

HOSTED BY:

Strategic

INNOVATION SPRINT LONDON

EXECUTIVE INSIGHTS REPORT
LONDON, 17 SEPTEMBER 2026

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Introduction

When we began developing the first Strategic Innovation Sprint, we started with a simple premise: the communication profession does not need more opportunities to identify its challenges. **We need more opportunities to work together to address them.**

We also believed that much of the expertise our profession needs already exists within it. Our role was to create the space and structure to bring that expertise together.

Innovation Sprint London brought communication leaders, business leaders and specialists from different organisations, sectors and disciplines together to focus on three issues: demonstrating communication value and business impact; strengthening organisational trust and addressing the say-do gap; and leading the implementation of AI with confidence and consistency.

Rather than presentations or traditional panel discussions, participants were asked to collaborate. Through our Discover – Design – Deliver approach, they explored the challenges, questioned assumptions and collaborated on practical recommendations.

This report captures the thinking that emerged from that process. It is not intended to present the final word on these challenges, but to share the collective insights and recommendations of those who took part. We hope they will prompt further discussion, be tested and developed within organisations, and contribute to advancing communication leadership.

My thanks to every participant; our facilitators and Executive Mentors; our Industry Leadership Partners; James McCann and Everhaze, our AI Innovation Partner; Louise Thompson for bringing the Sprint methodology to life; and Mike Klein for leading the development of this report.

The first Innovation Sprint demonstrated what can happen when we move beyond talking about the challenges facing our profession and create the space to start working on them.

Now the opportunity is to take that thinking forward.



Orla Clancy

Founder and Managing Director
Strategic

Foreword

Nobody in the room on 17 September had all the answers, and that was the point.

Our Strategic Innovation Sprint London tested a theory I've argued for a while: our profession spends more time talking about its problems than solving them.

So for our Innovation Sprint, we went with an approach that reflects our unique approach to events – no panels, no keynotes, just four tables working through three real challenges from Discover through Design to Deliver.

What came out surprised me.

Two tables working on the same brief on communication value reached almost the same diagnosis from opposite directions: it's a language problem, not a measurement problem.

The group focused on corporate trust decided boards own their say-do gaps, not their communication functions.

And the AI table disclosed its own AI use before proposing a disclosure standard for everyone else – about as good a definition of walking the talk as I've seen from this profession in a while.

This report captures what each table built, so none of it stays in the room.



Mike Klein
Editor-in-Chief
Strategic Magazine

Executive Summary

The Strategic Innovation Sprint London, held on 17 September 2026 at The Trampery in London, brought together practitioners, facilitators and mentors to work on three of the core challenges facing our profession in real time: demonstrating communication value, closing the say-do gap and building organisational trust, and leading AI implementation.

Structured around the Discover, Design and Deliver methodology rather than panels or keynotes, the day produced concrete, table-tested recommendations.

On the question of how best to prove the value of communication activity, two tables reached a shared conclusion from different directions: the real barrier is language and confidence, not measurement. Their headline recommendation was to retire 'measurement' and 'reporting' in favour of answering 'so what?'

On corporate trust, the table concluded that trust is an outcome built from listening, and that ultimate ownership of the say-do gap sits with the board, not communications alone.

On AI, the table modelled the standard it proposed: full disclosure of its own AI use, backed by five recommendations on literacy, disclosure, preparing for and learning from failure, and an industry code of conduct.

One theme recurred throughout: the gap between what an organisation believes it delivers and what others perceive is the real, common work.

The Innovation Sprint Approach (Discover – Design – Deliver)

The Strategic Innovation Sprint London – the first event of its kind for Strategic – was built entirely around solving problems rather than simply discussing them.



The day moved through three phases: Discover, exploring the root causes behind each challenge; Design, generating and testing practical solutions; and Deliver, refining ideas into concrete recommendations for the closing Solutions Showcase.

Four multidisciplinary tables, assigned in advance by group and table number, tackled three challenge areas: two on communication value in parallel, one on organisational trust and the say-do gap, and one on leading AI implementation.

Each table paired a facilitator with an executive mentor.

Louise Thompson served as overall facilitator; Mike Klein moved between tables as host and Insights lead. James McCann, CEO of Everhaze, the day's AI Innovation Partner, served as a mentor for the AI table.

Insights and Recommendations

Each table moved through Discover, Design and Deliver before presenting to the full room at the closing Solutions Showcase. Their findings and recommendations are captured below by challenge.

Tables 1 & 2: Demonstrating Communication Value & Business Impact

Two tables tackled the same challenge in parallel, arriving at complementary answers.

