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From Band Leader to Master Conductor

Expanding the Scope of Corporate Affairs Leadership

London Panel Discussion Synopsis



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Panel Members

Stephen Doherty, Chief Brand & Corporate Affairs Officer, Aviva

Lisa Tremble, Chief People, Corporate Affairs & Sustainability Officer, British Airways

Sam Peacock, Managing Director, Corporate Affairs, Regulation & Strategy, SSE

Sally Jackson, Senior Vice President, Global Communications & CEO Office, GSK

Richard Menzies-Gow, Director Communications, Investor Relations & Brand, Informa

A film of the panel event can be found [HERE](#) and below are some of the highlights of the discussion:

What it takes to be a ‘master conductor’ of corporate affairs

When corporate affairs executives were thrust centre stage during the pandemic – reflecting their enhanced stature in recent years and rising personal ambitions – many seized the moment to make a major positional manoeuvre, one that had been quietly percolating for some years. They argued it was time for entire functions and operations, not traditionally seen as part of the communications remit, to move under their leadership, to enable more coherent management of the corporate narrative.

Organisations listened. Suddenly, these leaders found themselves stepping into major roles alongside their corporate affairs responsibilities – Chief Brand or Marketing Officer, Chief People Officer, Chief Sustainability Officer, Head of Investor Relations, Head of Strategy, or Chief of Staff.

This was seismic. What we were witnessing was an emergence of a more powerful and influential corporate affairs director with serious heft and authority, embedded at the highest levels of some of the world’s largest multinationals. An argument that had simmered throughout the 2010s – for corporate affairs to take on more holistic management of corporate reputation – had, in a moment of global crisis, finally crystallised. The modern corporate affairs function had arrived, led by 360° leaders now acting as the ‘master conductors’ of a complex symphony of business operations.

They were ideas we explored in [From Band Leader to Master Conductor](#), our in-depth research into how that tectonic shift happened and why, and what it meant for our industry’s future. Voiced by the practitioners who had lived it, and who now occupied exalted roles in some of Europe’s biggest multinationals, we wanted to share their insights with a wider group of peers, to encourage the growth of the profession.



From Band Leader to Master Conductor Report

So, in January 2025, we hosted a breakfast panel at the London Stock Exchange to ask five of this new breed of corporate affairs leaders how others might replicate their successes – and how, as a profession, we might sustain this shift, making it universal and permanent.



From Band Leader to Master Conductor Report Panel Debate

How do you get or create these broader roles?

The most obvious question for other corporate affairs leaders is: How do you jump on that train? What's the most effective career route in? Does it suit particular industries better than others? And how do you engineer expansion in your existing corporate affairs role?

Our panellists looked at the issue in often very different ways, reflecting their own diverse career pathways.

