The Paradox of the Role of Communication Professionals: Identifying the Gap between Theory and Practice and its Determining Factors

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Abstract. Researchers emphasize the need for communication to be part of the strategic management of an organization and its importance for the organization to be recognized. Yet, the role of communication as a success and value creator for business organizations is not appreciated. This paper presents a study that aims to explore the perception of the role of communication professionals from the perspective of CEOs of business organizations. Semistructured individual interviews were used to gather the views of CEOs of business organizations. The research results revealed a paradox that has not been explored so far. While CEOs of business organizations do not see top-level communication professionals as technical staff, but rather as having a strategic advisory role, the need of CEOs for the capabilities of communication professionals in the strategy development process is more of a technical operational rather than a strategic nature. CEOs tend to ignore the core mission of strategic communication which from the theoretical point of view is to align the communication strategy with the business organization's strategy. The traditional view of the role of communication professionals leads to the perception that communication professionals are not perceived as important strategists in the development and implementation of the business organization's strategy.

Keywords: strategic communication; communication specialists; role of communication specialists; strategic role of communication specialists; business organization strategy.

Komunikacijos specialistų vaidmens paradoksas: atotrūkis tarp teorinio ir praktinio požiūrių ir jį lemiantys veiksniai

Santrauka. Mokslininkai pabrėžia poreikį komunikacijai būti strateginio organizacijos valdymo dalimi ir jos svarba organizacijai yra pripažįstama, vis tik komunikacijos, kaip verslo organizacijų sėkmės ir vertės kūrimo, vaidmuo nėra vertinamas. Straipsnyje pristatomas tyrimas, kurio tikslas – ištirti verslo organizacijų vadovų požiūrį į komunikacijos specialistų vaidmenį. Verslo organizacijų vadovų požiūriams surinkti taikyti individualūs pusiau struktūruoti interviu. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė iki šiol netyrinėtą paradoksą. Nors verslo organizacijų vadovai aukščiausio lygio komunikacijos specialistus įvardija strateginiais konsultantais, vadovų išreiškiamas poreikis komunikacijos specialistų gebėjimams strategijos kūrimo procese yra labiau techninio operatyvinio, o ne strateginio pobūdžio. Vadovai linkę ignoruoti pagrindinę strateginės komunikacijos misiją, įvardintą teorijoje – suderinti komunikacijos strategiją su verslo organizacijos strategija. Tradicinis požiūris į komunikacijos specialistų vaidmenį lemia, kad jie nėra traktuojami kaip svarbūs strategai kuriant ir įgyvendinant verslo organizacijos strategiją.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: strateginė komunikacija; komunikacijos specialistai; komunikacijos specialistų vaidmuo; komunikacijos specialistų strateginis vaidmuo; verslo organizacijos strategija.

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Introduction

The intensity of modern business and the competitiveness challenges have made it necessary for business organizations to apply strategic communication that, when aligned with the business organization's strategy and focused on achieving the organization's goals, strengthens its competitive advantage (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018; Tench et al., 2022; Zerfass et al., 2018). According to Kaplan & Norton (2006), aligning the two strategies enhances an organization's strategic positioning and ensures that it responds to changing stakeholder needs, improves the credibility of the business organization among its stakeholders, fosters beneficial relationships, and enhances the business organization's reputation. Baron (2006) suggests that aligning strategies can increase internal efficiency, reduce costs, and boost employee commitment. Alsolamy et al. (2014) argue that the strategies alignment has a positive impact on organizations' operational and financial performance. Research (e.g., Argenti, 2016) highlights that one of the core missions of communication is to be aligned with an organization's strategic objectives and that the alignment of communication and the organization's strategies is the basis for communication to create value for the organization. According to Volk et al. (2017), strategic communication involves setting communication objectives based on the strategic goals of the organization and integrating communication objectives into communication activities to achieve organizational goals. Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication within an organization to fulfill its mission to help the organization achieve its goals. The two concepts of strategic communication are united by the idea of emphasizing the need for alignment of communication and the organization's strategies. The present article follows this strategies alignment approach, i.e. the alignment of business strategy, defined as a set of goal-oriented actions that a business organization takes to outperform its competitors (McGrath, 2013), with the communication strategy as an essential prerequisite for the use of communication to help the organization achieve its strategic objectives.