TABLE 1

Anthony Monks (Director, ITPR), Rochelle Oakley (Internal Communications Manager, Beazley), Claire Newell (Director of Communications, Civil Enforcement Association) and Ana-Maria Melnicky Calin (Group Communication & Culture Manager, FEG), facilitated by Jon Gerlis (CIPR) with mentor Richard Bagnall (CommsClarity Consulting) – split the problem into a practitioner side and an organisational side.

On the practitioner side, they diagnosed a lack of confidence rooted in many practitioners' unfamiliarity with how their businesses work. They proposed a 'CAP' model (Curious, Accountable, Proactive) built into a first-100-days checklist: sit with finance, map stakeholders and learn the business before trying to explain value in its terms.

On the organisational side, they argued that practitioners must generate demand for their own value, proposing a gamified 'CEO Nightmares' tool – a wheel of senior-executive risks showing where communication can help. Drawing on data from industry bodies that track CEO sentiment, it would point beyond obvious wins such as media relations towards engaging harder-to-reach audiences, such as deskless workers.

TABLE 2

Michael Curran (Group Media & Insights Officer, HSBC), Iman El Ghazouani (Manager, Insights & Measurement, Corporate Affairs, PMI), Elif Guvencer (VP Advisory, The RepTrak Company) and Katharina Auer (VP/Head of Global Internal-HSE-SD-SCM Communications & Communication Business Solutions, Hitachi Energy), facilitated by Laura Wall (PRII) with mentor Orla Graham (CARMA) – opened with the ‘sour reality’: a crisis prevented is invisible, and the profession has drifted towards proving itself through outputs such as media coverage rather than outcomes.

They named four barriers – a board-literacy skills gap, limited relationship capital, weak attribution infrastructure and discomfort with self-promotion – and proposed a circular value framework: identify the business need; test it with a ‘so what?’ question and a five-whys exercise; define success; map audiences; test; implement; and report in language tailored to each stakeholder. Their headline recommendation: retire ‘measurement’ and ‘reporting’ as loaded terms, and build planned, reported failure into communications objectives. Done well, this pays off at four levels – a common language for the profession, a shift from activity to outcomes, a higher professional standard and better-informed business decisions.

Table 3: Organisational Trust & the Say-Do Gap

Dennis Larsen (EACD / Linq Advisors), Alana Foster (Head of Communications, Travelex), Robin Clegg (Head of Media and Communications, The Ocean Cleanup), Jennifer Sanchis (Insights & Consulting Director, West, CARMA) and Andrew Commons (Head of External Communications, First Bus) worked with facilitator Jonathan Phillips (Lithos Partners) and mentor Pdraig McKeon (McKeonIreland).

The group treated trust not as a single trait but as an outcome built from competence, predictability, authenticity, voice and honesty. Full transparency, they agreed, is often impossible for legal, regulatory or safety reasons – but organisations owe people honesty about how far they can go and why. Their conclusion: a trustworthy organisation ‘dares to listen’.

Barriers raised included fragmented reach (one participant's organisation has three-quarters of its workforce without email or a company device), the prevalent assumption that a CEO or MD should personally own every trust relationship even when they are the wrong messenger, and uneven access to the data needed to speak credibly to technical audiences.

Recommendations, in order: name the say-do gap explicitly and treat it as a reputational risk; build a listening-led audit blending qualitative and quantitative measures; enable communication wherever it is needed rather than centrally; and extend the skill set on both sides, so leaders understand and use the comms function as well as direct it.

The group combined two frameworks: a journalism-style who-what-where-why-when-how diagnostic – drawn from the fact that four of the table's own members had started as journalists – layered onto a circular loop of listening, analysing and routing stakeholders into urgent trust-repair or business-as-usual actions.

On ownership, they concluded that the board should hold it, reasoning from a 'concentric circles' view of trust radiating outwards from leadership through staff, customers and investors.

In discussion, participants offered proxy metrics – employee-survey pride scores, referral volumes and exit-interview willingness to return (one cited close to 3,000 referrals, with 69 per cent saying they would come back) – and argued for practitioners to act as a 'conscious voice', deliberately seeking out the roughly 60 to 70 per cent of an audience not yet convinced rather than repeatedly polling the already engaged.

