



THE COMPANY OF  
COMMUNICATORS

# CURRENT STATE OF DEI IN COMMS SUMMER 2024

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# INTRODUCTION

The Diversity Equality and Inclusion Committee of the Company of Communicators held two focus groups to take a deep dive into the current state of play on DEI in the Communications industry.

To get this initiative started, we met with senior Communications professionals of Black heritage\* to explore their experience of access, representation and opportunity in the Communications profession, the City Livery community, and the Company specifically. We know that this is the least represented demographic in Communications from research conducted by trade organisations such as PRCA and most recently CIPR as well as for our Company. The Livery community has also accepted that more work on DEI is necessary if it is to live up to commitment to societal, professional, charitable and membership goals

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*I want to be part of the conversations that are creating change, opening doors, removing gatekeepers, and making sure we're holding organisations and people to account.*  
”

We spent 1.5 hours with each group exploring a set of questions with 12 Communications professionals, including 3 who provided written or separate telephone contributions as they couldn't make one of the meetings. With appetite from many others contacted during outreach who were unable to attend on this occasion, the interest shown indicates that work on this important subject should be continued.

The participants were drawn from a wide range of Communications specialisms with an average of over 10 years experience and several coming to the industry from a journalist background. Professionals included Senior in-house counsel from corporate to FMCG; Agency founders; managers of Communications within Local and National Government departments; senior management of PR adjacent organisations to name a few.

Several are members of separate PR networks such as Black Comms Network and BME PR Pros, which were established to address limited support for DEI priorities within official industry bodies.

All commended the Company for undertaking this work as an organisation representing the industry and made specific recommendations for us to consider.

We have included a selection of direct quotes to illustrate points being made.



# HOW DO YOU CHARACTERISE THE STATE OF DEI IN THE UK COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY?

The consensus for both groups is that the communications industry mirrors broader UK society – we've made progress, but we're far from where we need to be. True DEI isn't just about diverse faces at the entry-level. We need more diversity in senior leadership, boardrooms, and leading influential organisations shaping the narrative.

Most of the effort feels very outward facing. There is a lot of conversation about diversity and inclusion, but there is a gap between what a company says and what it lives and breathes day to day. Companies **preach more than they practice**. Even with managers responsible for DEI, with DEI strategies in place and open conversations, this hasn't translated into a greater increased diversity in the workplace. It's more about a company's branding and marketing, and less part of the corporate strategy and culture.

This was especially evident in the panic post the murder of George Floyd and the rise of Black Lives Matter when many firms felt it necessary to show they were doing something.

There was a push to promote or elevate ethnic minority staff. So, things started to look diverse, with more Black faces on company websites and brochures, but there's very few great examples of best practice. More troubling is the sense that today fatigue about DEI is setting in, that it's time to move on to other priorities.

“When I joined my agency, they had just entered for an industry award for a ‘Black’ health campaign. There was not one Black person on the creative team.”

For some participants working within the public sector, professionals understood they were viewed as a necessary resource for communicating with diverse communities. Even then, however, there was a reliance on marketing mindset.

For example, every Black History Month required a blog or LinkedIn post as an automatic action with little thought about what should/could be said. More importantly, despite collecting Diversity data and framing policies, **these were not strategically overlaid across departmental decision-making**; they were viewed as isolated metrics.

PR agencies were seen to be much better at looking diverse because they're good at selling themselves and thinking about who their client and audiences are. Attendees often felt they and other members of their team were shown off for their diversity, when the reality of the project team is very different

It's necessary to start looking at attrition rates, how long does diverse talent stay?

In agencies, diversity is bottom heavy. If we look at the data around entrepreneurship, there is a lot of freelancers and consultants setting up their own consultancies. Not just because of the lack of opportunity to progress to senior leadership roles, but also because they want to offer a service that is shaped by their experience and to reach audiences of relevance. It was also noted that a number of Black women who achieved seniority in Communications are leaving.



*In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, communications agencies were very quick to scramble to do something and to be seen to be doing something. How that played out was to hire more ethnic minorities, usually at junior levels.*

# WHO IS SHOWING LEADERSHIP IN ADVANCING DEI IN THE SECTOR?

There are beacons of hope! Some agencies are making a genuine effort, setting ambitious targets, and not just **'talking the talk'** but **'walking the walk'** in recruitment and fostering inclusive cultures. These companies recognise the economic benefit gained by harnessing all the available talents, how DEI creates opportunity and empowers communities.

Most of the participants were encouraged by the young, diverse people entering the industry. In a kind of Gen Z way, they are just kicking the door down and making their presence felt. The reason why we have not seen growth in senior and executive leadership is not because the diverse talent isn't there.

“I never thought I couldn't show up as my authentic self. I'm not saying it's been easy, but I've always thought I could be authentic, and I tell people to lean into their authentic selves. I think it is a superpower.”



Industry organisations are also pushing for change, creating mentorship schemes, and conducting research. However, there's also a great deal of 'performative allyship' and box-ticking – we need to celebrate the leaders who are driving systemic change, not just those giving good speeches and reporting with no consequences.

So sector DEI leaders create opportunities for white colleagues to realise they have diverse identities too, facing discrimination because of an accent or social class perhaps. Common ground should be found, for example between women and Black people about not trusting the police.

When speaking of diversity, some participants focused on value gained from diversity of thought. It was also noted that diversity of thought can be used by mainstream audiences to push back against examining race, ethnicity and even gender.



# WHAT ARE THE DEI PRIORITIES FOR THE SECTOR?

**Intersectionality:** DEI isn't single-issue. It needs a nuanced approach recognising how race, ethnicity, gender, disability, LGBTQ+ status, social class, etc., intersect and create unique barriers.