The academic discourse identifies the role of communication professionals as strategic (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), however, in practice, the role of communication as a factor influencing the success of a business organization is not appreciated (Volk et al., 2017). Brønn (2014) shows that strategic communication in business organizations is perceived as less important to the organization's success than activities carried out by sales, finance, human resources, or marketing departments. Communication is slightly more important to a business organization than security, IT, and legal issues. According to Falkheimer et al. (2018), CEOs associate the role of communication with functions traditionally attributed to communication, such as media relations, content creation, and distribution to stakeholders. The author's more than 20 years of practical experience in the field of communication also shows the inadequacy of the theoretical concept of strategic communication in practice: top-level communication professionals are rarely involved in strategic management, they are not involved in the management's strategic decision-making and strategy development, but rather they are the informational executors of these decisions. The traditional

treatment of the role of communication professionals in a business organization, which defines the role of communication professionals as organizers of technical tasks, without sufficiently highlighting the involvement of communication in business activities and governance, reinforces the perception that communication activities are only „servicing" other activities of the organization and do not have a direct impact on the implementation of the strategy of the business organization.

This situation points to differences between the theoretical concept of strategic communication, which is used by communication professionals to define their activities, and the functions of strategic communication as perceived in practice by CEOs in business organizations. Therefore, the scientific problem raised in the article is multifaceted, involving a noticeable gap between the theoretical approaches to strategic communication and their application in practice. The question is what factors lead to the perception of the role of communication, defined as strategic in theory, as not having a direct impact on the success of the business organization? However, there is a lack of research in the scientific discourse that analyzes the gap between theoretical and practical approaches to assessing the role of communication professionals in the process of strategy development and implementation in business organizations and the factors determining it. Tench et al. (2017) study reveals that communication professionals perceive CEOs of business organizations as lacking an understanding of the role of communication, however, studies analyzing CEOs' attitudes towards the role of communication professionals in the process of strategy development and implementation are rarely found, and the reasons for this paradoxical situation remain unclear. The aim of this paper is therefore to investigate the attitudes of CEOs of business organizations towards the role of communication professionals in the development and implementation of business strategy and identify the determining factors.

Transforming the role of communication professionals: from technical to strategic

Research on the role of communication professionals has been a prominent subject of research over the past decades (Fieseler et al., 2015). As the range of tasks performed by communication professionals increases, the different roles of communication professionals are being investigated more frequently (Gregory & Willis, 2013). Broom & Smith (1979), pioneers in the study of the role of communication professionals, proposed a typology of four roles and defined them as follows: 1) mediator between the organization and its stakeholders; 2) expert in solving communication problems and proposing solutions; 3) facilitator of the problem-solving process; and 4) technician in charge of the production of the communication material. Subsequent studies have simplified the concept of four roles to two: technician and strategist (Brønn, 2014). This has been influenced by the distinction between managerial and technical competencies (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), which highlights the importance of communication as strategic management. Alongside the growing focus on professionalism, the role of communication and the nature of the work of communication professionals has changed (Volk et al., 2017). In particular, the role of the

top-level communication professional (manager) has been transformed. Communication managers are no longer solely responsible for maintaining media relations and ensuring public awareness and visibility of the CEOs of the organization but increasingly act as advisors to the top management of the organization (Falkheimer et al., 2018). This has led not only to the separation of the technical role of communication professionals but also to their transformation into a strategic one. The Communication Value Circle (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017) helps to identify and structure communication goals and align communication targets with the overarching corporate strategy. The framework is based on the organization's strategy, which should be the starting point for all decision-making in the organization. After structuring the theoretical concepts and analyzing the transformation of the role of the communication professional, a chronology of the stages of this evolution is presented (Annex 1).

