



**THE POLICY INSIDER'S REPORT:
POLICYMAKING DURING A PANDEMIC**

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HOW ARE POLICY PROFESSIONALS FARING IN THE ERA OF CORONAVIRUS?

In May, we interviewed more than 700 policy professionals seeking to uncover the experiences and challenges of experts responsible for influencing policy amid a global pandemic and economic recession. Our goal was to better understand how Covid-19 has shifted the policy profession in the near- and long-term.

Our research cut across corporations, associations, government, non-profits, and professional services firms to gather thoughts from hundreds of government affairs, communications, public relations, regulatory, and legal professionals and compared those results with our [2019 Policy Insider's Report](#). Our results overwhelmingly show that the forces of a global pandemic, coupled with an economic recession, massive federal stimulus, and disparate state and local responses has exacerbated the environment of uncertainty that plagued policy professionals in recent years and has accelerated fundamental challenges such as information overload.

“This crisis requires an even more intense monitoring of source materials, expanded contacts, and timely updates.”

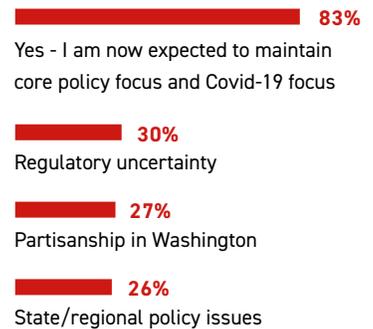
- SURVEY RESPONDENT

“Honestly, its just working longer hours to use old resources as much as possible while incorporating new resoures like social media. The information overflow just requires working longer to try and intake it all. And that’s a result of a failed federal response and the myriad million other sources taking up the slack.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

FIGURE 1: HAVE POLICY PROFESSIONALS SHIFTED FOCUS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19?

% of policy professionals whose policy priorities shifted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic



INTRODUCTION

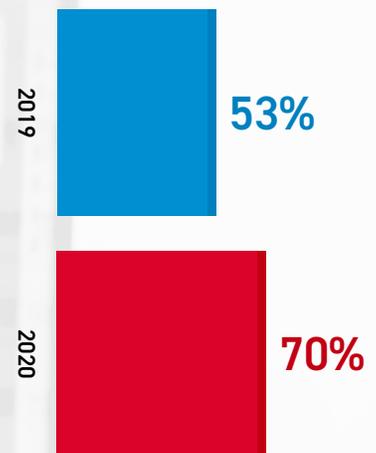
A remote work environment, economic challenges, and increasingly disparate policy responses accelerate the primary trends and challenges noted in last year's [Policy Insider's Report](#). Namely, larger policy portfolios lead professionals to feel overloaded with information and create difficulties coordinating with other functions in their organizations.

Before the outbreak of Covid-19, policy professionals already had difficulty managing large policy portfolios amidst heightened corporate interest. Now, they must track the massive policy response to Covid-19 while also maintaining their existing policy portfolio. Plans and priorities across federal and state legislation have drastically shifted, thus making traditional policy endeavors more challenging to influence as coronavirus responses overshadow existing policies and legislation. **In 2019, 53% of policy professionals told us that information overload was their top challenge. This year that number has skyrocketed to 70% (Figure 2).**

Furthermore, we found that the key skills necessary to succeed as a policy professional are even more important in this environment. Remote work changes how professionals communicate, both internally and externally. Last year, respondents noted that how they spend their time has shifted from external stakeholder meetings to internal stakeholder meetings. The pandemic accelerates this trend, as policy professionals can no longer rely on face-to-face meetings with their internal stakeholders. Additionally, we noticed a rise in the prevalence and importance of digital tools for policy professionals in 2019, and this new work environment has further underlined the growing significance of digital tools in policy work.

This report contains the findings from our research, which we hope you will use to better understand the challenges facing policy professionals today, to benchmark your resource allocation and time management, and to identify new best practices.