**Operational Priority, not a Moral Imperative:** Imbed DEI in business processes such as procurement and business development. Black communities contribute £25 billion a year to the UK economy. We have influence if we wield it.

**Allies as Mentors:** While some participants feel responsible for mentoring young people to provide role models, that there is value for a Black person to show how to navigate the industry, others felt it should not be up to them to do the heavy lifting. The pool of mentors gets smaller and smaller, until suddenly there is one person who's responsible for every Black person within their organisation. The industry should do the nurturing. It was also noted that there is value in Black professionals mentoring white colleagues as a way to overcome biases and misconceptions.

**Data-driven Accountability:** Let's stop with the vague commitments. We need transparent data on representation at all levels, pay gaps, and retention rates. This gives us a baseline for measuring real progress.

**Beyond Recruitment:** It's not just about getting diverse people in the door but creating environments where they thrive and progress. Recognise and nurture talent.

“Many Black senior leaders left and started their own businesses or left the industry altogether because of the psychological trauma they faced.”

## WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT CITY LIVERY COMPANIES? HAVE YOU CONSIDERED MEMBERSHIP OF ANY?

Knowledge of Livery companies was somewhat limited. Historically, they seem rooted in tradition and professional guilds, focused on philanthropy and networking within specific trades. Participants haven't actively considered membership, mainly because they are perceived as archaic and at odds with the image of modern society.

“I knew nothing until I got your message about this exercise. But in terms of the Company of Communicators, I like the concept of us talking about the industry so yes, I will definitely be attracted to join you; but in terms of City Liveries, I always thought it was just a white male thing, to be perfectly honest, certainly not something for me.”

## WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE COMPANY OF COMMUNICATORS?

“There's a concerning 'leaky pipeline' where promising talent from underrepresented groups get frustrated and leave or plateau before reaching their potential.”

Some participants were aware of the Company's focus on professionalism and networking within the Communications field. While that's valuable, they are interested in understanding how actively the Company is prioritising DEI – **not just in statements, but in membership demographics, events, and mentorship opportunities.**

If the CoC is looking to position themselves as accountable, then the Company should be able to create something that shows that there is something to address those in the industry for those who are not supporting the change that is needed.



# WHAT COULD ATTRACT YOU TO JOIN THE COMPANY?

A bold vision for DEI would be a strong draw. Participants are not interested in joining an 'old boys club' – they would like to see the Company step into a leadership role on DEI working in partnership with PRCA and CIPR. The profession and the Company must do so with integrity and a commitment to follow through. If the Company took a leadership role, with a clear action plan for inclusion and measurable goals, it would be something to join.

Participants said an incentive to join the Company would be to continue to take part in the conversation to create change in the industry.

Participants also asked what doors are opened for £300, what access to senior leaders and opportunities to showcase their expertise and experience are there. They basically asked what's in it for me. They are already members of lots of things and are reducing their involvement because they are not acknowledged in these spaces despite paying for the privilege.

*"I cannot see why, for me to join an organisation that I'm paying to join, I need two nominating signatures. That's just a barrier to access, particularly for those of us from underrepresented backgrounds."*



# WHAT DEI PRIORITIES COULD THE COMPANY EMBRACE TO BUILD BETTER REPRESENTATION?

**Sponsorship not Mentorship:** Let's move beyond 'soft' support. Actively sponsor high-potential Communicators from diverse backgrounds, opening doors, and championing them in influential spaces. Partner with affinity groups such as UK Black Comms Network and BME PR Pros. Understand what a barrier the Company's requirement for two nominations is to those not connected to the company

**Outward focus:** Partner with affinity groups such as UK Black Comms Network and BME PRs as well as with grassroots organisations and schools to widen the talent pool. Don't just wait for diverse candidates to come to you.

**'Brave Space' conversations:** Facilitate honest dialogue on privilege, bias, and how we can be better allies. Promote the kind of Company culture that will attract diverse talent.

Additional thoughts

**Nothing about us without us:** Include diverse voices in the planning of DEI initiatives – well-intentioned efforts can backfire if they miss the mark.

**Imperfect progress:** Acknowledge that change takes time. Communicate regularly about milestones and setbacks with transparency.

**Beyond the company:** Encourage members to push for DEI within their own organisations. Systemic change needs to happen industry-wide. If brave enough, CoC could be the standard bearer of the sector, setting targets for best practice on ethnic representation like the FCA does for the Finance sector. A pointed discussion was had about the absence of Black representation on Women in PR's Shadow Board and anger at their wholly inadequate response to criticism.

# OTHER QUOTES/OBSERVATIONS

“There are loads of really nice policies written. I don't think is a policy issue, but it is an issue about embedding those policies and collating the data as well to measure progress and accountability.”

“British culture is about multiple cultures. It's not the central white culture that is known and loved by some people in positions of power. We need recognition that we have contributed to the tapestry of Britain since Roman times.”

“This is why the Women in PR's “shadow board” was such a failure for DEI in comms”

“I got into PR because somebody at my university dissuaded me from going into journalism because they didn't think I would have the intelligence for it. I went on to get a MA in journalism.”

“In terms of recognising and nurturing talent, I've worked majority of my life in newsrooms that have been white dominated. I've never felt I could be my authentic self at work. When you're like me a Black girl from a council estate in South London, you are maybe not given the same grace.”

Over the past 12 years, I worked my way up from a CEO's assistant at my first job to now being Head of EMEA Communications for a global corp.”

“In most organisations, when they talk about diversity, they talk about one aspect, ie gender. Nine times out of 10 it isn't about us.”

“In terms of the Company of Communicators, I liked what I see in terms of bringing us together to talk about this. So yes, I will be attracted to join you, but in terms of City Livery I always thought it was just a white male thing.”



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