The strategic role defines the function of a senior and top-level communication professional, which requires top-level capabilities: aligning communication objectives and activities with the organization's strategy, acting as an ambassador on behalf of the organization, managing the key communication processes to build the organization's long-term success, and advising the organization's leaders on strategy development and communication issues (Mykkänen & Vos, 2015). The separation has led to the emergence of a technical role, which falls to an entry-level communication professional with basic capabilities. His or her responsibilities include developing content, setting up communication platforms and channels, implementing communication activities, communicating with stakeholders of the organization, and developing communication skills (Falkheimer et al., 2018).

The framework of the roles of communication managers (Volk et al., 2017) depicts the variety of roles (Figure 1), showing that the communication manager has different roles. The framework distinguishes between strategic (ambassador, strategist, and advisor) and technical operational (communicator and coach) roles. The role of the manager includes the dispositional tasks related to the management of the communication unit.
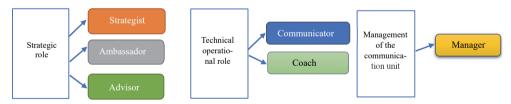

Figure 1: **The framework of the roles of communication managers.**

Source: based on Volk et al. (2017).

In the process of developing and implementing an organization's strategy, each role is assigned a function that requires the appropriate capabilities of communication professionals. Based on the above-mentioned framework, a structured definition of the functions of communication professionals by their role is presented, it highlights the functions and capabilities of communication professionals related to strategy development and implementation (Table 1).

Table 1. **Functions of communication professionals by their roles, and the functions and capabilities related to strategy development and implementation**

	The role of the communication professional (Volk et al., 2017)	Definition of functions by role	Functions related to strategy development and implementation	Capabilities required to perform the functions related to strategy development and implementation
Strategic role	Ambassador	Acting as an official ambassador for the organization, persuading stakeholders in favor of the organization they represent (Mykkänen & Vos, 2015).	Ambassadorship of the strategy to stakeholders.	Understanding the organization's strategy and decisions, being able to explain them, and convince stakeholders of their necessity (Zerfass et al., 2021).
	Strategist	Aligning organization and communication strategies (Volk et al., 2017).	Aligning strategies: integrating the organization's strategic objectives into communication objectives.	Awareness of the organization's strategy, with the ability to construct it into specific communication objectives (Volk et al., 2017).
	Advisor	Drawing the attention of the organization's management to potential risks, societal expectations, and concerns, advising on strategic decisions, and building relationships with stakeholders (Zerfass and Franke, 2013).	Strategic advisor: advising on strategic decisions; identifying risks; identifying societal expectations and critical issues; and maintaining stakeholder relations.	Ability to understand strategic decision-making processes and to speak the language of top management (Zerfass et al., 2021).
Technical operational role	Communicator	Is responsible for managing reputation, brand, and crisis, developing campaigns and content, managing stakeholder and media relations, conducting social responsibility activities (Gregory, 2000; Zerfass et al., 2021; Coombs, 2007; Schaefer et al., 2020), and is responsible for the use of platforms and channels to communicate strategic objectives internally and externally (Huebner et al., 2008).	Communication of the strategy: creation of content and use of platforms and channels to communicate it; stakeholder relations management.	The ability to create content, maintain relationships, and be creative (Gregory and Willis, 2013); lead productive social collaboration inside (and outside) the organization, and balance diverse interests (Guthey et al., 2006).
	Coach	Content development for speeches, presentations, social media posts, and communication training (Zerfass et al., 2021).	Developing the skills needed to communicate the strategy.	Coaching and feedback capabilities to support the development of employees' and managers' personal communication competencies (Falkheimer et al., 2018).
Managerial role	**Management of the communication unit**	Managing the communications unit, developing a technology-based infrastructure, and communicating with employees (Stoner et al., 1999; Van Riel &Fombrun, 2007; Terblanche, 2014; Zerfass et al., 2021).	Ensuring the infrastructure is in support of the organization's strategy.	Ability to optimize processes and structures, leadership skills, understanding of management tools, expertise in business models, rationality, and leadership capabilities (Macnarama, 2018).