Recognise the opportunity – and argue for it

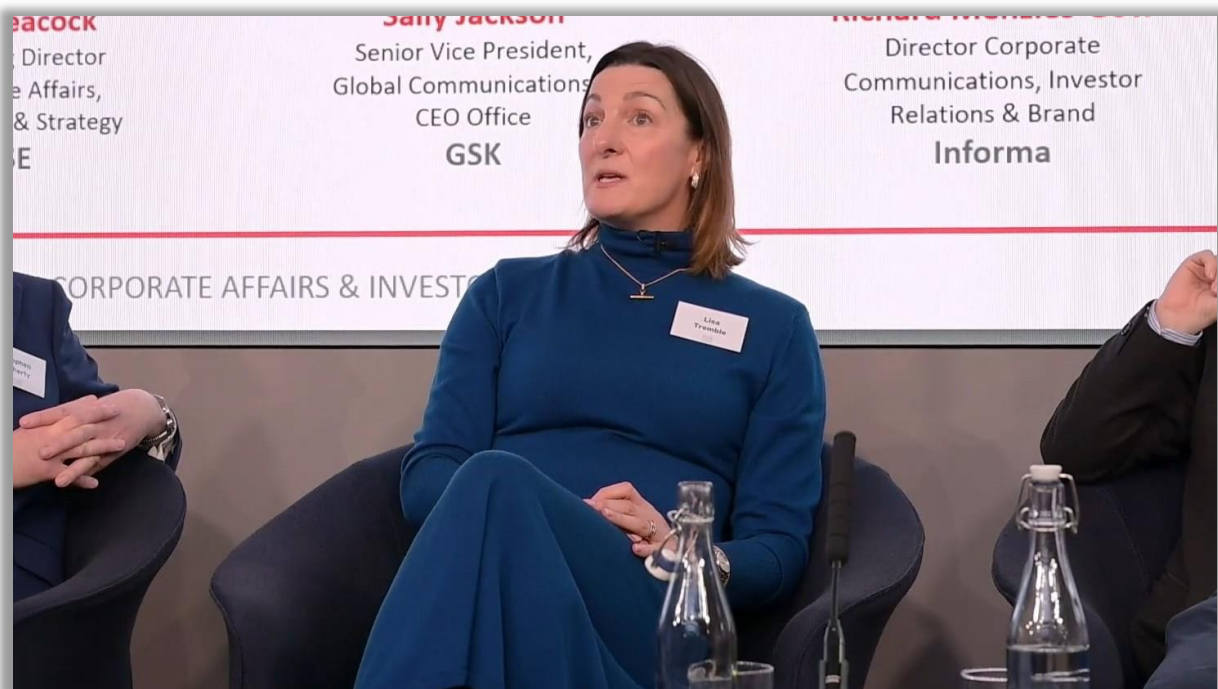
For Sam Peacock, Managing Director of Corporate Affairs, Regulation and Strategy at SSE, it's a matter of making the right case at the right time. He initially joined SSE to lead corporate affairs, before taking on strategy as well in 2017, and regulation in 2022. "My role, with strategy incorporated, doesn't seem to be the most common example," he told the room. "Truthfully, it came about because I saw an opportunity and asked for it. The strategy team was struggling, it was close to a strategy review, I was reasonably well respected on corporate affairs and energy issues in the organisation, and I could see it wasn't going to end well for the strategy person. So I just said, 'Look, if you want, I'll take it over on an interim basis. Give me six months and take a view at the end of that.' And that was seven years ago. So I think there's something to be said for just sticking up your hand."



Sam Peacock, Managing Director Corporate Affairs, Regulation & Strategy, SSE

And once you've proven yourself at one additional, unconventional responsibility, he says, more come along. "The regulation angle occurred more naturally after that because, once the strategy was with me, and corporate affairs too, the regulation felt like it probably fit best with me too."

Lisa Tremble became Chief People Officer at British Airways in 2023, in addition to her existing role as Chief Corporate Affairs and Sustainability Officer, in part because she saw a way to change a difficult situation. "I'd joined BA in the corporate affairs and sustainability role in 2021 and then, in 2023, our Chief People Officer – the fourth BA had had in four years – decided to leave. I said to my CEO: 'You know when you keep getting dumped when you're younger and you're like, 'What's wrong with everyone?' and at some point, you have to look in the mirror and say, 'Maybe it's me.' So at that point he asked if I would take it on an interim basis, and that interim basis has lasted 18 months. The discussion I had with him at the time, though, was that I wouldn't just tread water or keep things ticking over. I told him I thought we needed to change the dynamics, reposition how we interacted with our people – and then maybe we'd be able to hire someone who would actually stay in the job. So that's what I did."



