gaining legitimacy. Just as many participants said they need to talk members of their organizations through the value in spending their time doing strategic communication practices instead of party-planning, PowerPoint deck building and other base-level communication functions, without understanding what it is an effective corporate

communication team does, they are often taken for granted. This is where Mary brought up that once you walk your organization through a crisis, “you’ll never have to sell them on PR again”—or the taken-for-grantedness of the corporate communication department for that matter. Reese illustrated well: “There’s a lot of people who look at communications and just think that all this stuff happens automatically, and don’t really think about the function or the people behind [it].”

The fourth construct, symbolic life of organization, considers the “ceremonial activities” performed to gain legitimacy, and in this case, the tools and strategies utilized by corporate communication professionals for legitimization (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 355). Performances of institutional norms are used to signal conformity to normative practices to management in hopes of increasing perception of legitimacy (Bertels & Pelozo, 2008; Levis, 2006; Truscott, Batlett, & Tywoniak, 2009; Winn, MacDonald, & Zietsma, 2008). Certainly, operating strategically, operating with high levels of credibility, and having a diverse team could be seen as signaling conformity to the larger expectations of the corporate institution.

### **Limitations**

Overwhelming, participants of this study felt they had legitimacy in their role. Something important and perhaps peculiar to take into account as we begin discussing the results though, is that of the numerous people I contacted to request participation in this study of various degrees of seniority within their organizations, all 10 that agreed to participate held senior positions within their organizations. Although I offered evening and weekend hours for interviews, each of the participants chose interview times during the work day. This may suggest that the participants that agreed to this study have the legitimacy to be able to take time out of their workdays for unaffiliated interviews, which will have no impact on them bringing in revenue to

their respective corporations. It is possible—and further, probable—that the seniority skew impacted data in my research. Two key areas I think this is possible was within the parameters of salary and autonomy. It makes perfect sense that senior leaders would be afforded larger salaries and greater amount of autonomy. While it is possible senior leaders may be able to speak for the feelings and experiences of their subordinates, it is important to note that in most cases, I did not ask them to. Because I sought to find a diverse sample, the research questions were designed to examine legitimacy from only the participant's point of view. Due to this, the data collected is likely not representative of the opinions of junior-level associates in corporate communication.

Another limitation was the fact that I had my own first-hand experiences in terms of corporate communication and legitimacy going into this study. I built in methods to safeguard objectivity in data collection and worked extensively with my advisor to ensure objective study design and analysis of the data, but inherently, I found myself at times assuming what participants would say before they expressed their opinions. If I had no connection to the research, it may have been easier to bracket my biases on this research topic.

A final way this research was limited was through my use of phone versus in-person interviews due to time and geographical constraints. While I listened for intonation and other verbal cues that accompanied the participants' answers, I was unable to read their non-verbal cues, such as body language, as I would be able to if these interviews were in-person. Additionally, although I utilized a warm-up question to build rapport with participants, this likely would have been much easier to do in-person, and thus, I may have received more open, honest answers.

## **Directions for Future Research**

The foremost direction I would like to see this research taken would be to find a way to speak with individuals who are in the process of struggling for legitimacy in their role (i.e., lower-level corporate communication professionals). This would allow the researcher to tease out what conditions are different for these individuals in comparison to the dialogue provided through this thesis. In this population, the researcher may very well find that participants struggle with autonomy and salary in their tread toward legitimacy. Additionally, this line of research could be used comparatively to examine what tools and strategies that are employed, but arguably ineffectively, since all the participants of my study spoke of what tools and strategies they used to effectively gain the legitimacy they now hold.

To contrast, this topic may also be interesting to hear from the perspective of management and other members of the organization. This point of view could help corporate communication professionals understand about why they are perceived the way they are by other organizational actors and detail the steps and actions those organizational members go through when negotiating legitimacy with the communication department.