Source: compiled by the author.

The data in Table 1 show that in the process of strategy development and implementation, communication professionals perform different roles and have to fulfill different requirements in terms of capabilities, depending on the strategic or technical operational role they play. The strategic role includes functions related to strategy ambassadorship, aligning and advising on strategic issues, identifying risks, identifying societal expectations and critical issues, and maintaining relationships with stakeholders. Meanwhile, the technical operational role includes communicating the strategy, managing stakeholder relations, and developing the skills to communicate the strategy. The analysis of the role-based functions of communication professionals and the capabilities required to perform them will be used in the study to investigate the attitudes of CEOs of business organizations towards the role of communication professionals in the development and implementation of the business strategy and the factors determining it.

Research design and methodology

This research aims to investigate if there are differences in the perceptions of the concept of strategic communication between academics and practitioners. The reasons and factors that lead to these differences are not well known, and there is a lack of studies analyzing this issue. Therefore, an exploratory research approach will be used to conduct this study. Exploratory research is characterized by the aim of gathering knowledge about a phenomenon that is not well known and, based on the results, generating a set of hypotheses for future research (Swedberg, 2020). Such research explores areas where there has been limited or no previous research (Brown, 2006) or "investigates an area about which the researcher has little or no knowledge" (Swaraj, 2019, p. 666). According to Yin (1994), exploratory research is a valuable tool to understand what is being experienced, to seek new insights, to ask questions, and to evaluate a phenomenon in a new light. Exploratory research, as stated by Mbaka et al. (2020), is used to gain a thorough understanding of the views of research participants. Such research is also used to study various c ommunication phenomena in the public sector (Beniušis, 2023).

Qualitative research involves inductive reasoning (Das, 2020), therefore an inductive research logic was chosen, characterized by "the formulation of generalizations based on the research data" (Blaikie, 2000, p. 12). This logic seeks to explore the attitudes of informants, and the factors determining them, and to establish universal generalizations. In the research, this was realized in several key steps (p. 103): all facts were recorded without being ranked according to their relative importance, the recorded facts were analyzed and compared without the use of hypotheses, and generalizations were derived from the analysis to establish the relationships between the recorded facts.

In-depth interviews were used to gather CEO views. Individual interviews are useful when seeking information from individuals who "would be difficult to convene for a group discussion (e.g., business executives), but from whom it is desirable to gather more in-depth, 'lively' information than would be obtained through a survey method" (Gaižauskaitė et al., 2016, p. 82). As the informants are CEOs of business organizations who, due to

their busy agendas, would be challenging to bring together for a discussion and the survey responses would be less comprehensive, the in-depth interviews provided information allowing the researcher to fully understand the informant's point of view (Berry, 1999).

Semistructured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate way to encourage CEOs to talk openly about the issues of interest to the research, to obtain more detailed, structured data, and to find out the individual CEOs' views on the role of communication professionals. To gather the views of CEOs, individual semistructured interviews are generally used (e.g., Svinndal, Jensen & Rise, 2020; Du Plessis & Van Niekerk, 2017). The interview questions for the informants were developed according to Kvale's (1996) guidelines for qualitative interviews. The questions to be asked included "What is the predominant role of communication professionals in the development and implementation of the business organization's strategy in the business organization that you manage?", "What are the most important activities carried out by communication professionals in the implementation of the business organization's strategy from your point of view as a CEO?", "Which capabilities of communication professionals are essential for the development and implementation of the business organization's strategy in your view as a CEO?", "Is the communication manager involved in the development of the business organisation's strategy in the organisation that you lead?", "What are the reasons for the necessity (and maybe not the necessity) of the involvement of the communication manager in the development of the business organization's business strategy?" etc.

10 CEOs of international business organizations operating in Lithuania were invited as informants. The key criterion for the informants was long-standing (more than 20 years) experience in managing business organizations.[1] In this way, the aim was to gain broader insights into the role of communication professionals.

