

ICCO GLOBAL SUMMIT 2025

THE CHANGE AGENDA



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ICCO Global Summit 2025: The Change Agenda

The 2025 ICCO Global Summit took place in Mumbai on the 12th and 13th of November. The Summit theme — **‘The Change Agenda’** reflected a bold strategy to reboot ICCO’s vision in line with unprecedented disruption across the global corporate affairs landscape.

Accordingly, the 2025 edition of the Summit brought together more than 220 participants from 32+ countries across the globe, to examine how the global public relations industry can navigate and drive transformation in today’s

rapidly evolving information environment.

The Summit featured a rich variety of keynote presentations and interactive discussions, all of which directly contributed to the development of this 10-point plan, which aims to help both consultancies and in-house practitioners navigate these turbulent times. Sessions and speakers, many of them industry leaders from around the world, were structured around 10 key areas that form the industry roadmap detailed in this overview.



ICCO's vision

When Grzegorz Szczepański began his ICCO presidency, he urged the industry to “bring PR back into public relations” — to shift the craft away from narrow communications delivery and toward “the business of building relationships.” In a world transformed since then by war, technological disruption, and collapsing trust, that call feels more prescient than ever. At the heart of Szczepański’s message is a simple but profound truth: PR is, above all, a people business.

ICCO, accordingly, must champion relationships rooted in human intention, not transactional delivery. This idea forms the bridge to ICCO’s next chapter under new president Massimo Moriconi, who notes that meaningful change must be anchored in purpose, ethics, and the courage to shape the information society rather than be shaped by it. As Moriconi explains, reputation is now “the true currency of enterprise value,” and communicators must help organisations operate in an environment where trust can

“vanish in seconds.”

Moriconi’s blueprint expands this ambition: ICCO must “go beyond” the boardroom and embed itself in the wider information ecosystem — working with institutions, fact-checkers, universities, AI bodies, and global partners to build the knowledge frameworks that help society make informed decisions. This shift recognises that PR today sits at the centre of disinformation risk, societal polarisation, and global reputational fragility. Our role is to strengthen the connective tissue between organisations and their stakeholders across paid, earned, shared and owned channels — grounded not in convenience, but in what is right.

In doing so, ICCO can define the PR profession as one that supports its people, elevates its partners, and shows — through action as well as words — that its future depends not on louder communication, but on deeper relationships, shared responsibility, and the courage to aim for something larger than itself.

INTRODUCTION

The struggle for transformation

As SEC Newgate CEO Fiorenzo Tagliabue put it in his keynote speech to the Summit, the communications industry is currently navigating a period of unprecedented transformation that is marked by high uncertainty. Weber Shandwick Global President Jim O'Leary pointed out that the next five years will bring “more change in our profession than we have had in the previous five decades”—an era often referred to as the 5x era.

This new environment is characterised by structural and systemic risks and a state of “perpetual extinction events”¹. For organisational leaders, the challenge is immense; being a CEO is “more difficult than it has ever been,”² leading to a historically high “topple rate”—the frequency at which chief executives are fired or resign. This volatility calls for a fundamental re-evaluation of the role of public relations.

At the 2022 ICCO Global Summit in Dubai, ICCO President Grzegorz Szczepanski called for the industry to bring “PR back into public relations,” advocating for an important shift away from a narrow focus on communications

toward “the business of building relationships.” This focus on “real relationships” has only become more important due to subsequent rapid global changes, including the rise of ChatGPT and wars in Ukraine and Gaza. As Rod Cartwright affirmed, these relationships are the very “lubricant, the oil that makes the world work.”

Yet, this disruption has created significant professional consequences, creating a climate of instability and apprehension:

PERVASIVE ANXIETY AND FEAR

A palpable sense of stress permeates the industry, with Adfactors CEO Madan Bahal admitting to being “scared and struggling,” even amid his firm’s consistent double-digit revenue growth. TCS CMO Abhinav Kumar pointed to stress and the fear of AI within comms teams, noting that chief communications officers (CCOs) and chief technology and risk officers (CTROs) are experiencing the “highest burnout rates.” Leaders, Kumar added, often feel they are in a “constant crisis flow with no start or stop”.

A CONFIDENCE GAP

A concerning disconnect exists between the C-suite and its communications function. Research finds that a mere 17% of CEOs³ feel their communications teams are “very well equipped” to handle the complexity of the modern world.

STRUCTURAL DIFFICULTY AND INERTIA

Despite the clear need for change, many organisations remain hampered by a resistant mindset. In ICCO’s NextGen session, FischerAppelt’s Milena Stein noted that the attitude of “it works, so keep it” remains prevalent across the industry. Edelman, global president- solutions and delivery, Tristan Roy, meanwhile, pointed out that internal approval processes “can’t keep up” with the speed of culture.

THE ECONOMIC PARADOX

Compounding these challenges are stark economic realities. As Bahal noted, for many, “business is contracting... amidst complexity expansion.” This is occurring alongside a “massive, significant economic realignment”, according to APCO global CEO Brad Staples, as global trade shifts toward the South and East.

AN EXISTENTIAL CROSSROADS

As Dilip Cherian noted, resilience in this environment must be “assertive and offensive, not just defensive” – treating volatility as a competitive advantage rather than something to merely withstand. He pointed to a “new order” in which power is fragmenting, with India and mid-sized economies playing a far more influential role than in the previous era.

In this environment, inaction is not a safe harbour. O’Leary warned that fighting change carries an “even greater risk” than embracing it. The core challenge for communicators is to cultivate the “wisdom”⁴ required to detect emerging threats from all available signals. “I believe resilience today means much more than simply enduring the storm,” said Staples. “It’s about being aware, being on the front foot, and having the ability to adapt and thrive amid constant change” Tagliabue argued that “we now prioritise wisdom over weapons,” likening global corporations to young republics that must navigate environments defined as much by values and politics as by economics. Progress, in his view, “is driven not by dominance, but by understanding.”