Table 4: Leading AI Implementation

Alison Meston (Director of Communications, FCA Global), Naomi Smith (Manager, Social Media & Web, Rolls-Royce), Robert Gage (Head of Comms and Engagement, High Value Manufacturing Catapult), Yaakov Chailiotis (Founder and Managing Director, Group of Verified Intelligence), Kate Hunter (Client Partner, Ogilvy UK) and Andrei Philip Iacob (Account Director, Red Lorry Yellow Lorry) worked with facilitator Renna Markson (Markson Partners) and floating mentor James McCann (Everhaze).

The group opened by disclosing that they had used an AI transcription tool for their own notes – a live example of the standard they were about to propose. They landed on five recommendations: three that organisations can act on immediately, and two needing an industry response.

Immediate: an AI literacy pathway with a standardised literacy test giving practitioners a shared baseline; a tiered AI-disclosure standard distinguishing AI-assisted from AI-generated work, letting clients tell the difference between low-effort 'AI slop' and work someone stood behind; and an AI failure-preparedness kit – a comms-owned risk matrix and crisis playbook, tested through scheduled 'fire drill' scenarios and proposed as a billable agency service, built to answer C-suite leaders who believe they no longer need a comms function because AI can write for them directly.



Industry-level: a shared AI code of conduct, co-owned by practitioners and revisited every six to twelve months, paired with a public ‘state of AI’ register; and a visible AI-use label for published content, so audiences can see how a piece of work was produced. The group flagged this as necessary given what a bad actor could do with AI at scale, citing Bell Pottinger as a byword for reckless client work.

Underneath the recommendations sat a worry about the profession's talent pipeline: that AI will be used to justify cutting entry-level roles. The group argued for protecting apprenticeship-style entry points, illustrated by one member's own background in science communication – nobody at her research institution ever asked a physicist to do ten minutes of communications work in her place, and the same respect for expertise should run both ways.

Their advice to junior colleagues: use AI first on something you already know well enough to judge, build your own AI customisation that carries over to your next employer, and be deliberately ‘demanding’ of managers for meetings and mentorship.

Two challenges went unresolved: how to approach ‘GEO’, the AI-search-era equivalent of SEO, and the larger question of what AI means for communicators as stewards of knowledge and public discourse.

Participant Perspectives

Feedback from participants and partners captures what the day felt like from inside the room.

“Partnering with Strategic on the Innovation Sprint was a fantastic experience. The quality of the people in the room, the calibre of the talent and the openness of the conversations made it an incredibly valuable day. It was insightful, energetic and genuinely thought-provoking, with a real focus on how innovation is reshaping our industry in practical terms. For us at Everhaze, it was a great opportunity to engage with forward-thinking leaders, share ideas and be part of a room that was clearly focused on where the industry goes next.”

James McCann

CEO | Everhaze

“The Innovation Sprint London was an energising, productive and fun session, allowing us time to really deep-dive into challenges and work out potential solutions. Rather than staying at the surface level, the structured approach helped us focus on a specific challenge, unpack underlying root causes, and challenge assumptions. Bringing together different communication, business and AI subject matter experts, it created a uniquely collaborative environment where ideas were tested, refined, and translated into practical solutions. It was fast paced and lively, and offered participants actionable frameworks and fresh thinking that can be applied immediately within their own organisations.”

Katharina Auer

Head of Internal, HSE, Suppliers & Partners Communications | Hitachi Energy

“I thoroughly enjoyed the Strategic Innovation Sprint. It's rare to get the opportunity to take time away from a busy workload to spend a day with peers digging into the complexities of some of the most important challenges we face as communications professionals. The Sprint was very well-constructed and facilitated, giving us plenty of time for detailed discussions on root causes as well as potential ways forward for the profession, while also allowing time for networking outside of our assigned groups. I'm looking forward to reading the Insights report and keeping in touch with my fellow Sprint-ers!”

Claire Newell

Director of Communications | Civil Enforcement Association Limited Incorporated

Conclusion

Despite tackling different problems, all four tables converged on the same underlying idea: the gap between what an organisation or profession believes it delivers and what others actually perceive – a value gap, a trust gap or an AI-disclosure gap – is the real work.

Every table treated listening as an active, continuous discipline, and every table treated AI as both an accelerant and a risk requiring human judgement. A second thread ran underneath all four discussions: practitioners kept locating the fix not in a new channel or tool, but in a shared vocabulary and framework – a checklist, a model, a standard, a loop – that turns an abstract problem into something a team can act on together.



This report was compiled by Mike Klein from the day's Solutions Showcase materials, recommendations and table discussions.

Participants and partners are welcome to contribute further material via editor@strategic.global.

HOSTED BY:

Strategic

INNOVATION SPRINT LONDON

LONDON, 17 SEPTEMBER 2026

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