FIGURE 2: INFORMATION OVERLOAD IS THE TOP CHALLENGE
The % of policy professionals surveyed who select "information overload" as their top functional challenge



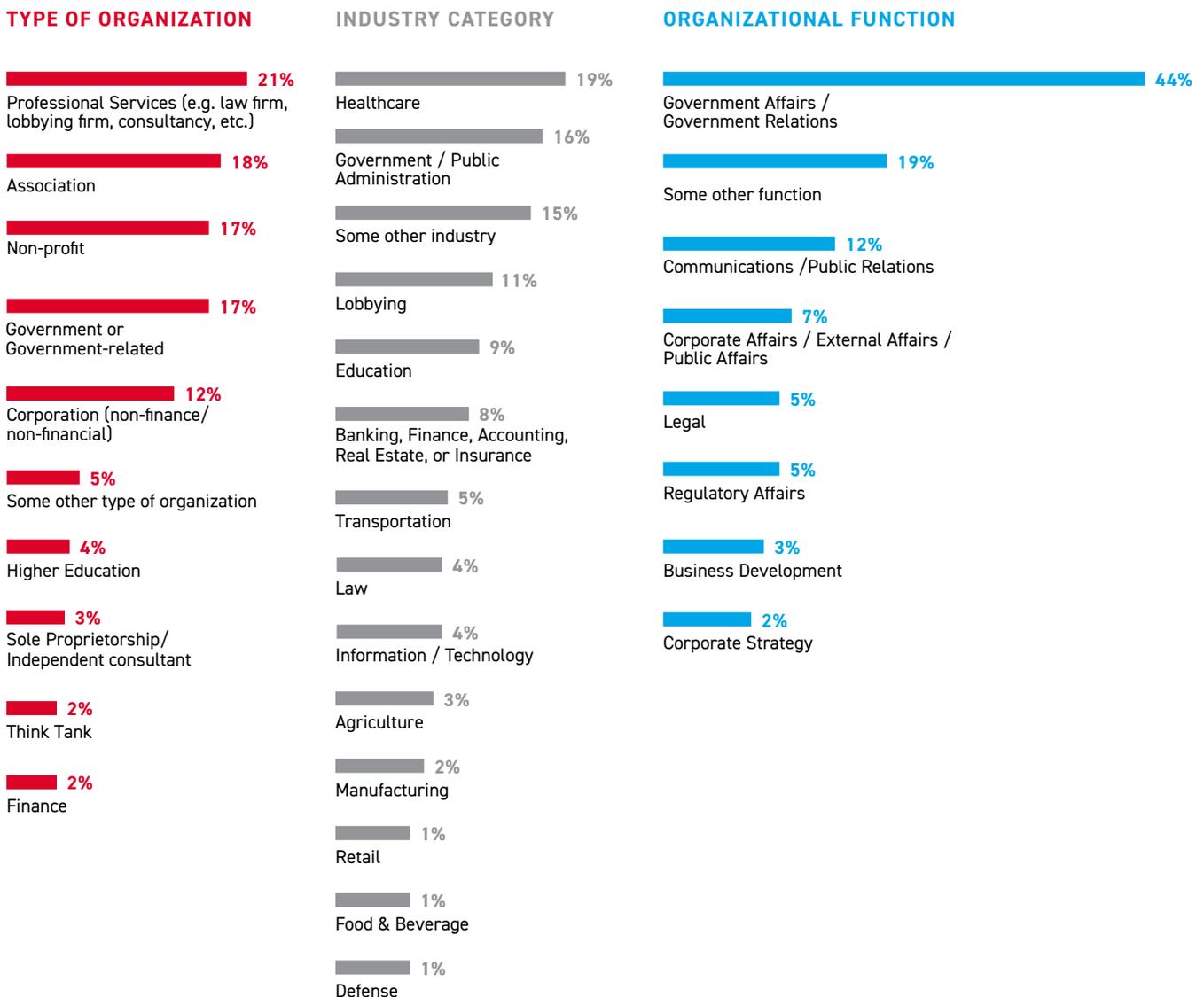
WHO WE SURVEYED

The data in this report is from 767 survey responses from policy professionals in a range of roles. POLITICO Pro directly invited all 767 respondents to participate in the survey.