1 Brian Keenan, WE Communications

2 Jim O’Leary, Weber Shandwick

3 Abhinav Kumar, TCS, citing the IPSOS Reputation Council

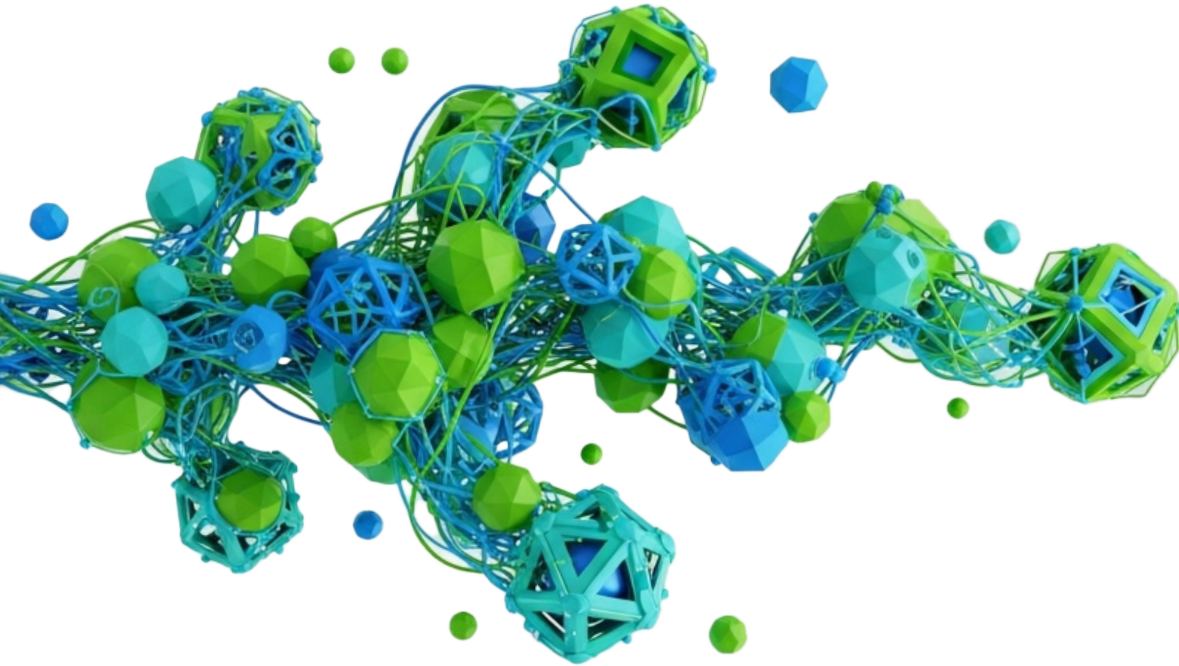
4 Fiorenzo Tagliabue, SEC Newgate

Strategic transformation: A 10-point roadmap

This report provides a 10-point roadmap designed to equip communications leaders with the strategic framework needed to navigate this new reality, ensuring their function remains relevant and influential at the C-suite level.

“Creativity divorced from culture is just noise”

– Neha Mehrotra, ICCO vice president.



TEN POINT ROADMAP

1. Creativity & culture

In the modern brand economy, creativity cannot exist in a vacuum. To resonate with audiences and avoid being dismissed as mere “noise,” creative work must be deeply embedded in cultural context. This fusion of creativity and culture is no longer an option but a strategic imperative for differentiation and relevance.

“Ideas are released into culture, and they survive or fail on merit,” said Weber Shandwick’s Jim O’Leary. “Attention isn’t bought — it’s earned”

As Alex Malouf explained, while the “universal condition of humanity” provides common emotional touchpoints, context is paramount. He contrasted the direct, explicit communication style of the Dutch with the nuanced, relationship-driven context of the Gulf, where much is left unsaid.

This underscores the need for global brands to move beyond one-size-fits-all messaging. Further challenging traditional creative flows is the concept of “reverse

innovation.” Shruti Bose of Roche pointed to India’s philosophy of *jugaad* – a mindset focused on low-cost, high-impact solutions – as a model for global creativity, where ingenuity born from constraints in emerging markets can inform and inspire global strategy.

For agencies and consultancies, delivering on this principle requires a fundamental rethinking of “strategy, structures, and services.”⁵ All work must be “rooted in cultural empathy” and localisation, recognising that a region like Asia contains multitudes of cultures and languages⁶. As the lines between PR and marketing continue to blur, Sandpiper CEO Emma Smith notes the growing demand for “greater integration” and collaboration.

This also requires a new appetite for uncertainty; as Malouf advises, the industry must learn to “take more risks” and “be braver,” specifically calling for more collaboration with marketing departments. To secure the resources needed for impactful creativity, communicators must “do a very good job in speaking the language of the business,” added Bose, another area in which they can learn from their marketing brethren.

A further challenge raised by Bose was the tendency for brands to “be bold when conditions are normal” but retreat into silence during a

crisis. True creative courage is needed most when navigating difficult issues, she explained, citing the cultural sensitivity around cervical cancer screening in India, where confronting taboos is essential for public health.

Corporations, in turn, must foster an internal environment where creativity can flourish. This means providing employees with the “free time” and “head space” necessary for generating “big ideas.”⁷ The role of the corporate communicator must evolve from being simple “storytellers” to becoming strategic “story shapers,” added Arpana Kumar Ahuja of Jindal Steel. The strategic risk of inaction is significant: “if every brand sounds the same,” there is no “differentiator.”⁸

Consultancies should also bring the same spirit of innovation to their own operations. “At the heart of it, it’s a narrative,” said Yefira Partners CEO George Kypraios. “Success isn’t just selling; it’s about finding the right capital and organic partners to meet objectives.” rates.” Leaders, Kumar added, often feel they are in a “constant crisis flow with no start or stop”.

Discover more about
ICCO’s conversations
on Creativity and
Culture at Cannes
Lions International
Festival of Creativity

⁵ Kate Midttun, Acorn Strategy

⁶ Caroline Hsu, The Hoffman Agency

⁷ Alex Malouf

⁸ Alex Malouf

“How do I make measurement cultural to my client’s organisation?”

– David Lian, Zeno



TEN POINT ROADMAP

2. Measurement & evaluation

Measurement must be repositioned from a final reporting step to the foundational element of strategic counsel⁹. It is the mechanism that provides a clear and unequivocal answer to the C-suite’s most critical question: “How does PR work directly impact my business objective?”

The industry remains plagued by a legacy approach, with research showing that “70% are still using output” metrics like AVEs. This is not just ineffective; it is detrimental to the profession’s credibility. The warning is stark:

“If your CEO is asking for AVEs... s/he hates you.”¹⁰ As Felicia Nugroho of Maverick noted, even great campaigns have been perceived as failures because their success was reported only through outputs. This legacy mindset undermines the industry’s influence and economic power.

