

Strategic Planning in Dynamic Environments: How Design Thinking Can Complement Corporate Communication

Frederic Vuillermin^{1}, Simone Huck-Sandhu¹*

¹Business School, Pforzheim University, Pforzheim, Germany.

*Corresponding author: Frederic Vuillermin¹, frederic.vuillermin@hs-pforzheim.de

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Abstract

Corporate communication planning is in transition. In a VUCA world, planning has to adapt to volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous contexts. Strategic planning analyzes, plans, implements and evaluates communication programs or campaigns, but at the same time needs to become increasingly agile. This paper develops the argument that strategic planning is evolving from conventional, rather linear approaches, to new, more dynamic models. Based on literature, a new perspective is offered by introducing design thinking principles, practices and techniques to the body of knowledge in communications research. Thus, the paper addresses design thinking as a mindset and as a means for creative problem solving within corporate communication planning. Findings of a qualitative study conducted among communication agencies and consultancies in Germany suggest that elements of design thinking are already being used and implemented by practitioners. The study determined that there are at least five types of implementations, three of which showed clear linkages to design thinking. Based on these findings, a modular, stakeholder-centered approach to communication planning is conceptualized.

Keywords

Design Thinking, Agile Planning, Communication Planning, Corporate Communication, Communication Management.

Introduction

In a world that is subject to constant change, Corporate Communication (CC) is faced with numerous challenges. Formerly stable contexts have become unpredictable (volatility). It is more difficult to anticipate how events will unfold and to predict the outcome of management decisions and strategic communication (uncertainty). Furthermore, the world seems to be more complex (complexity) and contradictory than ever (ambiguity). Within such VUCA conditions (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), CC has to be agile and adaptable to change (Zerfass et al., 2018).

CC can be defined as *a management function that offers a framework for the effective coordination of all internal and external communication with the overall purpose of establishing and maintaining favorable reputations with stakeholder groups upon which the organization is dependent* (Cornelissen, 2014). As in strategic communication, CC is based on strategic planning, aligned to objectives, systematically planned and implemented in a structured process. At the end of this process, results are evaluated and, if necessary, adjustments are made.

Communication planning frameworks vary within CC's three subdomains; marketing communications (Holm, 2006; Schultz, 1992; Schultz & Kitchen, 2000; Kitchen & De Pelsmacker, 2004), public relations (Vieira, 2018; Smith, 2017; Cutlip et al., 2006) and internal communications (Ruck, 2015; FitzPatrick & Valskov, 2014). However, all three subdomains are dominated by similar approaches consisting of a four or multi-step process based on analysis, strategy, implementation and evaluation. Those planning processes follow a predefined linear order of separated phases (Cutlip et al., 2006).

Currently, whenever unforeseen developments arise and influence the planning process, analysis and strategy phases have to be reviewed initially — requiring a substantial amount of time and other resources. In the light of ever-changing environments in VUCA times, this issue and the general linear logic behind current planning frameworks are problematized.

By investigating CC and the discipline of design thinking, this proposes a new integrated model for communication planning that combines conventional frameworks with key aspects of the design thinking discipline. On one hand, the paper portrays the developments in contemporary communication management, based on theoretical work and qualitative findings; on the other hand, it aims at expanding communication managers' planning toolset.

Models of Planning in Corporate Communication

CC, as a management function, effectively coordinates all internal and external communications (Cornelissen, 2014; Berger, 2018) within three specific disciplines; public relations, internal communication and marketing communication. As early as the 1960s, Marston (1963) described a four-step model of Public Relations (PR) programming. This model consists of Research, Action, Communication and Evaluation (RACE). Special emphasis is put on action as Seitel (2014) stresses *Performance must precede publicity; Act first and communicate later*. Similarly, the ROPE model contains Research, Objectives, Program/Plan and Evaluation (Hendrix, 1995). Over time, the focus evolved from action to strategy. Due to the managerial turn within the field starting in the 1980s, planning and programming addressed a managerial approach to PR as well. The RAISE model stresses the relevance of strategy by suggesting a five-step approach. Research, Adaptation and Implementation are followed by Strategy and Evaluation (Kendall, 1997; Crifasi, 2000). In this model an emphasis is put on setting objectives, defining strategies and implementing a predetermined plan in order to achieve these objectives. Adopting either a four or a five-step process, the PR process can be described as follows (Cutlip et al., 2006); in the first step, a situation analysis is carried out in order to define the communication problem — *what's the problem?*. Facts are collected and evaluated. In the second step, a strategy is designed — *what should we do and say, and why?*— and, in the third step, implemented — *how and when do we do an say it?*. Finally, in the fourth step, the program is evaluated using an assessment — *how did we do?*.