How have these demographics changed year-over-year?

The breakdown of respondents by organization type and industry remains steady between the [2019 Policy Insider's Report](#) and this year's survey. The primary difference is a minor decrease in corporate and professional services respondents countered by an increase in respondents working in government.

FIGURE 3: SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



ACCELERATING EXISTING TRENDS

An evolution for policy professions was underway before the Covid-19 economic and public health crisis began. Our 2019 survey identified heightened corporate interest in politics and policy, new internal stakeholder demands on time, the rise of social media, and of course, difficulty managing large policy portfolios. Our findings this year show that the pandemic accelerates these trends.

Currently, stakeholders expect policy professionals to keep pace with more issues than ever before. Expanding policy portfolios reflect a growing focus from corporate management and investors, the fragmentation of policymaking across states, and increased focus on corporate social activism. For policy professionals, larger portfolios require ingesting and understanding a greater volume of news, analysis, and data from numerous sources.

Given a fast-paced news cycle, the rise of social media, and an expanding number of information sources – more than half of policy professionals cited managing information overload as their top challenge in 2019. And that number grew in 2020, with more than 70% of policy professionals citing information overload as their top challenge (Figure 4). A number of pandemic-related concerns fuel this shift, including staffing reductions, increasing individual workload, greater frequency of communication with colleagues across channels, increased executive engagement, and longer work hours which blur work-life balance.

“There is no workflow or process anymore. It’s all hands on deck, drinking from a firehose 24/7.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

“Due to 90-day furloughs, I now am doing the job of 2.5 FTE and not just a 1.0 FTE.”

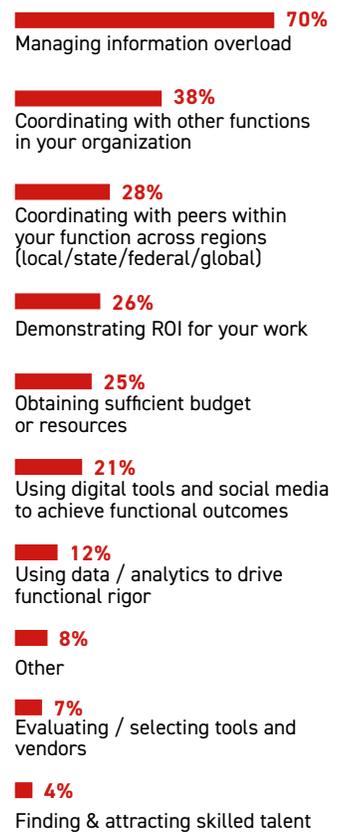
- SURVEY RESPONDENT

“Daily executive calls mean that I’m constantly looking for up-to-the-minute reports on what’s happening in DC and certain state capitols. It makes it difficult to manage non-COVID, traditional type of work.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

FIGURE 4: MANAGING INFORMATION OVERLOAD CONTINUES TO BE POLICY PROFESSIONALS' #1 CHALLENGE

% of policy professionals who rate each functional challenge as among their top-3 this year



Another major shift we uncovered last year relates to demands on policy professionals' time. Many policy professionals noted a decreased focus on communication with external stakeholders in place of increasing demands from internal stakeholders. From keeping executives abreast of a rapidly changing policy environment to addressing employee concerns about new social policies, many policy professionals spend the majority of their time on internal communication.

As a result, many survey respondents cited coordinating with other internal functions and coordinating with peers in other regions as major challenges last year. These challenges are even more prevalent this year with both responses seeing significant increases. The percentage of professionals citing each as a top challenge increased from 29% to 38% for coordinating with other functions and 19% to 28% for coordinating across regions. One reason for this shift is likely the new remote work environment. Whereas a policy professional struggled to coordinate with other functions while working in the same location, the switch to remote work only exacerbates this problem.