Consultancies must lead the change by embedding measurement into their counsel from the outset, using established standards like the AMEC framework to shift focus to meaningful outcomes such as “trust, sentiment shift, message recall,

and recovery.”¹¹ This necessitates investing in “hybrid talents” like “data analysts”¹² and being “brave” enough to ask clients for more data¹³.

As Muck Rack’s Iskren Lilov argued, the only way to win bigger budgets is to “ease audience pressure, build trust that connects people to the brand, and demonstrate how that trust translates into concrete business results.” When agencies bring custom, accurate metrics beyond AVEs into the room, “95% of clients immediately ask why they haven’t seen them sooner” – a telling indictment of legacy practice.

Critically, to elevate the profession’s stature, leaders must “stop price wars and undercutting,”¹⁴ which devalue strategic counsel before it is even delivered. Nugroho’s agency, Maverick, has successfully integrated measurement into its core offering and increased its fee, making it a non-negotiable part of the value exchange.

Measurement, added Nugroho, must “start with the audience and desired change” – behaviour, trust or reputation – with intermediate indicators treated as “health checks” rather than end goals. For Zeno’s David Lian, the scarcest resource is not tools but client engagement: without time from business leaders to interpret and act on findings, “data scientists and AI tools are wasted.”

Corporate organisations and clients now have heightened expectations. They demand that communicators “go beyond storytelling” and connect PR to “tangible business results.”¹⁵ The goal, as Lian explained, is to make measurement “cultural” to the client’s organisation. Today, the two most important metrics are simple but powerful: “So what?” and Now what?”¹⁶

More than one speaker noted that the rise of AI offers opportunities for communicators to better prove their commercial value, even if optimising for LLMs may repeat some of the missteps familiar in SEO. “I could not be more excited with the technology I have a real hope that is going to eventually allow us to both prove and improve the value of communications,” said Edelman’s Tristan Roy. “Ultimately, the way that we change our commercial model is by changing the ability to demonstrate the commercial impact of our commercial model.”

9 Iskren Lilov, Muck Rack

10 Johna Burke, AMEC

11 Ana Pista, Ardent Communications

12 Emma Smith, Sandpiper

13 Johna Burke, AMEC

14 Minari Shah

15 Ana Pista, Ardent Communications

16 Johna Burke, AMEC

“We have to continually remind ourselves that we are talking to machines”

– Kathy Bloomgarden, Ruder Finn

TEN POINT ROADMAP

3. AI in PR: Craft & models

Artificial intelligence is not merely a tool for efficiency; it is the engine of a new “intelligence economy”. For the communications profession, AI represents a “force multiplier” that will fundamentally reshape craft, capabilities, and the overall value proposition, demanding strategic adoption to maintain a competitive edge.

The opportunity and imperative of AI are immense. Jim O’Leary of Weber Shandwick identifies the “AI economy” as a market projected to reach \$90bn by 2030. According to new research from BCG, furthermore, 80% of the work that communications does sits within what they call the ‘AI sweet spot’. However, the true strategic advantage will not come from speed or scale alone. The

competitive edge will come from judgment, leveraging human insight to guide powerful AI tools.

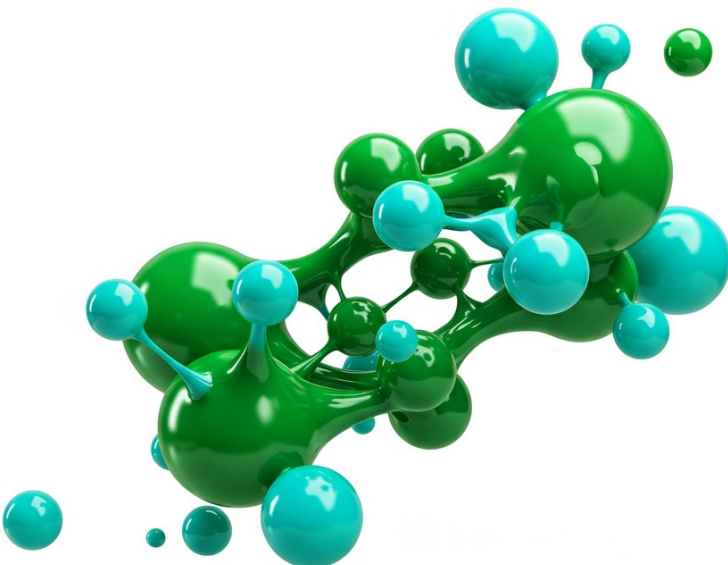
A profound paradigm shift was presented by Kathy Bloomgarden, CEO of Ruder Finn, who argued that with “75% of new online content influenced by AI,” communicators must now treat the machine as a primary stakeholder. To navigate this new reality, she outlined a ‘human algorithm’ framework for optimising human connection in a world increasingly intermediated by LLMs.

Bloomgarden’s framework consists of three core pillars:

1. GENERATIVE ENGINE OPTIMISATION (GEO):

Communicators must now “talk to machines” by tailoring content for LLMs. Key tactics include:

- A.** Prioritising “relevance over size” by targeting niche, expert trade press that LLMs scrape for detailed information.
- B.** Leveraging ‘The Reddit Effect,’ as Reddit is the #1 most cited domain by AI models, making it a more powerful platform for influence than many traditional social networks.
- C.** Ensuring “machine readability” through structured, summary-first content with bullet points and clear headers that algorithms can easily find, understand, and train on.



2. MICRO AND NANO INFLUENCERS

To “talk to humans” with authenticity, the focus must shift from macro-celebrities to influencers with smaller but “very well defined and highly engaged” followings. This allows for precision targeting and genuine connection that resonates more deeply than broad, impersonal endorsements.