Within internal communication, strategic planning also is seen as *the starting point for everything that is produced in the realm of employee communications, such as channels, campaigns, events and face-to-face programs* (Carramenha, 2019). A planned approach is said to prompt preemptive decision-making and to ensure consistency from the creation of communications to its contribution to corporate strategy (Carramenha, 2019). From a communication management perspective, internal communication has been researched mainly from a PR perspective. Thus, internal communication planning is very similar to PR programming, as stated by Ruck (2015).

Cutlip et al.'s process also applies to internal communication planning with the phases:

1. definition of goals
2. collection of all relevant information and the analysis of different scenarios
3. stakeholder segmentation
4. development of strategies, tactics and initiatives while identifying resources to be allocated
5. determination of how to measure results (Carramenha, 2019; Guadain, 2019; Hollaus, 2016).

In his *RADAR* model, Ruck presents a linear process approach with the phases being Research, Assess, Decide, Act, Review (Ruck, 2015).

Based on the literature on marketing communication, planning is seen as a process that involves management and organization of all internal and external individuals' efforts in achieving predetermined corporate and/or marketing objectives using professional communication (Gombeski et al., 2007). The purpose of a marketing communication plan is to ensure the greatest possible communicative coherence between the various communication contents (Cvetkov Čikošev, 2019; Gombeski et al., 2007). Similar to PR and internal communication, the relevant phases of a marketing communication planning process are as follows (Gombeski et al., 2007; Caemmerer, 2009); as a first step, communication objectives informed by strategic marketing decisions and plans are set. Then in the second step, the situation is analyzed and marketing communication opportunities are identified — such as different types of positionings (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010). As the third step, audiences have to be targeted *which will have implications for tone, content, conceptual development, design, expected actions and responses as well as other aspects of the piece*, as Gombeski et al. (2007) stress. As the fourth step of campaign planning, message strategies are defined. Creative execution and media planning as well as campaign or program evaluation are the fifth and final steps, respectively.

To sum up, all three disciplines of CC present conventional models of planning that are:

- Linear: Models are based on a step-by-step approach of research, strategy, implementation and evaluation. However, evaluation seems to be of more importance within PR frameworks than in marketing communication models.
- Sequential: Planning consists of a predefined sequence of steps with the possibility of looping back when, for example, findings of the research phase prove to be lacking or outdated, conversely when fundamentals and general conditions change during strategy formulation or implementation. Although loops are an integral part of the models, they have the connotation of being a step backwards instead of taking the next step forward.
- Closed: Conventional models are based on a mindset that posits a rather closed planning process. Consumer research or research on public opinion is conducted in the first step, the analysis. Evaluation is done at the end of a campaign (summative evaluation) or when major milestones have been reaching during implementation (formative evaluation). During positioning and strategy development, traditional models are a closed process — meaning neither stakeholders are involved nor is the process open-ended.
- Goal-Oriented: Conventional planning as an integral part of strategic communication has to contribute to achieving a company's strategic objectives as the main focus being the company and its mission.

Recent publications, however, address a need for more agile approaches in planning. According to [Ruck \(2015\)](#), *the agile approach has been developed in the IT world, though it is transferable to communication planning; detailed and exhaustive planning processes which previously took months of research are replaced with a faster, agile methodology*. [Zerfass et al. \(2018\)](#) expect agility to have a strong impact on communication departments, *as an organizational function that is deeply affected by all changes in the external and internal environment of an organization, corporate communications have recently been forced to cope with the challenges associated with agility — not only as a driver of the topic but also because it is simultaneously driven by its implications*.