“More time spent on internal communication including analysis of policy impact.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

“Just the impact on internal communications with the association team is a challenge - much more emphasis on over-communication and outreach!”

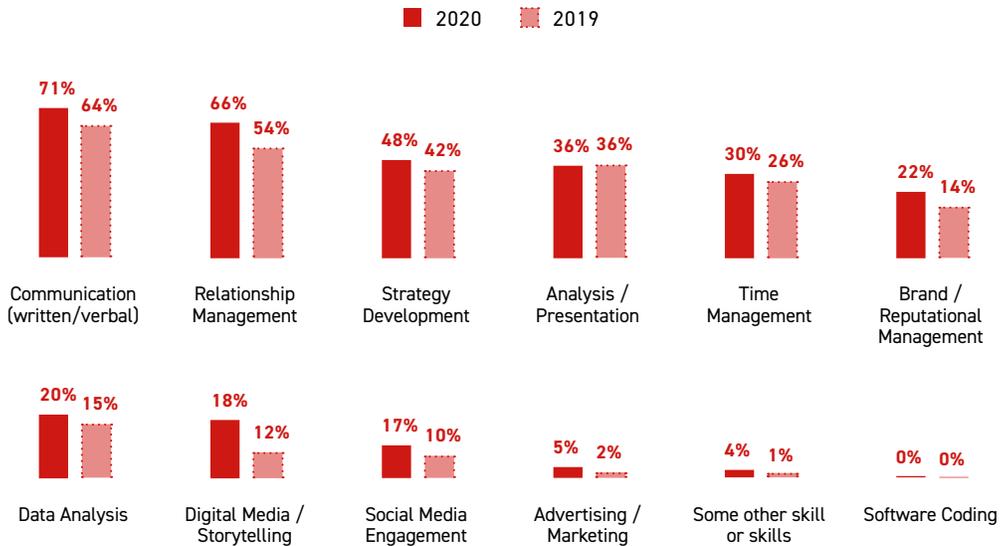
- SURVEY RESPONDENT

“There are too many emails and calls. Because we can't collaborate in person, I feel that there is an overcompensation to connect virtually which keeps people from doing work. We just talk about the work and can't get to it since we are also juggling a multitude of other responsibilities as well as anxiety and uncertainty of being in a pandemic.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

Working in the coronavirus era forces policy professionals to focus on the job's core skill sets. In 2019, policy professionals told us that written/verbal communication, relationship management, and strategy development were the three most important skill sets necessary for success. In 2020, these skills remain the top three for policy professionals, and they have increased in importance. The percent of policy professionals citing relationship management as the most important skill rose from 54% to 66%, and those citing communication skills rose from 64% to 71% (Figure 5).

FIGURE 5: RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION ARE THE KEYS TO SUCCESS AS A POLICY PROFESSIONAL. % of policy professionals who rate each of these skill sets as among the top-3 most important to their role



The increase in the importance of these skills is likely a function of transitioning to a remote work environment. The inability to rely on face-to-face meetings has forced policy professionals to flex their strongest relationship management muscles and to perfect their digital communication skills. The loss of ad-hoc hallway conversations with colleagues has led to an over-reliance on meetings. In short, policy professionals must become even more innovative and creative with their stakeholder management. Many have seen success transitioning to informational webcasts, virtual happy hours, virtual lobby days, and digital grassroots advocacy.