3. HUMAN-CENTRIC SYNTHETIC CONTENT

AI is not just for efficiency; it is a powerful tool for creating authentic, personalised experiences. Bloomgarden highlighted how AI is already reshaping both risk and opportunity. Photorealistic deepfakes – such as an “ideal” AI persona gaining thousands of followers or fabricated images of people in dangerous situations – demonstrate how convincingly synthetic content can capture attention. Yet the same tools are turning dense assets, like the 50-page ICCO World PR Report, into a six-minute audio summary, making complex information instantly accessible to wider audiences. This technological shift is also forcing a structural rethink within agencies. Tristan Roy of Edelman advised leaders to map their workflows to identify what can be “automated, human-empowered & human-only,” noting that the “human layer” is where firms can differentiate. Even with highly capable LLMs, Bloomgarden cautioned, “the smartest summaries still need human judgment”: prompts must be refined (“summarise with a clear focus on X”) to preserve

nuance and correct semantic slips. As Burson’s Chad Latz put it, “implementing AI itself is not a strategy” – the value lies in how firms apply it to elevate the work and help clients achieve their objectives. Latz added that AI is a powerful tool for “driving horizontality and silo busting,” by connecting teams and disciplines in new and unexpected ways. Both Latz and Roy agreed that firms must fuel future growth with non-traditional talent like creatives and engineers, with Sandpiper’s Emma Smith further noting the importance of “thinking like a tech company.”

To overcome organisational resistance, firms are increasingly making AI compliance a mandatory aspect of their operations, integrating it into key performance indicators (KPIs) up to the CEO level.¹⁷ Training is fundamental, but Latz also advised “five-minute productivity hacks” in addition to hourlong sessions. “Giving our people the ability to actually build agents on their own was a massive unlock... adoption exploded,” he added.

The profound impact on consultancy commercial models necessitates further flexibility and innovation. “The hourly model has for a long time supported a fair bit of inefficiency... AI is accentuating that we could and should be more efficient,” said Roy. “We’re at a point where the question isn’t faster/cheaper – it’s how to prove and improve the value of communications.”

**“Facts rarely change minds;
people respond to stories & values”**

– Angela Scaffidi, SenateSHJ



TEN POINT ROADMAP

4. Tech transformation & disinformation

The same technologies transforming the industry are also accelerating one of the most severe global risks identified by the World Economic Forum: misinformation and disinformation. This reality places the communications function on the front line of defence for brand reputation, market stability, and societal trust.

The scale of the threat is staggering. Even before the widespread availability of generative AI, the global cost of disinformation to businesses

was estimated to exceed \$78 billion annually. Generative AI now acts as a powerful “accelerant,” enabling the creation of “highly realistic fake content at scale.”¹⁸ The danger is not abstract; a fake live stream of NVIDIA CEO Jensen Huang was viewed “five times more” than the official broadcast, demonstrating the potential for massive reputational and financial damage.¹⁹

In this environment, the role of consultancies must evolve. They are now the “sense makers in chief,” tasked with finding the

“signal from the noise.”²⁰ As SenateSHJ’s Angela Scaffidi further noted, firms cannot assume that their staff will automatically be able to “think critically” – a more deliberate approach is required. A key technical tactic is embracing generative engine optimisation with formats like Q&As, listicles, and schema to ensure accurate content is machine-readable and prioritised by AI models²¹. Furthermore, agencies must advise clients to work with fact-checkers as allies and respond to crises transparently and on record. As Jency Jacob of Boom states, “unless you have something really bad to hide, there is no harm in speaking on record.” Corporate defence strategies must be further fortified. With 69% of all news searches on Google now resulting in no click-throughs, We.’s Brian Keenan advises that the brand website must become the canonical “official information repository.” It is also vital to understand that LLMs actively search for expert information in the trade press, reinforcing the strategic need for high-quality, credible content in specialised publications to shape the narratives that AI models will amplify.

In a post-truth economy, verifiability becomes more important than visibility as the currency. But as Paul Mottram noted in a session on ‘PR as a Force for Good’, the profession itself has historically contributed

to problems of misinformation, deception, and societal harm. Mottram contended that PR “in many ways represents the worst of late stage capitalism,” prioritising the interests of the “plutocracy at the expense of social good”, and being “incredibly unhelpful” in generating “misinformation and deception.”

Overcoming these issues requires courage, proactive engagement, ethical clarity, and a relentless focus on stakeholders and relationships. The core job of communicators is to “have the courage to tell leaders what they need to hear.”²² In an era of constant crisis and conflict, silence “signals ambivalence or indifference,”²³ which ultimately erodes trust with stakeholders. Accordingly, communicators must go beyond storytelling to build trust and measure that trust in tangible business results. “Communicators must balance correcting falsehoods with building alternative, positive narratives that showcase an organisation’s true contributions,” said SenateSHJ’s Angela Scaffidi.

18 Jency Jacob, BOOM

19 Kathy Bloomgarden, Ruder Finn

20 Rod Cartwright

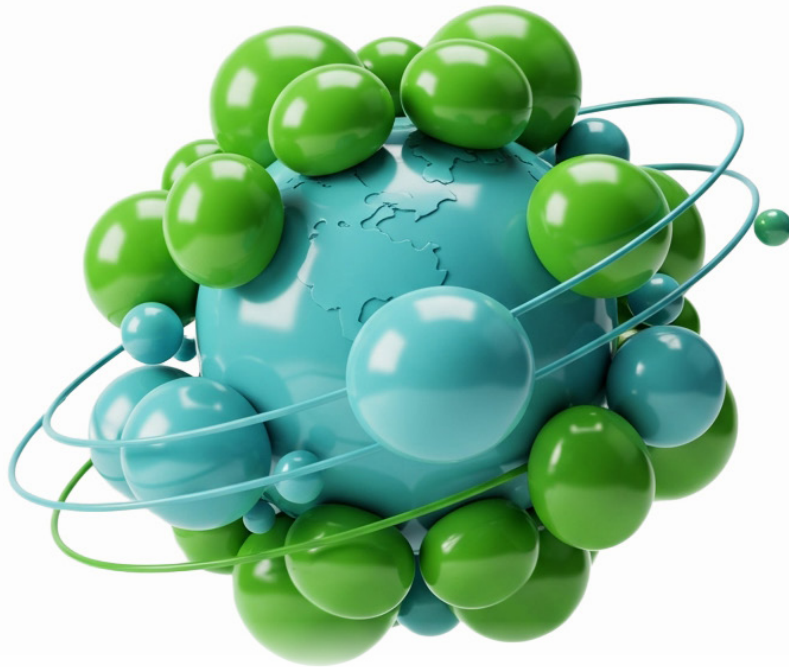
21 Kathy Bloomgarden, Ruder Finn

22 Nandini Chatterjee

23 Pooja Jethwani, Adfactors

“That seamless, global ordered world we were in before, that’s gone”

– Brad Staples, APCO



TEN POINT ROADMAP

5. Geopolitics & crisis

In today's interconnected and volatile world, business and politics are inseparable. Communicators must develop geopolitical acumen and adopt a new approach centred on corporate diplomacy and proactive engagement to protect their organisation's licence to operate. SEC Newgate's Fiorenzo Tagliabue used the analogy of the Rosetta Stone to illustrate the modern communicator's challenge: they must now decipher the complex, layered "languages of geopolitics, technology, and culture" to create value and navigate uncertainty.