Introducing a New Perspective: Design Thinking as a Means for Agile Planning

A growing number of companies seem to have implemented Design Thinking (DT) frameworks in order to foster a more agile culture and boost innovation ([Leifer & Meinel, 2018](#); [von Thienen et al., 2019](#); [Wrigley et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, DT is seen as an efficacious problem-solving process to meet the challenges of a VUCA world ([Liedtka, 2020](#)). Within strategic and change management, DT has been gaining more and more attention ([Knight et al., 2020](#)) and more recently also in CC ([Zerfass et al., 2018](#)). From a VUCA perspective, DT may offer new opportunities for communication planning as it *helps to obtain a multi-perspective comprehension of a complex and ambiguous problem* ([Meinel & Leifer, 2011](#)).

DT is both a problem-solving approach based on creativity ([von Thienen et al., 2019](#); [Bicen & Gudigantala, 2019](#)) and a *social technology*, i.e., a structured process that *blends practical tools with insights into human nature* ([Liedtka, 2018](#)). It is about approaching a task with an adequate mindset — i.e., as being user-centered and open towards multidisciplinary— and using specific methods — such as brainstorming, synthesis, prototyping and testing solutions with users in an iterative process ([Liedtka, 2020](#)). DT has been called a methodology, a culture and a philosophy ([von Thienen et al., 2019](#)). Being deeply rooted in stakeholder orientation ([Lindberg et al., 2012](#); [Plattner, 2016](#); [Meinel & Leifer, 2011](#)), it copes with multiple points of view ([Leifer & Meinel, 2018](#)).

So far, there is neither a dominant definition of DT ([Carlgren et al., 2016](#); [Hassi & Laakso, 2011](#)) nor a consensus on DT terminology. However, the two lines of thought — an academic perspective on the one hand and management-oriented or practice-driven perspectives on the other hand ([Johansson-Sköldberg et al., 2013](#))— are in agreement that DT can be seen as an innovation practice in organizations as well as for organizations ([von Thienen et al., 2019](#)). By avoiding the *essentialist trap* of a dominant definition ([Johansson-Sköldberg et al., 2013](#)) asking what it is or what it consists of, DT definitions can be both specific and flexible enough to refer to different aspects of use ([Carlgren et al., 2016](#)).

In the academic literature, DT is described as a specific set of principles — general rules or laws— embodied in mindsets, enacted in practices and supported by techniques ([Carlgren et al., 2016](#); [Hassi & Laakso, 2011](#)). The core principle of DT is iteration or experimentation, based on *testing and trying things out in an iterative way, and moving between divergent and convergent ways of thinking, working on multiple solutions* ([Carlgren et al., 2016](#)) with a strong focus on learning ([Liedtka, 2020](#)). Regarding mindsets, DT is based on an inherent user focus or user orientation ([Bicen & Gudigantala, 2019](#)). This orientation can be described as human-centered since it is based on empathy and expressed by a will and attitude towards the process and the understanding of user needs — i.e., being open or avoiding being judgmental ([Liedtka, 2020](#)). At the same time, the user focus is fostered by the proactive involvement of potential users during the development of offers and solutions ([Carlgren et al., 2016](#)). Regarding practices, [Carlgren et al. \(2016\)](#) address two aspects; firstly, they address problem exploration as a means to develop an unconstrained view of the problem instead of trying to solve it. DT widens challenges and reframes the problem ([Beckman, 2020](#); [Liedtka, 2020](#)) by repeatedly questioning and reformulating the initial problem, identifying a larger problem space— thus, helping in creating a larger solution space. Secondly, diversity in the sense of a systematic perspective as well as through collaboration is an essential practice. DT is perceived on team collaborations with individuals combining different skills and personalities. At the same time, it incorporates diverse outside perspectives throughout the process ([Carlgren et al., 2016](#)).

Regarding techniques, DT uses visualization, or prototyping, in order to make ideas tangible by means of low-resolution representations or mock-up drafts of ideas or solutions (Liedtka, 2020). Making things tangible is not only about externalizing, testing and refining ideas; it is also a way to share insights, make sense of data, create consensus and select the most suitable, accepted ideas (Carlgren et al., 2016).