“There are more meetings than ever before now that we are not able to connect over a 5 minute conversation in the office.”
 - SURVEY RESPONDENT

“With face-to-face meetings gone, the ability to function effectively in the digital space is even more important.”
 - SURVEY RESPONDENT

“I rely on the relationships I built prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to get things done. Reputation and professionalism move things forward faster.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

“Coordination of work across departments is more challenging as everyone is overbooked with Zoom meetings on separate paths. It is more time-consuming to be informed and connected with co-workers and legislative staff. Past relationships are key to one’s ability to stay connected. Technology skills and familiarity are a plus.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

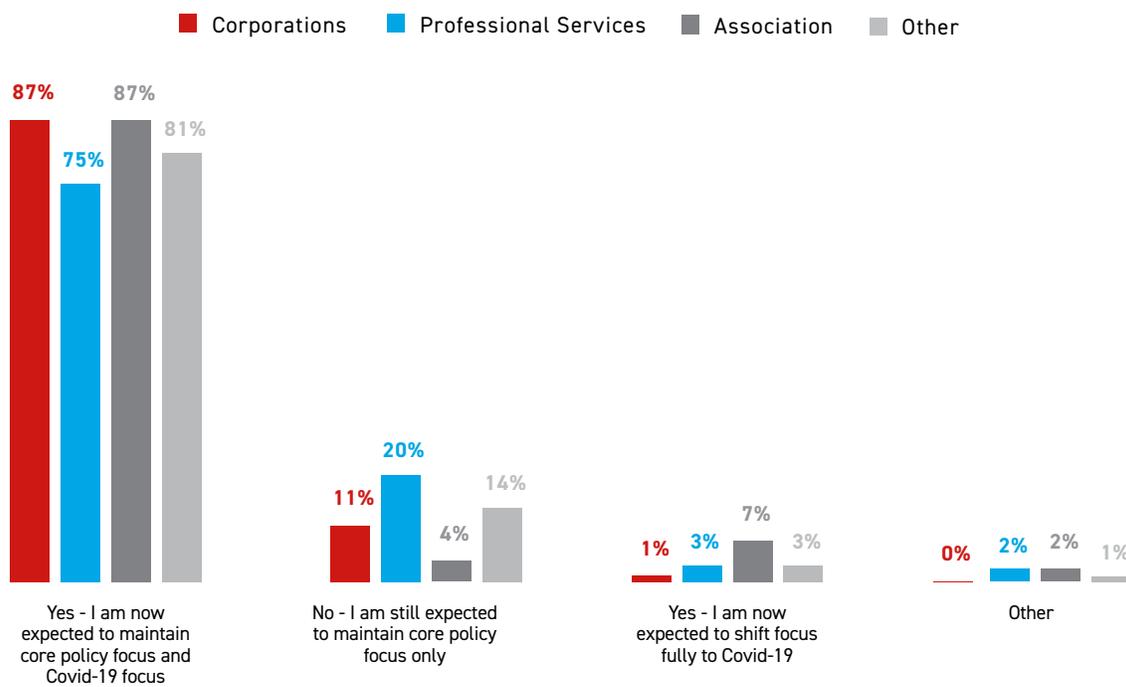
While Covid-19 has accelerated existing trends for policy professionals, the pandemic also creates entirely new job responsibilities. First and foremost, the lines between work and life are blurred, resulting in longer work hours and exhaustion. Given staffing constraints and increased executive interest in politics and policy, many respondents cite having to work longer hours to manage their workload.

Making this challenge exponentially more difficult is childcare. One of the top challenges cited by policy professionals in this survey is the difficulty in managing an increased workload and childcare in a home-schooling environment. This challenge further blurs the lines of work-life balance as many cite having to work into the late hours given their focus on childcare during the workday. Additionally, many policy professionals cite managing their teams as increasingly difficult given the remote work environment. On the other hand, respondents have noted that micromanagement from leaders has increased with more frequent check-ins and less autonomy.