Lisa Tremble, Chief People, Corporate Affairs & Sustainability Officer, British Airways

Find a CEO who “gets it”

For Richard Menzies-Gow, Director of Corporate Communications, Investor Relations and Brand at Informa (also with responsibility for sustainability), the role was thrust upon him unexpectedly. But even within that lies a lesson for career progression: Looking for an organisation with a CEO who instinctively gets it – who sees value in a coherent narrative across multiple communications fields – is often the fastest route to broadening your corporate affairs remit. “I came in from the City, just to do IR,” Menzies-Gow explained. “But after a year, a new CEO arrived who very much saw IR and communications as an advantage – that they were strategic disciplines as important as strategy or finance – and that he and I needed to get on. Soon afterwards, four or five of us were scrumming the strategy off site, and the CEO suddenly laid down a sheet of paper listing his new ExCo ... and my name was on it, with an expanded job title. In his eyes, it was just logical: Why *wouldn't* you have communications more broadly – internal, external, investor, brand – all joined up? And then sustainability for him was a natural add-on too, given its growing importance to IR and the need for the message to be consistent.”



Richard Menzies-Gow, Director Corporate Communications, Investor Relations & Brand, Informa

Stephen Doherty’s story is very similar. He is currently Chief Brand and Corporate Affairs Officer at Aviva with a corporate affairs remit (external and internal comms, public affairs, regulatory policy and digital), plus brand marketing, sustainability, sponsorship and events. “At Barclays, I ran a similar function in terms of composition but that had happened more by accident – corporate affairs had become a dumping ground for stuff that didn’t fit anywhere else. But I endeavoured to make the most of it and, when I was

approached about the Aviva role, one of CEO Dame Amanda Blanc’s key strategic priorities was to ‘power up the brand’ – for Aviva to be recognised for the great business that was in there. And to do that, she’d already brought together all the disciplines that sit within Brand and Corporate Affairs. So when I was approached, that structure was already there, and it made perfect sense to me based on my background – that all these fellow travellers were engaged in a single endeavour to tell a compelling, coherent story. So serendipity is how I ended up with this remit but it’s not very practical career advice – ‘be lucky!’”



Oskar Yasar, Managing Partner, Broome Yasar Partnership
& Stephen Doherty, Chief Brand & Corporate Affairs Officer, Aviva

Recognise how individual each role is

A common theme among all our panellists was that the expanded corporate affairs roles we see are often highly individual to that individual and their expertise and experience.

“Being in an organisation for a while can present both problems and opportunities in career terms,” explained Sam Peacock. “You can be typecast if you look for a job elsewhere – for me, that’s being seen as ‘an energy guy.’ But inside the organisation, it gives you a positive reason to ask for wider responsibilities: You’re already there, you know the company, so you’re in a position to define the role. That’s one thing that enabled me to shape the remit. But if I left the organisation tomorrow, I’m not sure they’d advertise for a ‘Director of Strategy and Corporate Affairs’ in that way, because the candidates wouldn’t have the unique experience I have.”

Richard Menzies-Gow agreed. “I’ve got my review later today and one of the questions my boss always asks is about succession. And my answer will be that there’s one particular person who has the capability. The issue won’t be whether she wants it but rather, if she did, that the structure of the role might have to change, given her background and skillset.”

Recognise you don’t need to know or do everything – just hire well

But that doesn’t mean you need to be a *technical expert* in every discipline within an expanded role (this was perhaps the most commonly articulated theme among our panel). You just need to surround yourself with the right talent and trust it.

Indeed, all of our panellists held responsibility for areas in which they had no formal background at all. All insisted that it didn’t matter: They saw their own skillset as leadership, rather than the security blanket of technical expertise.

Stephen Doherty is a classic example: “At Aviva, when I came in with a wide corporate affairs brief – for a CEO with a massive ambition for the brand – candidly, I found I didn’t have the lieutenants I needed to accomplish that at speed. So one of the bravest decisions I’ve taken in my career was to exit all of my leadership team in my first four months, bar one person, and set about recruiting my new principal violinists – to use your ‘master conductor’ analogy. That put a lot of pressure on me because, as well as my day job, I was also having to fill in on internal comms, sustainability, brand, and so on. But then gradually, by just hiring well, I have the best people in the organisation running those disciplines. So today, I am not the pre-eminent public affairs person at Aviva, Scott Colvin is; I’m not the pre-eminent brand person, Phoebe Barter is; I’m not the pre-eminent internal comms expert, Fran Chambers is. And that’s how you can have the slate of work we have in these jobs – and not only cope with it, but do really well at it. As long as, then, you empower those people to be the experts, your job is just to orchestrate it and ensure the symphony sounds good.”