Management-oriented and/or practice-driven approaches to DT focus on how to approach and provide specific tools such as process maps and templates. From a research perspective, Stanford University's d.school in USA and the Hasso Plattner Institute at Potsdam University in Germany are two main contributors of practice-oriented knowledge, both closely linked to universities. Figure 1 presents d.school's DT model that consists of the six phases (Doorley et al., 2018) that shall be applied as needed, with the process not necessarily being linear. The first phase *empathize*, is about understanding the problem by gathering data, conducting interviews or seeking stories. The second phase *define*, illustrates, frames or reframes the problem in order to *ideate* in the sense of creating ideas in the next phase.

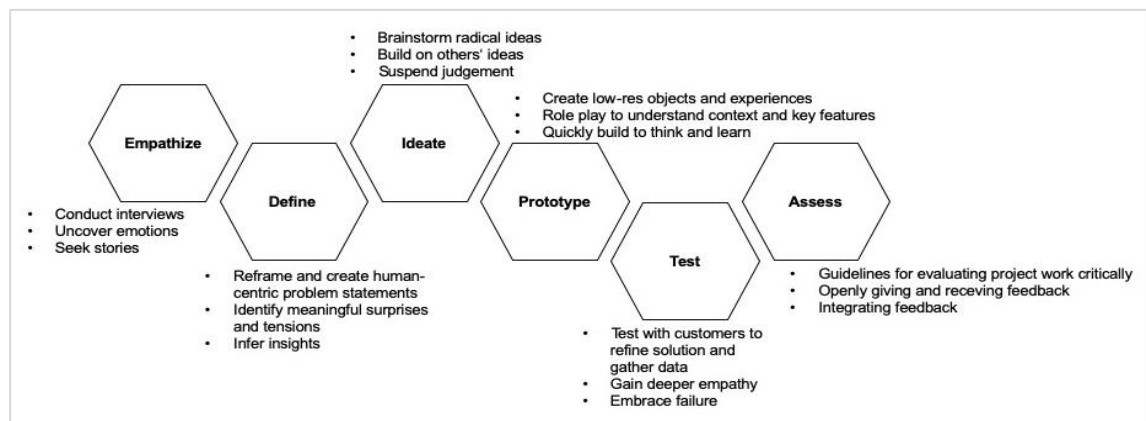


Figure 1: Depiction of the DT process as conceived by Stanford's d.school (Doorley et al., 2018).

These ideas are put to the test in the *prototype* phase by bringing them to life i.e., through role play, mockups or prototypes. In the fifth phase, these prototypes are tested with consumers as to rapidly receive feedback and gain deeper insights into stakeholders' thoughts and actions. These insights lead to iteration, expressly going back to the empathizing, defining, ideating and/or prototyping phase depending on how well prototypes address the needs and expectations of consumers. The process ends — and might restart anew— with the sixth phase, where process and solution are assessed.

As DT frameworks *help professionals design solutions for complex problems* (Overmyer & Brock Carlson, 2019), they also could offer new insights and opportunities for CC and strategic communication planning. They complement analytical techniques by a prototyping mindset and iterative problem-solving patterns built upon heuristics, empathy and situational reasoning. DT leverages *a discursive and creative activity of developing design solutions in frequent communication with the stakeholders of a design problem*, as Lindberg et al. (2012) state. One such design problem could be CC, with DT being a new approach to strategic communication planning.

Qualitative Insights: Design Thinking in Communication Agencies and Consultancies

In theory building, DT approaches are especially suited to VUCA conditions (Cousins, 2018; Robbins, 2018). Still, they have not yet been incorporated into CC planning models. Since research tends to lag behind current development in practice, the research question arises as to whether DT is already used in communication practice. To what extent do German communication agencies and consultancies use DT for strategic communication planning purposes? If DT is used, do they implement DT holistically, including the specific principles, mindsets, practices and techniques? Or do they just adapt specific characteristics into existing traditional models of planning so far?

Methodology

To gain first empirical insights into communication planning within CC practice, the authors conducted a qualitative study gathering data from the leading CC agencies and consultancies in Germany. The study was designed as a case study approach. Documents and additional materials were analyzed on the agencies' and consultancies' planning process added by interviews. Leading agencies and consultancies in Germany were chosen as they are professional actors within PR, marketing communications and internal communication being specialized in strategic planning. It is assumed that they act as first movers in testing and implementing new frameworks, concepts and models for planning as a way to gain competitive advantage, as consultancies usually do (Nissen & Dittler, 2019; Deelmann, 2018; Bronnenmayer et al., 2016). Thus, they are most likely to have a professional view on communication planning and to have established an agency-specific model — while possibly also integrating approaches such as DT.