MANAGING INFORMATION OVERLOAD

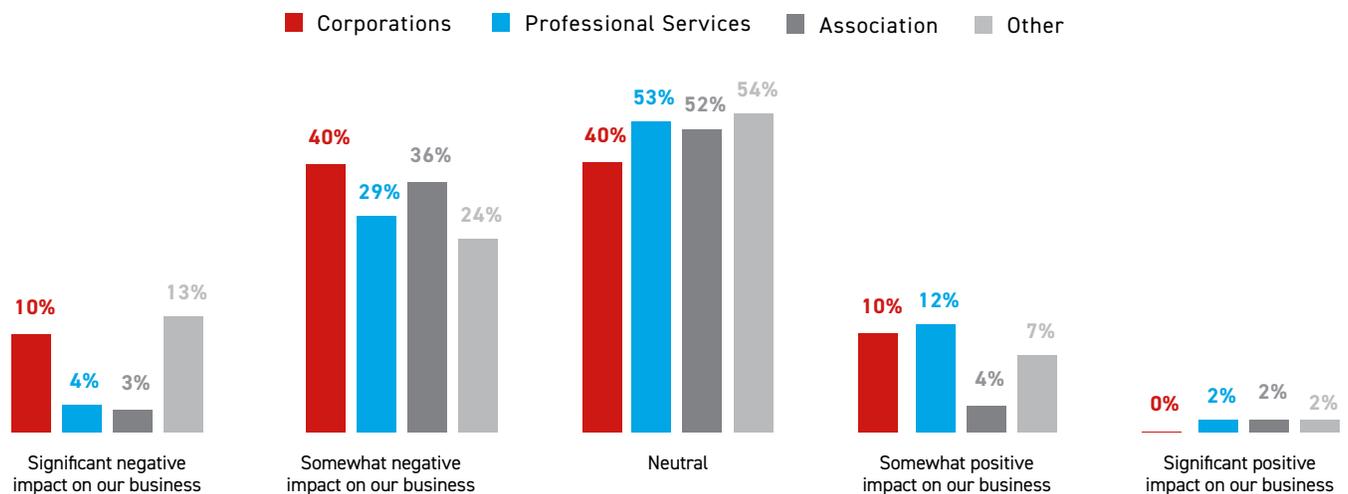
Managing information overload is the biggest challenge facing policy professionals today. Covid-19 has drastically increased the size of policy portfolios, with nearly 82% of respondents citing having to manage their core policy focus as well as Covid-19 (Figure 1). Unsurprisingly, this shift is most pronounced for policy professionals working in corporations (87% maintaining core policy focus and Covid-19 focus). The shift was less dramatic among respondents who work in professional services (75% maintaining core policy focus and Covid-19 focus), given the specialized nature of their roles (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6: HAVE POLICY PROFESSIONALS' PRIORITIES SHIFTED IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19?
 % of policy professionals who have seen a shift in policy priorities in response to the Covid-19 pandemic



Shifting policy priorities towards Covid-19 is particularly difficult due to the fragmentation of policymaking and the disparate nature of state and local responses. Given gridlock at the federal level, state and local legislatures are taking on Covid-19 rules and regulations. Nearly 40% of respondents stated that disparate state-level responses negatively impact their organization, further highlighting the challenge at-hand (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: MANY POLICY PROFESSIONALS STRUGGLE HANDLING DISPARATE STATE-LEVEL RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC
% of policy professionals who have seen disparate state-level responses impact their businesses



The impact was most significant at corporations, with over 50% of respondents citing a negative impact, whereas merely 31% of those at professional services firms cited a negative impact. Curiously, 14% of respondents from professional service firms even cited a positive impact resulting from disparate state responses. The lack of a strong federal response left states and local governments to create and manage responses to a fast-moving public health crisis. For policy professionals, this means tracking testing policy, insurance regulation, mask requirements, and economic shutdowns across overlapping areas of authority, a nearly impossible task to stay ahead of.