That was echoed by Sally Jackson, who has a particularly daunting remit: Senior Vice-President Global Communications and Government Affairs at GSK, paired with a role as Chief of Staff to the CEO. “That’s really how I’ve navigated the whole expansion of my own role: changing quite a lot of capability,” she said. “I wish I’d done some of it more radically, to be honest. Someone said to me early on, ‘You’ll regret being too slow in making changes.’ But I didn’t feel confident to make changes because I was coming in to run a function where I had done none of the jobs myself other than IR – no internal comms, no media, no government affairs. So you think, ‘What would I know?’ But

actually, when I look back, many of my instincts about people, or what we needed to do, were actually right.”



Sally Jackson, Senior Vice President, Global Communications & CEO Office, GSK

“Taking on the Chief People Officer at BA was quite frightening,” adds Lisa Tremble “because I didn’t have a great deal of HR experience. But the thing about leadership is that you don’t need to know everything, you just need to be able to make things happen. And what I didn’t know, someone else did. I’ve always been a fan of ‘phone a friend.’ I’m not special. No-one knows everything. So, getting a good team in is half the battle.”

A particularly interesting example came from Richard Menzies-Gow, whose responsibilities now include managing Informa’s property portfolio, alongside his communications and sustainability role. “Property is certainly different,” he admitted, “but there’s still some logic to it. We’re refreshing our offices around the world to reflect our brand and culture, and there’s a bit of a disconnect – between the technical property people, the office refit people and the brand people – to do it effectively. So there’s logic in the CEO thinking that I should manage that area, because, as he says, ‘You understand the brand and you’re good at connecting and communicating.’ And you just get better at leading and ensure you have good people who know these functions.”

Recognise how far your comms skills already take you

Sam Peacock’s responsibility for strategy at SSE is one of the more unusual extensions to the corporate affairs role, but one that offers obvious mouth-watering possibilities. Yet

he felt it was a very natural fit for many people with comms expertise, and that there were ways to leverage that.

“You have fantastically useful input for the strategy team,” he explained. “They may seem ivory tower-ish, but they’re often spread even more thinly than comms is. So they’re eager for input and support. And in a highly regulated sector, in particular – where you as the comms person probably have very good knowledge of politics, regulation, direction of travel – you hold information that is extremely useful to them. So if you can start getting involved in their workshops a little, or even create new workshops on political policy, outlook and the trend piece for them, you’re immediately being helpful to them and you’ll find that relationship starts to prosper.”

“And actually the most powerful thing in leadership, and for me in the HR/People space, is being able to communicate things,” says Lisa Tremble of her own extended remit. “HR had driven me potty before – by being really focused on the process rather than the outcome, and by producing material so long you’d lose the will to live by the time you reached the end of it. So having that really strong comms background enabled me to come into a directorship there and add value by changing things. And it needed that. To be frank, it was in a real mess – union issues, recruitment issues and so on. So it was my comms background that gave me the confidence to take control of that – to look at things differently, call out what was wrong, and be honest about how we needed to change.”



David Broome, Managing Partner, Broome Yasar Partnership

How do you manage the workload?

All senior communications professionals face the same paradox: They too could deliver much more effectively by managing greater alignment and coherence across the organisation's communications ecosystem – but their current role is already very much a full-time job. How, then, did our corporate affairs leaders manage the sheer workload involved in taking on such a wealth of functional responsibilities?

Better time management, people management and professional management were the answers that came most strongly to the fore.