The research was carried out between January and March 2022. Average interview time: 60 min. The study adhered to the fundamental ethical principles of research: to protect the confidentiality of the participants and to report the results of the study correctly. During the interview process, the informants were notified that their names and the names of their organizations would not be mentioned anywhere and that all data would be depersonalized. In the case of quotations from interviews, information that would allow the identification of a specific person has been removed. All informants were coded numerically, with each informant assigned a specific number from 1 to 10. Due to pandemic-related restrictions, the interviews were conducted remotely via the MS Teams platform with video cameras enabled. The informants were in their usual working environment – an office – on a normal working day. The video cameras were able to monitor both the cognitive and emotional aspects of the responses, which provided a better insight into the informant's attitude. All conversations with informants were recorded on a mobile phone recorder.

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[1] Although the decisive selection criterion was the informant's extensive management experience, additional criteria were applied to the selection of business organizations: the organizations are leaders in their segment (top 1–3 in terms of market share); the organizations have been awarded at least 2 times in the communication, most desirable employer or social responsibility awards; and the organizations have a high reputation index.

To analyze the data, the interviews with each informant were transcribed verbatim, as suggested by Hennink et al. (2011). Detailed interview transcripts ensure greater accuracy and provide more precise quotes (Alvesson, 2011). Clarke & Braun (2013) argue that by adopting a qualitative approach to research, it is appropriate to use thematic analysis as a flexible approach that is not constrained by a particular theory. Thus, the data were analyzed according to the principles of qualitative thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013): meaning units (words, combinations of words, concepts, their presence or intensity, i.e. statements revealing the informant's opinion on a given issue) were identified from the data, and then compared with the meaning units found in the literature, and the statements extracted from the whole group were compared to each other by adjusting the subjective meanings of the statements and by linking the statements that contained the same meaning. According to Tra (2019), a thematic approach enables the researcher to identify themes in the data collected during the interviews and to identify and contextualize collective meanings.

Analysis of the research results

The data analysis revealed that the strategic role of communication professionals is perceived differently in theory and practice. The differences are reflected in the way that, from the point of view of the CEOs of business organizations, the strategic role in practice involves advising the organization's management on strategic issues, identifying risks, managing crises, communicating the strategy, and managing relationships with stakeholders. In theory, these functions are defined as advisor (strategic) and communicator (technical operational) roles. As the data analysis shows (Table 2), in terms of meaning units, neither the role of communicator nor the role of advisor includes the functions of a strategist that are necessary for the strategic role – aligning business and communication strategies. Meanwhile, the role of the communicator in the strategy development and implementation process is defined by business CEOs as strategic.

The differences between the strategic role as defined in theory and as perceived in practice are also illustrated by the fact that the involvement of communication professionals in the process of developing a business organization's strategy is not driven by a managerial need to align the strategic business objectives with the communication objectives, as required by the theoretical concept of strategic communication, but by a technical function, namely the need to communicate the strategy successfully. From the point of view of the CEOs, the earlier the communication professional is involved in the process of developing the strategy and its objectives, the more immersed he/she will be in the strategy and the more successful (better, more persuasive, and more sincere) he/she will be in communicating the strategy: *"If a communicator is not involved in the formulation of the strategic objectives, but is only given a 'tray' of what to communicate, then to what extent will he/she be able to be more empathetic and to understand what to communicate? Will it be sincere? Probably not"* (informant 8); *"The earlier you involve the communication manager in the strategy process, the better the communication will be"* (informant 4).