Our sample consisted of the top 25 advertising and the top 35 PR firms as identified by the 2019 or end of 2018 national and international rankings¹. Selected rankings were based on how well firms performed at communication award shows — i.e., Cannes Lions, Effie— as awards are seen to be visible manifestations of state-of-the-art communication planning. On the other hand, the authors also selected rankings based on key financial performance indicators — such as yearly fee income and revenue— as representations of the firms' excellence in their respective field of expertise, as well as a symbol of their potential market power regarding the development and introduction of innovations.

Within each agency and consultancy, leading managers were contacted —specifically managing directors or chief strategists— and were asked to share their firm's models or frameworks for strategic communication planning. The first contact included a request for a visualization and additional written information about their model(s). 13 out of the 60 communication managers participated. Another five were interviewed but in the end, they declined due to confidentiality issues about disclosing strategy.

Out of the 13 participants, six provided in-depth information about their planning models through visualizations, presentations or insights during extensive telephone interviews. Seven shared information about their approach to planning in general in written form combined with background interviews. Data was gathered from July to September 2019, partly followed by a second round of contact to discuss findings and gain further insights into context.

Findings

Within all agencies and consultancies, strategic communication planning is an integral part of their portfolio — or even at the heart of their business model. They all use a more or less systematic approach on developing communication plans or campaigns. Mainly participants from the field of PR specialize on strategic communication management and top-management consulting. Others — mainly within marketing communications— have a rather campaign-oriented approach. Findings suggest five types of approaches with regard to strategic communication planning as seen in Table 1.

Type I represents well-established traditional models of strategic communication planning that are adapted to agency specifics. In the sample, two firms were assigned to *Type I* depicts a synthesized representation for these two models. In comparison to traditional models as presented in literature, the agency-specific models showed a change of terminology and an adaption within the first step. The general four-step process however was unchanged. Based on the reasoning of those five respondents, that replied to the letter of invitation but declined to participate in the study, the hypothesis can be put forward that *Type I* might apply to most agencies and consultancies in Germany. *Type II* is based on agency-specific models that are based on traditional approaches, but also include new ideas and elements. This type applies to three firms in the study set. Compared to *Type I*, these three *Type II* models show a different approach or mindset regarding communication planning.

¹ Ranked by German Media;
- PR Journal Kreativranking
- PAGE Ranking
- HORIZONT Kreativranking
- W&V Kreativranking
- Red Box Ranking
- CP Monitor Ranking
and International Media;
- Holmes Report and Mergermarket.

Table 1: Communication planning models in corporate communication agencies and consultancies in Germany.

Type of Model	Phases of Communication Planning					
Literature Review	Traditional Models of Communication Planning					
	Situation Analysis			Strategy	Implementation	Assessment
Type I	Situation Analysis	Target Analysis	Planning		Implementing	Evaluating
Type II	Discover			Design	Deliver	---
Type III	Understand	Immerse	Condense	Clarify	Design	Live
Type IV	Structured approach to communication planning, i.e., topical or emotion-based					
Type V	Client-based individual approach, differing models unstandardized					

As [Table 1](#) shows, terminology as well as the grouping of the main steps of the planning process have evolved. While the terminology clearly refers to DT comprehension and vocabulary, the general idea of a three-step process of analyzing (discover), strategy (design) and implementing (deliver) remains mostly unchanged. *Type III* represents agency-specific models mainly based on DT that shows no or only little resemblance with traditional models which applies to two firms. [Table 1](#) shows six exemplary steps of how these firms design their planning process. The terminology as well as the general approach is clearly derived from a DT mindset. For immersing, condensing and clarifying, *Type III* exponents use problem exploration workshops and other DT tools. Although the visualization in [Table 1](#) unfolds in the present table grid of traditional planning, *Type III* planning processes are iterative and open-ended in nature. The fact that the assessment phase is no longer present as a final step of summative evaluation, but is rather considered as formative evaluation throughout different steps of the process, might support the classification in DT as well.