Set clear boundaries

For Lisa Tremble, it was about being prepared to put in the hard yards, being truthful with those around you about certain realities – and with yourself about how “empowering” you are as a leader. “First, I've got a really strong bias towards working hard, so I honestly don't feel I have to work any harder now than I did 10 years ago,” she said. “Second, it's about boundaries: I am just one human, I need to eat, I need to sleep, and I've got three children. So I do set strong boundaries in order to do this job, because I would go insane if I didn't, and because I think it sets a tone in the organisation that anything is possible for anyone – and that really matters to me, as a woman with children. There are not loads of us at the top of companies.

“And the third thing is *truly* trusting people, because that is probably the single hardest thing to allow yourself to do: trusting and empowering them, and accepting that sometimes they'll do something you don't really like. It's a big choice for you in that moment: Will you roll your neck in? Will you let them do it differently to the way you feel it should be done? Because allowing yourself to do that, and allowing them to fail quickly, is crucial. Being a ‘trusting’ and ‘empowering’ leader means accepting that not everything will go to plan. But really you're just leaning into the idea that, if you keep doing everything the same way, you're never really taking risks. And if you don't take risks, you're not really going to push things forward.”

Learn to prioritise

Everyone was in agreement that having first-class prioritisation skills was critical – and they all had their own models and mnemonics for doing so. “I work by a maxim of ‘appropriate intervention,’” said Stephen Doherty. “I'm a good writer. Could all written communication coming out of Aviva be better if I wrote it? Yes. Should it all be written by me? No. So I always make a three-step judgment: First, should I intervene in this? Second, would it make a material difference to the outcome if I did? Third, if there was a

different outcome, would that matter? And if you apply that test, you'll find yourself not getting involved in a lot of the day-to-day stuff, because you can't answer 'Yes,' to all three questions.”

Others agreed wholeheartedly. “You have to know yourself too, and keep asking yourself: What tasks do I instinctively put at the top of any To Do list, and what do I instinctively put at the bottom?” said Richard Menzies-Gow. “Stephen would put writing tasks at the top because he knows he's good at them and he can do them quickly. If he didn't have any other pressures, he'd naturally do those first. Other people put numbers at the top. So if you don't think through what's actually urgent and critical, you'll naturally lean towards things that you know you're good at.”

That rang bells with Sally Jackson, juggling her corporate affairs and Chief of Staff roles. “I remember once coming to someone with a three-page To Do list when I was completely overwhelmed,” she recalled, “and he said, ‘Which of those things can only *you* do?’ And then I crossed out about 90% of the list. So ‘What's *just you?*’ is a good filter.”

Then there are the hard questions that might mean better management of the people around you, and difficult conversations, as Lisa Tremble acknowledged. “Always ask, of any of the ‘urgent and important things’ piling up around you: Is it really urgent and important, or does it just *feel* that way because someone wants you to do it for them? That does help decrease the list substantially. Because in a corporate comms job, everyone wants their problem to be your problem. When, in reality, they need to do some of the work to make that problem go away, so you can focus on the last five percent. So it is about managing that stakeholder a little bit more effectively.”

“But none of us have cracked this,” acknowledged Sam Peacock. “It's a constant battle. But remember: If you're seen spending your time on something that's a tactical response, then guess what? More people will start coming to you on tactical stuff.”

How do we sustain these wider roles going forward?

Our panel represent the vanguard of this transformation in the make-up of senior corporate affairs roles and, viewed one way, they are unique. As we have seen, they often arrived at their expanded roles due to personal reasons: They had made effective demands for it; their track-record showed they could take it on; the company was restructuring and it made sense in that moment; it fit their skillset but wouldn't have fit

another person; or their CEO had seen their potential and had pushed them to widen their responsibilities.

What does that say about the sustainability of this change? Would their successors in those roles be offered the same broad-ranging remits? And if not, how can we begin, as an industry, to start institutionalising it as the norm?