Along these same lines of reasoning, one could look for trends in groups of corporate communication professionals that consider themselves to be viewed legitimately or illegitimately, and similarly, to examine this same concept in management who perceive corporate communication professionals to be on one side or the other of the legitimacy spectrum. A reason I think this topic would be so interesting is because when I interviewed my manager from the corporation that inspired this thesis, her responses differed vastly from my

expectations<sup>4</sup>. Even in light of some of the struggles she faced that I interpreted to be results of illegitimacy in the workplace, such as being under-budgeted and not being given the ability to fund areas of her job that she thought were important pieces of her role, she held that she felt she was valued and autonomous in her role. When reflecting on a shift in dynamics since a merger occurred in the company and feeling like she is revered as less of an expert, she stated: “I think just the level of experience I don’t think is there that they have with us. Or that I have being seen as an expert anymore. That kind of, you know, declined.” Still, Rabia maintained that she felt she was not looked upon critically by management. From the managerial perspective, we also heard several participants reflect on the “enlightenment” of management. So then, what conditions exist in “enlightened” verses “old-style” managers? What is the current breakdown of the percentages of these types of managers that exist? Is this ratio changing over time?

A longitudinal study could tease out the process of legitimization, starting with junior-level associates and following them through seniority in their organizations. This would limit confounding variables between individuals and provide a concrete overview of the ways corporate communication professionals struggle with legitimacy over the course of their career and what tools and strategies they both effectively and ineffectively used in the course of legitimization.

Another theoretically rich direction to extend this research would be a comparative study between corporate communication and other departments in an organization comparing tenure and legitimacy. Most of the participants in my study referenced how legitimacy increases with credibility and experience and my study did point to specific areas where participants feel that

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<sup>4</sup> Note that I intentionally separated my own thoughts throughout the interview in effort to gather organic results and not influence the data in any way. The expectations discussed were only acknowledged after data had been collected and compiled.

they struggle with legitimacy, but I think a study that compared the degree to which this struggle exists that examined specific areas such as budget (supported by the work of Deephouse & Suchman, 2008), autonomy, etc. could be helpful.

Finally, a study that did more to investigate the influence demographics have on legitimacy could be very powerful and productive. Such a study could investigate differences in perception of corporate communication legitimacy by industry, geographic region, age, race, sex, etc. Each of these aspects could be helpful to have research conducted on, but a research study conducted on the relationship between legitimacy of corporate communication professionals and their sex could prove to be particularly enlightening. As previously stated, men are the minority in this industry, but both men in this study seemed to very comfortable in their position, expressing they receive a high amount of autonomy, satisfactory salaries, and that they have been able to legitimize themselves successfully over time. Additional research is necessary to find if this is a trend, wherein males find the process of legitimization to be easier/quicker than their female counterparts.

## **Conclusion**

I introduced this thesis by discussing my personal experience in corporate communication, and how that served as my motivation for pursuing this topic. Since then, I have had several other jobs and internships, received my bachelor's degree, and completed my master's courses. I have worked in two professional roles since finishing the courses toward my M.A. in Communication Studies, the latter being my current position in corporate communication. During my defense of this thesis, one of my committee members asked me: "Do you have any insight on what it was like to work on this thesis while working in corporate communication?" The first words out of my mouth were "vastly frustrating." I said this because



although I seemed to have it all spelled out for me on how to legitimize myself, it has not been that simple. When people see me, they see a 26-year old. As Jack stated, junior-level associates are often given the tactical duties and this makes it hard for them to legitimize themselves. I have tried to jump ahead and talk strategy, but in a lot of cases, these conversations have been ones that management is not willing to entertain. I have tried to build credibility, and in some ways I have, but in so many more, there seems to be a “just wait it out until you have more tenure” mentality. This thesis is personal for me, but this career is personal for thousands of others like me. There needs to be more research done in this area, and maybe, just maybe, additional research can lend a hand in the legitimization process.

While this is not an exhaustive study of the conditions of legitimacy for corporate communication professionals and the tools and strategies used to gain legitimacy, it is a first step toward better understanding these concepts and bridging the gap between academic recording and industry knowledge on these issues. This thesis helped to delineate literature on corporate communication and legitimacy that is no-longer relevant such as article counting, annual report generating, and social media monitoring, posturing them as tactics rather than legitimacy-gaining strategies. Through analysis of interview data, this thesis showed budget to be an issue among participants and organizational structuring and loss or gain of job responsibilities to be areas that can be directly affected as a result of legitimacy within a corporation. The presence of “old-style” vs. “enlightened” upper-management also directly has an impact on intra-organizational legitimacy. Finally, this thesis opened the door for discussion on how operating strategically, educating organizational actors on effective communication practices, building credibility, and having a department with diverse backgrounds can all work together to add legitimacy to the function of corporate communication.