The new reality is that geopolitical risk is now a central business concern. APCO CEO Brad Staples noted that "political volatility is shaping markets now far more than ever before", with more than one speaker citing Oxford GlobeScan's finding that geopolitical risk is the top concern for in-house communications leaders.

As TCS CMO Abhinav Kumar said, "any global statement risks offence locally". Staples notes that "local legitimacy and relevance" are crucial to navigating this landscape, while Northbourne Advisory's Justin Kerr-

Stevens explained that “global crises demand local nuance; you can borrow logic but must tailor it politically, culturally, and operationally.” OPRG international president Matt Stafford added that US companies, in particular, must proactively highlight their local contribution in international markets, to avoid being negatively impacted by America First policies.

The new geopolitical environment is rendering legacy crisis advice invalid. According to Stafford, the old counsel to “shut up, keep your head down” has been replaced with the new imperative “to engage.” This advice may seem at odds with the “strategic silence” that is seemingly favoured by many companies at this juncture, prompting Kumar to call for better use of trade associations to challenge risky government policies – a safer and often more effective approach than acting alone.

Strategic foresight is paramount; as Staples advises, leaders must “look all the way down the supply chain” to fully appreciate and anticipate risk. . Public judgment centres on character and behavioural response (eg leadership visibility) as much as operational success²⁴.

teams, focusing on grassroots advocacy and direct new-media influence, learning from the playbook of recent successful presidential campaigns in the US²⁵. Boards are increasingly concerned about geopolitics²⁶ and expect their organisations to develop their own diplomatic strategies²⁷.

It is essential to remember, as Rod Cartwright pointed out, that crises rarely stem from the communications function itself but are the result of an organisation’s “culture, values, ethics, and behavior.” Building resilience requires “simulating hard scenarios” to create organisational muscle memory and agility before a crisis hits.

“Over time, we’ve moved from crisis as event to crisis as environment,” said IPR president Tina McCorkindale. “And the organisations that thrive are those that treat crisis response as a human capability, not just a communications function.” Cartwright further describes this as “operationalised empathy”, where a “clear plan of action” is perceived as more valuable than simply expressing empathy.

²⁴ Justin Kerr-Stevens, Northbourne Advisory

²⁵ Matt Stafford, OPRG

²⁶ Rohit Bansal, Reliance

²⁷ Fiorenzo Tagliabue, SEC Newgate

**“We’ve gone from a very concentrated orbit...
to a decentralised constellation of influence”**

– Brian Keenan, We. Communications



TEN POINT ROADMAP

6. Influence & media

In The global media industry is in a state of “perma-crisis,” as described by Brian Keenan of We. Communications. This is not just an economic crisis but a crisis of trust, with Ipsos data revealing that 72% of people in India believe the media deliberately misleads them. This collapse of faith in institutional media has led to a fundamental restructuring of influence as the legacy media declines — “much of the communications is dead and about to be buried as far as media is concerned.”

Keenan modeled this shift as a move from a “concentrated orbit” of a few trusted, centralised outlets to a decentralised “constellation” of influence. In this new reality, every brand, every topic, and every individual has their own unique ecosystem of trusted sources and influential voices. This fragmentation is being accelerated by AI, which is creating a “zero-click world.” LLMs are becoming the “internet’s new editor-in-chief,” curating information so effectively that 69% of Google news searches now result in no click-throughs to publisher websites.



This new landscape demands a complete overhaul of media engagement strategies. Social and video networks are now the top global news source (54%), and in markets like India, 91% of Gen Z rely on social media for news. Journalists are leveraging platforms like Substack to become their own media brands, turning the “email inbox into the new front page.” As Keenan noted, these influential individuals have become a critical part of the new media constellation and require direct, personalised engagement.

The age of the mass press release is also over. Modern outreach requires crafting DMs, voice notes, and platform-native press kits with “memeable assets, GIFs, carousels, live video, [and] b-roll” to meet the needs of a new generation of creators. Agencies must lead strategic pivots away from legacy media and toward the platforms where audiences now congregate, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Substack.

of Ruder Finn points out that “Reddit... is by far the platform that is picked up by LLMs the most,” making it a strategically vital, if often overlooked, channel. To influence expert-seeking AI models, added Bloomgarden, agencies must also help clients generate credible content in the “trade press.”

This new landscape presents a significant corporate narrative challenge. Abhinav Kumar of TCS cited research revealing that “only 21% of CCOs expect themselves... to be commenting on issues of societal note,” indicating a high degree of caution and risk aversion. This hesitancy stands in stark contrast to the strategic question posed by Indu Sharma of Siemens, who urges leaders to ask the fundamental question of control: “Are we driving the narrative, or being driven by it?”

“Yesterday’s team is not going to win tomorrow’s war”

– Jim O’Leary, Weber Shandwick

TEN POINT ROADMAP

7. Talent & nextgen

The future of the public relations industry rests on its ability to understand, engage, and adapt to the expectations of its NextGen workforce—the Gen Z and millennial professionals who are already reshaping workplace culture. Preliminary findings from a new Astrum/ICCO research study, combined with a dynamic panel discussion, revealed a clear set of motivations and a call for a new leadership paradigm.