Band Leader to Master Conductor Report Panel Debate

Hire atypical people – it makes a point

Many felt that process begins at home. “I think the first way you institutionalise is just by demonstrating it and valuing it,” Richard Menzies-Gow said. “And that’s not just about me, there are different examples of ‘me’ in our company – people who have taken on atypical roles. The more you do that and see that, the more people believe it, and the more leaders in the organisation are open to it elsewhere.”

Sally Jackson agreed and felt corporate affairs leaders had a role here in leading the charge. “To develop the skillsets for broader leadership roles, we’ve done some things that have quite shocked people, like putting someone in to run government affairs who’d never been in any comms role before – but I knew she was a brilliant leader, she understood the organisation, and she would get stuff done. And when you do a few big flagship things like that, it does open people’s minds that *they* may be able to do something different too.”

Develop composite skills among those under you

For Stephen Doherty, some of that was about creating a cadre of multi-skilled people in your own team – something that would, in time, benefit our profession as a whole, creating the next generation. “An advantage of integrated corporate affairs functions is the opportunities it creates for people to build muscle in different disciplines. So you see a lot of that happen within my function because there are 185 roles, and things like maternity cover present the opportunity for someone to do a year learning a different discipline. So I’m an advocate for a public affairs person going to the brand team, or a brand person having a go at PR.”

Richard Menzies-Gow agreed, and believes it’s important to start that process early. “Our CEO is always saying: We don’t take enough risks with young talent, throwing them into a situation – providing them with support but essentially taking a gamble on them. It happened to him when he was 26: Someone gave him a business to run and, as he says, he didn’t have a clue what he was doing but he got support and he leaned into it. So we’re trying to get more confident about taking risks with young talent in the same way. I think the more you see that, the more it’s normalised across the organisation.”

“But I still think you have to work quite hard to encourage people to take those lateral moves, especially early in careers,” said Sally Jackson. “People are quite fixated on: ‘How am I getting up to the next grade in this profession?’ So you need to say: You would be much better going slow, doing three things at *this* level, and *then* you will accelerate massively because you’ve built the context and the capability to do everything else.”

Develop your own leadership skills and those of your team

Most critically – everyone felt – advancing the whole profession was about recognising that this is not about technical comms expertise, or your ability to run campaigns. It’s about having a true, executive mindset.

“If you want to be in seats we occupy, at a certain point it becomes all about leadership skills,” said Stephen Doherty. “It wasn’t essential for me to become an expert in sustainability in order to be able to strategically lead a function with sustainability within it. I’ve got my chief sustainability officer to do that. I just need to know *enough* about the disciplines in order to be able to add some value occasionally. But at a certain point, if you want to sit in a broad-based strategic role, it becomes all about leadership development. So we provide coaching for our “Head of” levels in the team (under our director levels), we send them on programmes, we really invest in it. And that

development isn't about developing technical muscle. It's about developing the leadership and strategic gears to actually run something across the piece.”

Define your own future

Our panellists – like those [featured in our report](#) – unanimously recognised the clear benefits of these expanded roles: greater alignment and efficiency; strategic coherence; and improved visibility across the organisation. While taking on an expanded remit comes with challenges – from managing workloads and balancing competing priorities, to the effort needed to align functions – the clarity it brings to organisational goals and the broader perspective it fosters make it clear that what we are living through is the future of the corporate affairs function.

And it is changing career trajectories. At Broome Yasar, we are now seeing increasing numbers of corporate affairs leaders not only expanding their remits within the function, but stepping beyond it entirely into broader business leadership roles, even CEO positions. It underscores how far the profession has evolved. Corporate affairs is now a platform for leaders with the ambition and capability to manage across boundaries, and that's a core strategic skill in the modern era.

There's no single blueprint for aligning corporate affairs with these enhanced expectations; every company and leader must find their own approach. But what's clear is that the role is no longer confined to communication alone – it is becoming integral to business leadership. The question now is how you, as a leader, will seize this opportunity to shape your path and define the future of our profession.



Broome Yasar Partnership

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