Type IV agencies use structured approaches to communication planning based on agency-specific positionings. Of the two firms belonging to this type, one uses an emotion-based approach strongly linked to branding, i.e., purpose-driven positionings. The other deploys a topical approach based on a PR perspective. Both make use of structured approaches relative to agency-specific process models or manuals, drawing strongly from the psychology discipline. *Type V* represents firms that use no standardized model, due to an individual approach to consulting. In this approach, strategies and strategic planning vary depending on clients, industry or product as well as the aim of a communication strategy. It is found in four firms that specialize in an integrated, holistic approach on CC as a strategic practice.

Proposing a Modular Approach to Communication Planning

Based on these empirical insights, theory building on conventional models and tool sets of communication planning can be expanded. As the literature review and the typology of practices show, an agile model for communication planning could address the specifics of VUCA environments while at the same time enriching the literature on communication planning. Thus, this paper proposes a modular approach to agile CC planning.

Comparing the two *worlds* of traditional planning and DT processes, this paper so far has highlighted that conventional planning models are linear, sequential, closed and goal-oriented; whereas, DT is characterized by being stakeholder-centered, open-ended — unbiased — iterative and multi-sequential. When focusing on linearity, traditional models give clear guidance as they suggest a step-by-step approach. Still, this linear enactment lacks flexibility an element that is strongly needed in VUCA contexts.

To address this duality between guidance and flexibility, the authors propose a modular approach for communication planning. This new approach, encapsulated in a model as shown in [Figure 2](#), still refers to the general idea of strategic communication management and the need of traditional CC planning for analyzing, planning, implementing and evaluating. The mindset, however, is based on DT and includes the notion and enactment of agility.

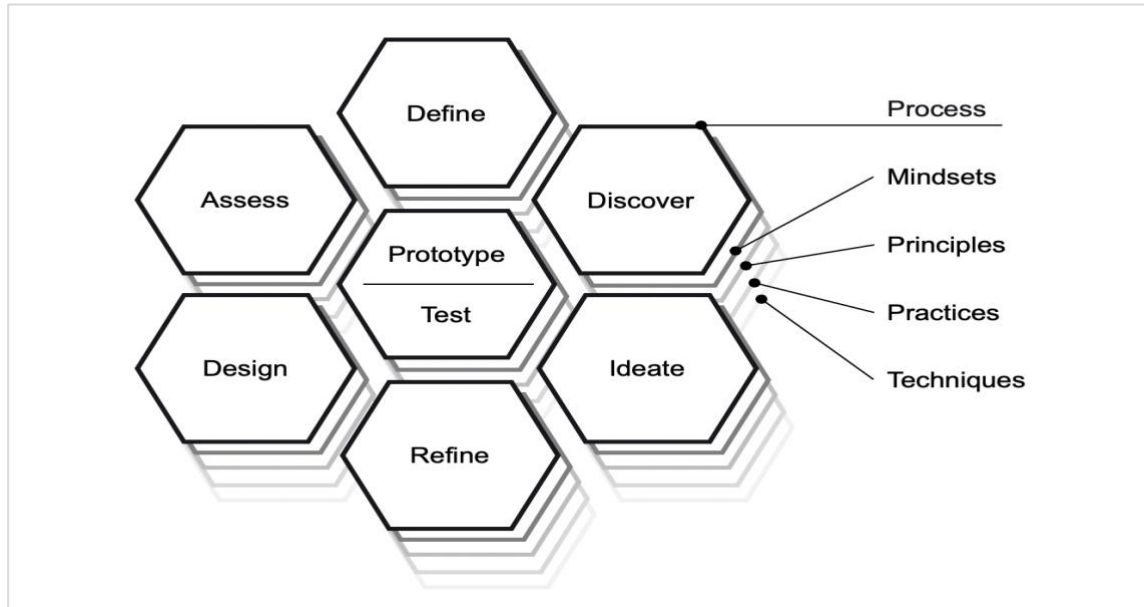


Figure 2: Agile Model of communication planning based on a modular approach.