Table 2. **Perceptions of the strategic communication professional's role from the point of view of CEOs of business organizations**

Role	Meaning units describing the characteristics of the role and the functions assigned to it	Quotes from CEOs of business organizations
1) Adviser within the organization	• Identifying risks; • Advising on strategic issues.	*1) „It is important to be able to advise and see risks"; 5) „A communications person often advises the company's CEO on various strategic issues, so trust is important in this respect"; 7) „It is essential that the communication manager understands <...> how the business model operates <...> and knows how to communicate it".*
2) Communicator within the organization	• Content creation; • Using communication platforms and channels to communicate strategic objectives within the organization.	*2) „It is essential to ensure that the vision and mission, especially internally, are properly communicated. If we want to implement the strategy, everyone needs to know clearly where we are going."*
3) The advisor with a view of the whole environment	• Identifying public expectations and critical issues; • Advising on strategic issues; • Maintaining relations with stakeholders.	*4) „<...> the communication manager sees potential external threats, makes suggestions on how to deal with them, provides scenarios on how customers might react in one way or another, and suggests solutions"; 6) „<...> we expect a holistic approach from the communication manager".*
4) Communicator to external stakeholders	• Content creation; • Using communication platforms and channels to communicate strategic objectives externally.	*1) „If you don't communicate your values, your goals, what you do, what you offer to your customers, what problems you solve to your partners, to your customers, the strategy is dead."*

Source: compiled by the author.

The differences between the theoretical concept of strategic communication and its practical application were also revealed by the requirements of business CEOs for the capabilities of communication professionals in the strategy development and implementation process. Having introduced CEOs to the strategic, organizational, and professional capabilities identified in the Global Capability Framework (Fawkes et al. 2018) and asked them to identify the capabilities they believe a top-level communication professional should have in the strategy development and implementation process, it was found that CEOs of business organizations do not generally perceive a need for strategic capabilities of communication professionals to align strategies (Table 3). The Global Capability Framework is the first and, to date, only globally applicable capability framework for

practitioners, employers, and academics in the field of public relations and communication management (Gregory et al., 2019).

Table 3. **Requirements of CEOs of business organizations for the capabilities of communication professionals in the development and implementation of business organization strategy**

Capability group for communication professionals by Global Capability Framework (2018)	Requirements of CEOs of business organizations for the capabilities of communication professionals	Quotes from CEOs of business organizations
Strategic capabilities		
Aligning organization and communication strategies	There is no need for the following requirements addressed by the CEO	*10) „Communication manager may be invited to strategy meetings to better understand the strategy and to communicate it in a more persuasive way <...> but not to align strategies.“*
Research to justify communication strategies and tactics	There is no need for the following requirements addressed by the CEO	*3, 5, 7, 9) „Not subject to such requirements.“*
Organizational capabilities		
Facilitate relationships and build trust with internal and external stakeholders	Stakeholder Relationship Management	*1) „Knowing the customer and the market better than other players in the market gives you a unique opportunity to differentiate from the competitors.“*
Build and strengthen the reputation of the organization	Building and enhancing reputation	*10) „Reputation Guardian.“*
Provide contextual intelligence („take a big picture“) from social, cultural, political, and economic perspectives, to anticipate strategic opportunities and threats as well as directions	Contextual intelligence	*9) „<...> be creative, don‘t close oneself off to innovation, don‘t just stay in one‘s bubble, but see the bigger picture what are the trends of competitors, what are the trends of consumers, what are the trends of technology“; 2) „<...> see the organization holistically, not only in this or that aspect but holistically, to understand the organization‘s strategy and to communicate it qualitatively“.*

Professional capabilities		
Provide valuable content and be a trusted advisor	Crisis management, identification of potential threats and crises	8) „A strategic framework on how to avoid crises and win in the competition would be preferable";3) „The focus should be on content and less on form".
Offer organizational leadership	Organizational leadership	5) *A leader must not only manage the unit well but also see his or her role in a wider context."*
Ethically represent the organization, taking into account professional and public expectations	Compliance with ethical principles	6) *„<...> comply with the Code of Conduct, you must not communicate what is incorrect or behave unethically."*
Developing oneself and others, including lifelong professional learning	Continuous professional development	7) *„A communication manager must not stand still, but continuously strive to improve, not only in the field of communication but also in a broader context."*

Source: compiled by the author.

The data (Table 3) show that strategic capabilities, identified in theory as the ability to align business and communication strategies, are not perceived in practice by CEOs of business organizations as important for communication professionals in the process of strategy development and implementation.