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## **Appendix A: LinkedIn Recruitment Message**

Hello,

My name is Alissa Hooper, and I am currently working on my master's thesis at Colorado State University titled "Seeking legitimacy: Corporate communication's struggle for intra-organizational legitimacy". My thesis works to understand the various ways and under what circumstances corporate communication professionals legitimize themselves within their organizations. Would you be willing to participate in my study? Although this is not a paid research study, I would be willing to share the aggregated results with you once I have completed my thesis defense. Data collection will be done via phone interview and last approximately 45 minutes, but may be more or less depending on the length of your answers. I am hoping to conduct interviews between now and [insert date here]. If you are interested in participating, please reply as soon as convenient. Interview scheduling is flexible and can be midday or evenings on weekdays or any time on Saturday.

Participants must have been in a corporate communication role for a publicly traded company for a minimum of six months before the interview date and be at least 18 years of age.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alissa Hooper

## Appendix B: Confirmation Email

Hi [Insert name here],

Thank you for agreeing to a phone interview with me regarding my master's thesis on feelings of legitimacy in corporate communication titled "Seeking legitimacy: Corporate communication's struggle for intra-organizational legitimacy". As we discussed on [Facebook/LinkedIn/other], our interview will be over the phone and last approximately 45 minutes.

Your interview date and time is: \_\_\_\_\_

I will reach out to you at that time via the phone number you provided. If you have any questions in the meantime, please feel free to contact me.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdrawal consent at any time. This research study is not paid, but participants may benefit from receiving a report of the aggregated results at the conclusion of the study. While there are no imminent threats to health, if you have experienced stressful situations at work, you may be asked to discuss them, which has the potential to trigger stress through recall. If after this study you find yourself in distress, there are resources. Please visit <http://psychcentral.com/lib/telephone-hotlines-and-help-lines/> for a list of hotlines available to you within the U.S. As always, call 911 anytime you feel your health is in immediate danger. Your confidentiality is my priority and no identifying information will be collected during the course of the interview. If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu) or 970-491-1553.

Sincerely,

Alissa Hooper, Department of Communication, Colorado State University  
Cell: 989-492-2193  
Email: [hooper@rams.colostate.edu](mailto:hooper@rams.colostate.edu)

### **Appendix C: Reminder Email**

Hi [Insert name here],

This is a reminder of our interview scheduled tomorrow at \_\_\_\_\_. I will reach out to you at that time from the phone number 989-492-2193.

As a reminder, your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdrawal consent at any time. If you have questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu) or 970-491-1553.

I am looking forward to speaking with you tomorrow!

Sincerely,

Alissa Hooper, Department of Communication, Colorado State University

Cell: 989-492-2193

Email: [hooper@rams.colostate.edu](mailto:hooper@rams.colostate.edu)

### Appendix D: Participant Demographic Chart

Pseudonym	Title	Industry	US State of workplace	Age	Length of time with company	Sex
Rabia	Manager, Organizational Communication	Retail and Distribution	MI	43	15 years	F
Reese	Director, Corporate Communications	Manufacturing	CO	42	3.5 years	F
Melissa	Director of Employee Communications	Healthcare	TX	55	2.5 years	F
Mariana	Executive Vice President of Corporate Communications	Financial Services	NC	41	12 years	F
Jack	Vice President of Corporate Communications	Chemical	TX	Early 40s	1 year	M
Lena	Global Grand Communication Manager/Communication 2020 Manager	Automotive	MI	51	16 years	F
Peter	Senior Vice President, Corporate Communications	Entertainment and Hospitality	NV	60	5 years	M
Erma	Chief Communications Officer/Global Vice President of Corporate Communications	Food	MN	48	1 year	F
R.M.	Managing Director, Global Head of Executive and Internal Communication	Financial Services	NY	41	2 years	F
Mary	Director of Corporate Communications	Manufacturing	WI	62	5.5 years	F

## **Appendix E: Interview Script with Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

Hello, this is Alissa Hooper calling regarding the phone interview we set up about corporate communication and legitimacy for my master's thesis. Is now still a good time to talk?

First, I would like to thank you for taking time to volunteer for this study. I am first going to review the details of the study with you and go over the informed consent information for a minute or so if that's okay with you.