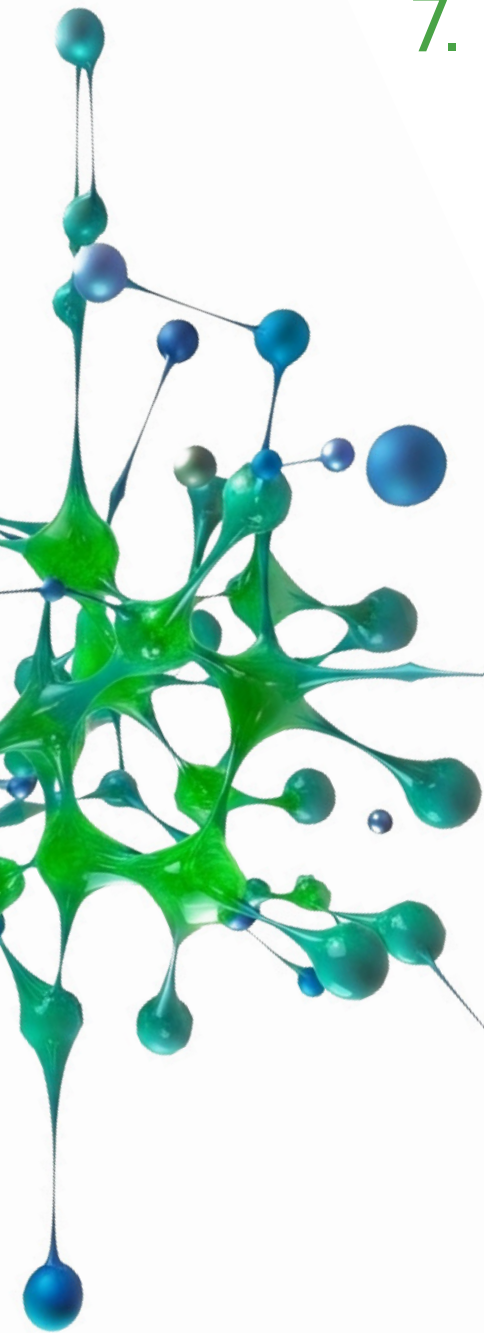
‘Flexibility’ was the most prominent word in the research word cloud. However, as panelist Srishti Gairola of Organic by MSL noted, flexibility is “not a generational thing... everybody’s wanted it. They’re just treating it as a non-negotiable.” This is not a perk but a baseline expectation for a modern workplace.

The label of “impatient” often applied to younger generations was reframed as a desire for growth and relevance. As Aditya Singla of Astrum argued, “we’re not impatient. We’re just situationally aware of if we don’t grow with the world, then we get left behind.” This cohort is acutely aware of the pace of change and expects their careers and organisations to keep up.

The NextGen workforce wants to be treated as “co-creators and collaborators,” not just junior employees. This requires a fundamental shift in leadership style toward active listening. Milena Stein of fischerAppelt made a direct plea to leaders: “take us seriously, listen and also show us our perspective.”

The traditional top-down feedback model is ineffective. Singla explained that what shuts his team down is “if feedback is being shot at their way” instead of being a collaborative conversation that respects their thought process. Leaders must also understand the “softer aspects” of the pressures facing young professionals. Gairola highlighted the need for empathy around issues like anxiety, confidence, and the severe financial stress of living in major cities, which are critical to creating psychologically safe and supportive environments.

This desire for impact is not just a cultural preference; it is a strategic necessity in an industry being reshaped by AI. The “human-only” skills that Edelman’s Tristan Roy identified — strategic judgment, creativity, and empathy — are



precisely the “softer aspects” this generation is demanding leaders cultivate.

AI drives a cultural shift, but the human element is central; 50% of PR is built on relationships,” said Acorn Strategy CEO Kate Midttun. “AI can’t replace that. We must ensure new talent masters fundamental skills before relying on tools, as human-centric stories always matter.”

Less burdened by legacy models, Asia’s PR consultancies are actively rethinking traditional structures. The Hoffman Agency’s Caroline Hsu noted a shift from the pyramid to something more akin to a “diamond”, with more senior-level talent. Sandpiper’s Emma Smith, meanwhile, added that they are prioritising a “flatter” structure that puts more power in the practices.

Meanwhile, the skills and perspectives that brought the communications industry to this point are insufficient for the future. Survival and success now depend on a fundamental redesign of talent acquisition, development, and retention strategies to build a workforce equipped for the challenges ahead.

The new skillset mandate demands a different kind of professional. The industry is now actively seeking “hybrid talents, data analysts, behavioral economists, [and] digital anthropologists.”³⁰ Agencies are increasingly hiring from talent pools that “tech companies would have been hiring from in the

past,”³¹ signaling a significant shift in required competencies from traditional media relations to data-driven strategic counsel.

Agencies have a critical responsibility to build this future workforce. They must “redesign the map of the skills needed” and commit to the mandatory “upskilling” of existing staff in areas like data literacy and business fundamentals³². Fiorenzo Tagliabue of SEC Newgate has called for agencies to return to their traditional role as “training ships” for the industry. This also requires a personalised management style; as Milena Stein advises, leaders must adopt an “individualistic approach,” because “one size doesn’t fit all.”

Corporate leadership must cultivate a culture where this new talent can thrive. This includes building platforms for Gen Z “to be heard,” addressing systemic issues like burnout and “ageism,” and rebuilding the “sense of community” lost due to post-pandemic online learning³³. To broaden strategic perspective and business acumen, TCS CMO Abhinav Kumar suggests that communicators should “go and run a business for a year or two” to gain invaluable cross-functional experience.

30 David Lian, Zeno Group

31 Emma Smith, Sandpiper Communications

32 Ana Pista, Ardent Communications

33 Sristhi Gairola, Organic by MSL

“80% of corporates are dialling down their ESG communications”

– Abhinav Kumar, TCS

TEN POINT ROADMAP

8. Climate & ESG

Discover more about
[ICCO's climate and ESG work](#)

Communicating on climate and ESG issues presents a dual challenge: on one hand, battling public apathy and fatigue, and on the other, navigating corporate fear of backlash in a polarised political environment. This has led to a troubling trend of “strategic silence.” Abhinav Kumar of TCS cited a recent IPSOS report showing that “80% of [CCOs] have also said they’re dialling down all their ESG communication” due to this fear.

This corporate retreat has a tangible societal impact, as “climate change has become less of a public priority because corporations are talking about it less.” This vacuum is being filled by opposing forces. Juxtaposed against this corporate silence is an “orchestrated denial of climate change,”³⁴ creating an environment where inaction by responsible companies cedes the narrative to those with a vested interest in confusion and delay.

In this challenging environment, agencies must counsel clients on the “long term value of honesty”³⁵ and the risks of strategic silence. This includes recommending alternative engagement strategies, such as leveraging “neutral sporting events” or participating in “multi brand initiatives.”³⁶ For brands willing

to be bold, “creative activism” can be a powerful tool to break through public apathy and fatigue.³⁷ The strategic lesson from “The Last Resort” campaign, presented by Geelmuyden Kiese’s Dan Vesterberg and Walter Westerlund, is that when conventional ESG communication is met with silence or cynicism, creative activism provides a necessary alternative. By reframing a complex social issue through a culturally relevant lens – in this case, youth travel culture – the campaign bypassed traditional “playbooks” for any brand facing apathy: find a powerful cultural insight, create an experience designed for headlines, and convert online curiosity into real-world political pressure.