The analysis of the data suggests that the concept of strategic communication defined in the academic literature, which identifies the alignment of communication and business strategies as a key factor for communication to create value for the organization (Argenti, 2016) does not coincide with the prevailing view of strategic communication in practice. The fact that all the informants in the research do not see a need for strategic capabilities of communication professionals and perceive the strategic role as more of a technical operational function of communicating the strategy shows that the gap between the theoretical concept of strategic communication and its practical application appears to be systemic.

Summary of the research and discussion

The results of the research revealed that although the role of top-level communication professionals is identified as strategic by CEOs of business organizations, which is in line with theoretical frameworks (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Cornelissen, 2011), CEOs tend to ignore the core purpose of strategic communication, which is the alignment of business and communication strategies. The essential capabilities of communication professionals, from the point of view of CEOs of business organizations, in the development and implementation of the business organization's strategy are organizational and profes-

sional capabilities such as creativity, the ability to create content and to select the most appropriate communication tools. Meanwhile, the need for strategic capabilities to align business and communication strategies is not being listed by CEOs at scale. The traditional view of CEOs of business organizations of the role of communication professionals as organizers of technical tasks, thus reinforcing the perception that communication activities are only 'servicing' other activities of the organization and do not directly influence the implementation of the business organization's strategy, echoes the trend of research in the European communication field (Falkheimer & Heide, 2018). However, the results of the research revealed a paradox that has not been explored so far – while CEOs of business organizations do not see top-level communication professionals as technical staff, but rather as having a strategic advisory role, their need for the capabilities of communication professionals in the strategy development process is more of a technical operational rather than a strategic nature. As the analysis of the research data shows, the involvement of communication professionals in the business strategy development process is driven by the need for the technical function to successfully communicate the strategy, but not by the alignment of the strategic business objectives with the communication objectives. These results reinforce the assumption that there is a gap between the theoretical concept of strategic communication and the perception of the role of strategic communication professionals from the point of view of CEOs of business organizations.

Taking a holistic view of the factors determining the gap, it is conceivable that one of the reasons for the gap may be that strategic communication is still a relatively young communication science discipline. Hallahan et al. (2007) introduced the concept of strategic communication in 2007 as the purposeful use of communication within an organization to fulfill its mission. As Nothhaft et al. (2018) argue, the mere existence of terms is not enough for a theoretical concept to take hold in practice. Therefore, the definition of strategic communication in theory, which emphasizes the alignment of business and communication objectives, may have lacked time to take hold in practice. As regards the factors underlying the gap, reference should be made to the existing ambiguity in the status of strategic communication. While theory identifies the need for alignment of business and communication strategies as an essential managerial factor for the success of an organization (Argenti, 2016), CEOs identify strategic communication as a more technical operational function, i.e. the successful communication of strategy. The lack of a clear status for strategic communication (managerial vs. technical) makes it challenging to establish itself as a managerial function in business organizations. Moreover, as the analysis of the roles of the communication manager has shown, the top-level communication professional performs several functions in the implementation of the strategy, both in a strategic and a technical role, often intertwined. This has implications for the traditional view among CEOs towards the top-level communication professional as an organizer of technical operational tasks rather than a strategist.

Study limitations. The gap between the theoretical concept of strategic communication and its practical application, however, should not only be assessed from the perspective of the CEOs of business organizations but also by analyzing the attitude of communication

professionals towards their role in the development and implementation of the strategy of a business organization. Research shows that communication practitioners themselves are 'stuck' in the old communication paradigm (Cowan, 2014) and are dominated by a traditional approach that emphasizes media relations, content production, and dissemination, which results in communication not being an integral part of the organization's strategic activities (Falkheimer et al., 2018). Therefore, in further research, it is appropriate to look at this situation not only from the point of view of CEOs of business organizations but also from the perspective of communication professionals. A comprehensive holistic view, including both CEOs' and communication practitioners' perspectives on the purpose and benefits of strategic communication, would enable both sides to agree on the equal treatment of strategic communication and would lay a solid foundation in the field, both at the theoretical and practical levels. Since the research participants in this paper are top-level executives of leading international business organizations with long-standing management experience, the Lithuanian context should not be considered a limiting factor in generalizing the findings.