As I stated in my confirmation email, this is a voluntary phone interview for my master's thesis titled "Seeking acceptance: Corporate communication's struggle for intra-organizational legitimacy". This thesis is a requirement to obtain my Master of Arts in Communication Studies through Colorado State University. I expect this phone call to last about 45 minutes, but it may be more or less depending on the length of your answers.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdrawal at any time. In line with that, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, please feel free to tell me and we can move on. I don't anticipate there being any risks to your health through this study, but if you find yourself distressed, please reference the list of resources that were emailed to you previously. I will not be collecting any identifying information and I will be maintaining confidentiality. Towards the end of the interview I will be collecting some demographic information, but again, if you do not feel comfortable providing that information please just let me know.

As far as benefits for your participation, this is an unpaid interview, however I would be happy to email you an aggregated report of the results at the conclusion of the study, which you may find interesting and beneficial.

Finally, if you have questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Colorado State Institutional Review Board at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu) or you may call them 970-491-1553.

Thank you for listening to that spiel. Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

I also want to make sure: do I have your permission to record audio of this interview? All audio content will be deleted after interviews have been transcribed.

### Warm-Up Questions

- Can you tell me about how you got into your current position with your company?

### Feelings of Intra-Organizational (II) Legitimacy

- How would you describe the level of autonomy you're given at work? Do you feel it is appropriate?
- In what areas of your job do you not feel like you're given autonomy?
- Do you feel like your department is given an appropriate budget for the work they do? Why do you think this is?
- Do you feel like you're given an appropriate salary for the work you do? Why do you think this is?
- Do you feel like you ever have to justify your role in the company to management? To other associates? If so, why do you think that is? Do you think this is normal?
- Do you feel like your department is a valued part of the company you work for? Why?

### Environmental Variables of (II) Legitimacy

- Do you advise upper-management in your role?
- Have job responsibilities of your department ever shifted to being another department's responsibility that you are aware of?
- How would you describe the diversity of upper-management?
- Do many members of upper-management have business degrees or backgrounds?
- Do you feel like annual reports have an effect on your department's reputation?

### Tools/Coping Strategies

- Are you a member of PRSA? Any other professional associations?
- Do you keep track of published articles? If so, what do you believe the significance of this is?
- Do you keep track of social media impressions? If so, why?
- Do you use any other analytic tools or have other strategies to track progress? What are their significance to your role?
- Do you engage in any practices you feel are done in effort to gain legitimacy at work?

### Demographics

- What is your professional title?
- What industry is your corporation a part of?
- What U.S. state do you work in?
- What is your age?
- How long have you worked for your company?
- What is your sex?
- Would you like to provide a pseudonym to be referred by in my thesis?



### Wrap-Up Questions

- Would you like to add anything else that you feel may be helpful for this study?
- Now that we've completed the interview, do you have any questions about what we talked about today for me?

Perfect. Well thank you so much for your time today. You've really helped me out with your answers. If any questions come up, please reach out and contact me. You're welcome to call me or reach out via email. With that, I hope you have a great rest of your day and I'll be in touch with the results in a few months.

## Appendix F: Coding

Step one: Open coding themes that emerged:

- Intra-organizational education
- Autonomy
- Budget
- Building credibility
- Job responsibilities
- Annual reports
- “Old-style” vs. “enlightened” management
- Article counting
- Social media impressions
- Strategic approach
- Miscellaneous
- Organizational structure
- Professional organization membership
- Diversity of experience

Step two: Axial coding:

- RQ1 themes:
  - Autonomy
  - Budget
  - “Old-style” Versus “Enlightened” Management
  - Organizational Structure
  - Job Responsibilities

- RQ2 themes:
  - Strategic Approach
  - Intra-Organizational Education
  - Building Credibility
  - Annual Reports
  - Article Counting
  - Social Media Impressions
  - Professional Organization Membership
  - Diversity of Experience
  - Miscellaneous

Step three: Delimiting

- RQ1 themes:
- RQ1 themes:
  - ~~Autonomy~~
  - Budget
  - “Old-style” Versus “Enlightened” Management
  - Organizational Structure
  - Job Responsibilities
- RQ2 themes:
  - Strategic Approach
  - Intra-Organizational Education
  - Building Credibility
  - ~~Annual Reports~~

- ~~○ Article Counting~~
- ~~○ Social Media Impressions~~
- ~~○ Professional Organization Membership~~
- Diversity of Experience
- ~~○ Miscellaneous~~