Corporations find themselves facing a difficult dilemma. The advice for those choosing to reduce external communication is clear: they must “keep engaging their employees internally” on these topics³⁸. Despite the external political pressures, many American corporations are continuing their ESG agenda not for optics, but because they see it as “good for their business” and “fundamentally something they believe they need to do.”³⁹

³⁴ Paul Mottram

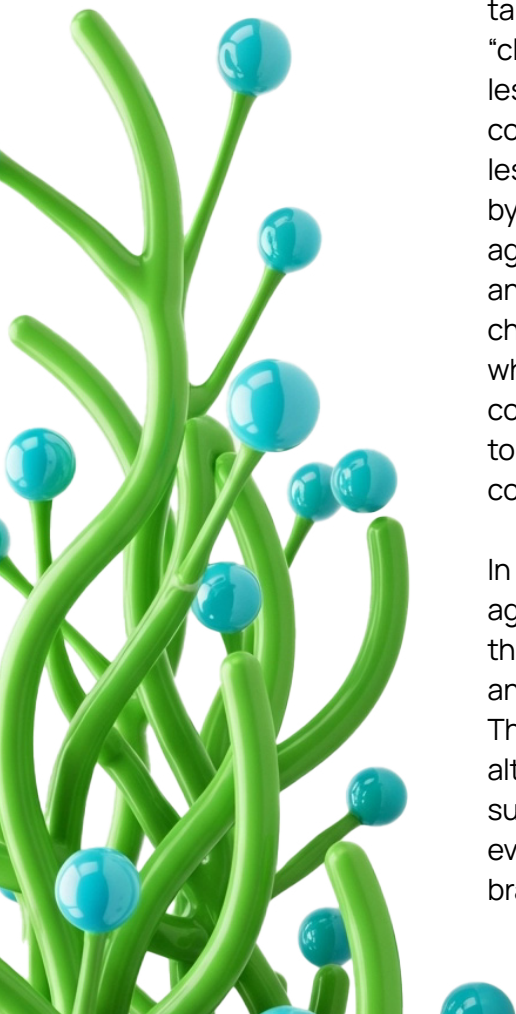
³⁵ Pooja Jethwani, Adfactors

³⁶ Abhinav Kumar, TCS

³⁷ Dan Vesterberg & Walter Westerlund, Geelmuyden Kiese

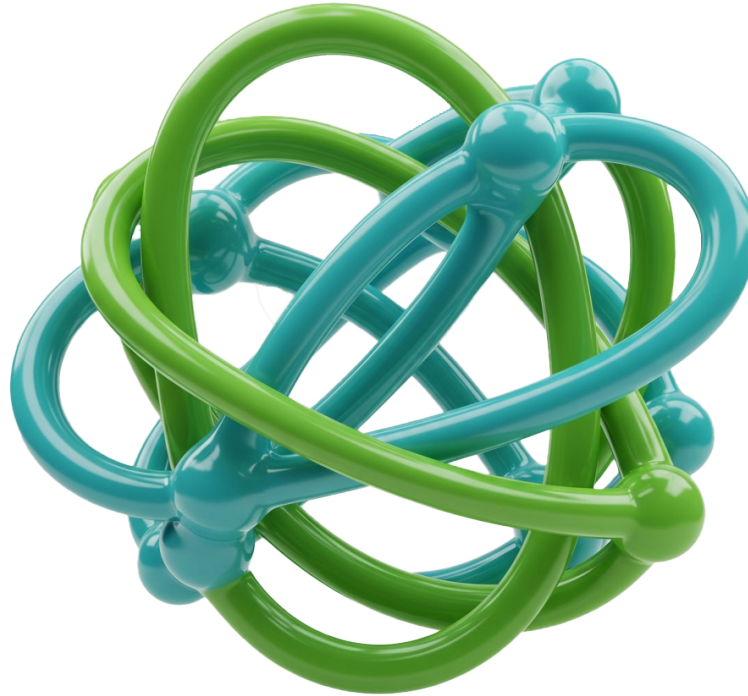
³⁸ Abhinav Kumar, TCS

³⁹ Abhinav Kumar, TCS



**“The core function of communications...
is to build these necessary bridges”**

– Manasi Narasimhan, CEGIS



TEN POINT ROADMAP

9. Health & humanity

Amidst the discussions of AI, geopolitical crises, and business model disruption, a powerful undercurrent emerged at the summit: the urgent need to preserve and amplify human connection, empathy, and truth. The communications profession is uniquely positioned to be a positive force in a world grappling with machine-driven content and societal division.

While acknowledging the persistent negative perception of PR as “spin,” speakers argued for its potential to drive purpose-led initiatives. As Manasi Narasimhan of CEGIS articulated, the “core

function of communications...is to build these necessary bridges” between the private sector, government, and social impact organisations.

In an industry defined by high stress and constant pressure, empathy is no longer a soft skill; it is a critical leadership competency. Described as the “rarest resource,”⁴⁰ a genuine commitment to humanity is essential for building resilient teams, maintaining stakeholder trust during crises, and ensuring the long-term health of the profession.

The human cost of the profession is severe and quantifiable. Data

from Abhinav Kumar of TCS identifies CCOs as one of the two professional personas with the “highest burnout rates.” This is a red flag for the industry, underscoring the critical need for leaders to prioritise and institutionalise self care within their teams to prevent talent drain and maintain strategic capacity.

The role of empathy in counsel is therefore twofold. Agency counsel must be “infused with empathy,” while also helping their people navigate the “softer aspects”, of the pressures they face, including high rents and long commutes.⁴¹

This requires what Rod Cartwright describes as a fundamental shift in perspective from “the self to the other.” However, a useful insight reveals why this often fails: a crisis survey found that the “lowest behaviours” valued by leaders under pressure were “empathy” and “communicating openly and transparently.” This suggests that empathy is not a natural default state in a crisis, but a discipline that must be cultivated.

Leadership, therefore, carries a clear “duty of care.”⁴² During a crisis, this duty manifests as

“operational empathy”—the ability to turn empathetic sentiment into concrete, supportive action. commutes.⁴³ The failure to do so can be catastrophic. The leadership team that “went into a silence stream” during a fraud crisis, as experienced by Nandini Chatterjee while at PwC, and the lack of transparency demonstrated by Boeing’s repeated crashes serve as powerful cautionary tales of empathy’s operational failure.