The Agile Model of CC planning consists of six modules that are linked and held together by a seventh module that acts like an inner node. These modules address the need to define, discover, ideate, refine, design and assess as described by the d.school and are an integral part of this CC planning process as well. The model does recommend, but not impose, a chronological order. Throughout the planning process, modules can be navigated according to aim, issue or progress of strategy or campaign development. As a link from traditional approaches, the module *assess* monitors and evaluates how well both corporate objectives and target group’s needs have been reached during the planning process as well as at the end. The module *prototyping and testing* is visualized as a node or hub connecting the six process modules, addressing the fact that user-centricity, regular testing and evaluating along with revising are main elements of a DT approach to communication planning. Prototyping and testing as a step is due diligence, accompanying every other module. For example, when having defined the problem space, the module *define* might lead to the core module *prototype and test* making it then purposeful to put user-centricity into practice by surveying stakeholders.

The first level of modular planning is the process layer, as described so far. While traditional models as well as the existing DT planning processes stop at that level, the Agile Model of CC planning is expanded by four more layers, which are suggested in [Carlgren et al.’s \(2016\)](#) definition of DT. Our model draws from a combination of techniques, i.e., research methods, creativity techniques or prototyping tools. It includes additional means for practices like problem exploration, cooperation or interdisciplinary work and the general mindsets as addressed by empathy, human-centricity or openness throughout the whole process instead of the early stages. Lastly, it comprises principles such as being comfortable with ambiguity and complexity.

The above mentioned five layers represent a holistic view on a communication planning process that integrates new means of DT. Having merged thinking with doing, the proposed model develops a new concept for agile communication planning.

Limitations

The advantages of a case study approach, based on qualitative content analysis and interviews, lie in its open and holistic manner of capturing social phenomena. The method offers the possibility to include the context and multiple perspectives to develop a more comprehensive understanding of previously little-studied phenomena. Main limitations are the lack of generalizability and completeness of the results.

Also, the decision to focus on the leading agencies and consultancies has had a direct impact on the findings and contribution of our study. The authors deliberately did not include firms or consultancies that are specialized in agile methods of planning as this was not the focus of our research question. The aim of the study was to gain insights in the status quo based on relevance and impact.

Thus, agencies and consultancies were selected based on revenue, top positions in industry rankings and whether they had been awarded industry prizes. This has also led to the selection and inclusion of mainly large players that have been part of the industry for several years up to decades now. Also, the hypothesis that agencies and consultancies are early adopters regarding new ways of thinking and being among the first to develop and implement innovative approaches led to the given focus. Further studies could both expand the circle of agencies and consultancies investigated or add companies to the sample.

As with any typology, our typology, too, reduces complexity. The five models compress the variety of approaches. They focus on some aspects while omitting others.

Discussion and Contribution

Conventional models of communication planning are challenged by more recent approaches stemming from agile approaches. Communication management researchers like [Zerfass et al. \(2018\)](#) have stressed how important agility is and will be for communication departments, regarding their organization as well as for communication planning. However, CC literature has yet to systematically address and research DT as a means for communication planning.

Our qualitative study led to the conclusion that characteristics and/or methods of agile planning and DT can be found in CC practice. To varying degrees, three of the five types found in German agencies and consultancies include at least some elements of a DT mindset. The least adaption can be found in traditional models that put strong emphasis on feedback loops throughout the process. The highest adaption is found in processes that use DT terminology, methods and tools.

Two questions arise and could give direction for further research: Firstly, a gap between theory and practice has been identified as practice seems to have evolved and adapted more rapidly to VUCA contexts than the current body of literature suggests. There is a strong need for additional conceptual papers as well as qualitative and quantitative empirical studies.

Secondly, communication agencies and consultancies may be even further along the road of integrating agile thinking in their planning processes than this study implies. Conventional types like *Type I & II* may iterate within phases and, thus, result in dynamical planning even if provided documents and interviews depict a rather linear, closed process of communication planning. DT may only partly be evident in structure and process descriptions and might also be applied subconsciously by communication managers. Therefore in future researches, it is also suggested that shadowing as a method be considered.

As a contribution to managerial practice, the proposed modular approach to communication planning could offer a more dynamic perspective within CC management. It contributes to practice by naming and systematizing the different layers of strategic planning. Based on DT, it might help communication managers to *bridge the gap between a company's need for reliable control of their processes and resource flows and an open and entrepreneurial approach* ([Lindberg et al., 2011](#)) to communication planning.

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