Conclusions

The variety of roles and functions of the communication professional in the development and implementation of an organization's strategy reveals the importance of strategic communication in the context of business strategy, and the role of communication professionals is considered to be strategic in the perception of CEOs of business organizations. However, the findings show the paradox arising from the disparity between theory and practice. Although CEOs perceive top-level communication professionals as strategic advisors rather than technical staff, their requirement for communication professionals' expertise in the strategy development process is primarily technical and operational, rather than strategic. This is not in line with the theoretical concept of strategic communication, which emphasizes the need to align business and communication strategies to achieve the organization's goals. As the study shows, the involvement of communication professionals in the development and implementation of a business strategy is driven by the need for a technical operational function to smoothly communicate the strategy, but not by their role as strategists in aligning the strategic objectives and the communication objectives. Based on the results of the research, the dominant role in business organizations is that of a communicator, which is defined as a technical and operational role according to the framework of the communication roles. The requirements are technical and operational in terms of the ability to create content and select appropriate communication platforms and channels for communication within the organization and with the media and other external stakeholders. Strategic capabilities are generally not identified by CEOs as essential for communication professionals. The traditional attitude of CEOs towards the role of communication professionals as organizers of technical tasks, the ambiguity about the status of strategic communication, the intertwining of strategic and technical roles, and the "stuckness" of communication professionals themselves in the traditional communication

paradigm, characterized by the functions inherent in the technical role, is not conducive to the consolidation of the theoretical provisions of strategic communication in practice. These factors determine that in theory the strategic role of communication is perceived by CEOs as "servicing" other activities of the organization and not influencing directly the implementation of the business organisation's strategy.

Competitive advantage, defined as the ability of a business organization to stay ahead of its competitors and to outperform its competitors in terms of operational and financial performance, is the goal of every business organization. This supports the core mission of every business organization to work effectively in creating value. Communication contributes to this mission, however, in practice the traditional approach dominates and the process of strategy development and implementation does not follow the guidelines for aligning business and communication strategies, requiring communication objectives, aligned with strategic business objectives, to be integrated into specific communication activities through the definition of measurement indicators for these activities, and it is difficult to justify the economic impact of communication on the business organization. As a result, the value that communication creates within the implementation of business strategy is more implicit than objectively measurable. This leads to strategic communication in business organizations being perceived as less important to the success of the business organization than activities carried out by other departments, and communication professionals not being seen as strategically critical in the development of business strategy and its objectives, and therefore rarely becoming part of the business organization's governing body – the board.

Given the importance of communication for the successful implementation of business strategy, there is a demand to change the traditional view towards communication by giving it a strategic managerial status not only in theory but also in practice. It is also crucial for business organizations to adjust their strategy development and implementation processes by including communication in the development of strategic objectives not only to improve the communication practitioner's understanding of the strategy and its communication to stakeholders but also to ensure that communication activities support the organization's objectives and that the effectiveness of those activities can be measured. It is anticipated that the ability of communication professionals to justify the strategic value they create will have an impact not only on the recognition of communication professionals as strategists but also on the prestige of the communication profession as a whole. Meanwhile, as Barends (2020) argues, the failure to recognize communication at the strategic level and to have a direct impact at the top level can damage an organization's image, reputation, and ultimately its effectiveness.

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Annex 1.
Stages in the evolution of the role of the communication professional

Stages in the evolution of the role of the communication professional	Authors
A typology of the four roles of the communication professional: (1) mediator; (2) expert; (3) problem-solving facilitator and (4) technician	Broom & Smith, 1979;
The managerial-technical competence dichotomy	Grunig & Hunt, 1984;
The distinction between the role of the communication manager: strategic (ambassador, strategist and advisor) and technical (communicator and coach)	Volk et al., 2017;
The communication value circle: the purpose of the strategic role is to align the communication targets with the corporate strategy.	Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017.

Source: compiled by the author.