As Pooja Jethwani from Adfactors warned, in a “perma-crisis” context, silence is no longer neutral; stakeholders increasingly interpret it as complicity or indifference, which erodes trust over time. Yet, as SenateSHJ’s Angela Scaffidi noted, we also risk over-burdening leaders with unrealistic expectations on ESG, DEI and global influence; the baseline is still “do no harm” and act clearly in stakeholders’ best interests.

40 Neha Mehrotra, ICCO

41 Srithi Gairola, Organic by MSL

42 Brad Staples, APCO

43 Rod Cartwright

“Harassment remains a key issue,”

— Susan Hardwick, GWPR



TEN POINT ROADMAP

10. DEI/Gender

Multiple speakers noted that DEI is a crucial business strategy for attracting and retaining top talent, fostering innovation, and ensuring the diversity of thought necessary to solve complex problems. However, the industry is facing a concerning “downward trend in equality, diversity and inclusion policies,”⁴⁴ making decisive leadership accountability more urgent than ever to reverse this decline.

Key challenges persist as significant structural barriers, according to this year’s Global Women in PR study. “Flexible work practices” are cited as a key factor in retaining female talent, yet their adoption is inconsistent across the industry. “Harassment remains a key issue,” and “ageism” continues to cause the industry to lose valuable, experienced talent, as noted by Susan Hardwick of GWPR.

Agencies must be at the forefront of driving change. This means actively fighting “the leaky motherhood pipeline”⁴⁵ through better support systems, addressing harassment head-

on, and finding “sponsors” for women leaders, including “more male allies.”⁴⁶ It is also crucial to apply a lens of “intersectionality” to address the interconnected challenges of gender, ethnicity, and age in a holistic manner.⁴⁷

Ultimately, corporate accountability and policy are what drive systemic change. As Deepshikha Dharmaraj of Burson noted, “driving change needs leadership accountability and active sponsorship.” This must be supported by effective policies, including full transparency around recruitment and promotion,” according to ICCO’s Nextgen panel. While some environments, like a UAE office with “17 nationalities and 20 languages,” demonstrate organic diversity, other regions like Saudi Arabia may need “government regulation” to accelerate women’s entry into leadership, illustrating the varied approaches required to achieve universal goals.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Susan Hardwick, GWPR

⁴⁵ Arpana Kumar Ahuja, Jindal Steel

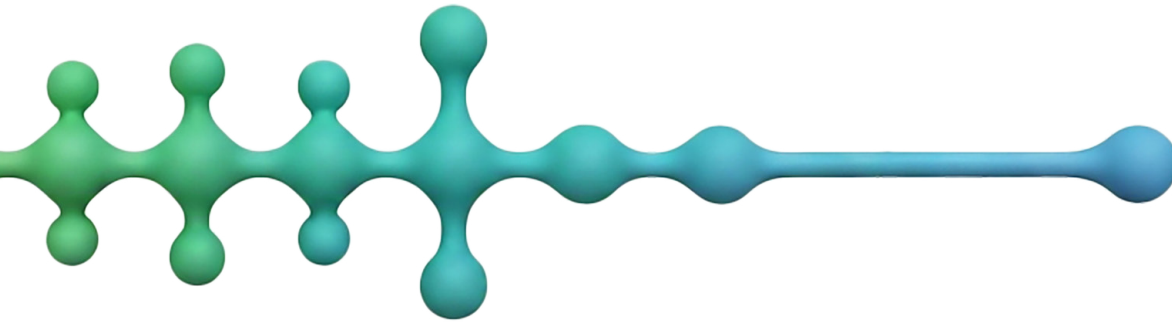
⁴⁶ Deepshikha Dharmaraj, Burson

⁴⁷ Rod Cartwright

⁴⁸ Sophie Simpson, Ruder Finn Attelene

“Constant change in PR, media, and generations demands adjustment and renewal, not rigid adherence to old ways”

— Milena Stein, FischerAppelt



CONCLUSION

Leading the transformation

The 10 points of this Change Agenda paint a clear picture: the public relations industry is at a crossroads. As Jim O’Leary framed it, the choice is between clinging to traditional methods and risking irrelevance, or seizing the opportunity to lead a necessary and profound transformation. The anxiety and complexity of this moment are real, but they are matched by an unprecedented opportunity. In an “economy of uncertainty,” the core skills of professional communication—sense-making, narrative shaping, relationship building, and strategic counsel—are not becoming obsolete;

they are becoming more critical than ever. The challenges of AI, geopolitical instability, and societal polarisation are, at their heart, communication challenges. The path forward requires courage, investment, and a radical openness to reinvention. As Fiorenzo Tagliabue urged in his closing remarks, the industry must “reaffirm the central and strategic role that communication plays.” By embracing this Change Agenda, the global public relations industry can move beyond being a profession transformed by disruption and rightfully claim its place as the profession that leads transformation.



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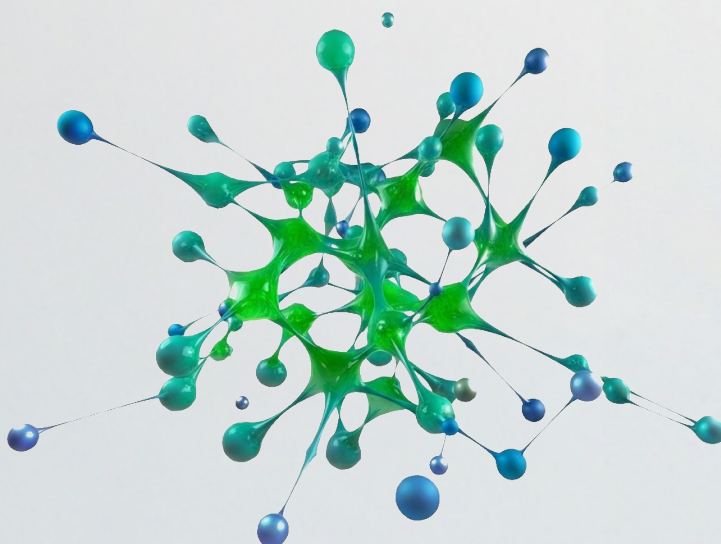


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