Many policy professionals are relying on their relationships with legislative stakeholders to stay abreast of the federal and state-level responses to the pandemic. **Over 61% of respondents cited leveraging government contacts as their primary means of tracking the pandemic response (Figure 8).**

The importance of these professional relationships underscores the impact of losing access to face-to-face meetings. Now, managing stakeholders and maintaining these connections is more important than ever. Many policy professionals have cited that client and member relations have become a core job responsibility. “Constant outreach and touches with membership” is the new normal for many policy professionals. The inability to establish new relationships with legislators or their staff through face-to-face meetings is a major hurdle, and policy professionals are leaning more heavily into existing relationships as a means

FIGURE 8: RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOVERNMENT CONTACTS REMAINS A KEY CHANNEL FOR TRACKING THE POLICY RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC
% of policy professionals leveraging the following channels to track the federal and/or state government response to the pandemic



to cope. Some policy professionals have also cited hiring consulting firms to “create new methods of communication with [their] audience given [the] inability to make in-person connections.”

The use of outside consultants and lobbyists also remains a critical tool for policy professionals during the Covid-19 era. Our findings last year showed that policy professionals’ top budget line item outside of FTE salaries was outside consultants. Despite budget constraints as a result of the economic downturn, over 72% of policy professionals are maintaining their high usage of outside consultants, and 16% even stated that they are increasing their use of lobbyists (Figure 9). The increased use of outside consultants was particularly prominent among policy professionals at corporations, with 24% of respondents citing increased usage.

FIGURE 9: LOBBYISTS AND OUTSIDE CONSULTANTS REMAIN A CRITICAL CHANNEL DESPITE BUDGET CONSTRAINTS
% of policy professionals who have increased or decreased outside consultant usage as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic



Has your use of lobbyists and/or outside consultants increased or decreased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic

However, with growing portfolios and increased demand for their attention, many policy professionals rely on digital policy intelligence tools, such as legislative and regulatory tracking or directories of government stakeholders, to work more efficiently. These tools can be useful for policy professionals to find and organize all layers of policy information within one resource. Roughly 45% of policy professionals cited digital tools as their primary channel for tracking the pandemic response (Figure 8). Given the inability to build new relationships in-person, digital tools will remain a critical resource for policy professionals throughout the pandemic.

“We have pivoted from personal relationship-building to electronic platforms.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

TRANSITIONING TO VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

Given the importance of interpersonal communication to the success of a policy professional, the transition to a virtual environment creates significant hurdles. Nearly all respondents have transitioned to remote work and digital tools. Specific communication challenges for policy professionals working remotely include digital communication taking much longer, an increase in the frequency of meetings, varying levels of technological familiarity and access, and interpersonal communication being much more difficult.

Our top finding regarding the virtual environment is that policy professionals believe digital communication is inefficient. Given the lack of “water cooler” conversations in the office, policy professionals consistently cited struggling with a significant increase in the number of meetings added to their calendars. Policy professionals believe that communication through digital tools requires more time and effort than in-person communication. Subsequently, we found that many policy professionals struggled with learning the digital tools themselves or with their stakeholders learning the digital tools. Not only do levels of familiarity vary, but some policy professionals cited stakeholders lacking Zoom or similar digital tools as a challenge. Finally, some policy professionals believe that “working remotely doesn’t allow you to actually read people successfully” thus making successful interpersonal communication more difficult.

However, the transition to remote work has not been entirely negative. Some policy professionals cited increased engagement by members in meetings because one can attend by webinar rather than travel. Remote life has also “enhanced flexibility to accommodate different work schedules and different division of labor among staff.” Finally, many stated that minimizing commute time is a significant benefit.

Despite numerous responses highlighting the hurdles associated with virtual communication, our findings show that these new challenges are not insurmountable. The vast majority of respondents cited video conferencing tools, phone calls, and emails as sufficient means of communication. The transition to video conferencing is certainly a hallmark of the Covid-19 era. One issue that has arisen is that while nearly all policy professionals (94% of respondents) find video conferencing to be effective for internal communication, the transition has been a bit less smooth for external communication with 85% of respondents citing video conferencing as effective (Figures 10 and 11).

“Varying levels of technological familiarity has heaped responsibility for tech support on junior staff who have an increased workload of their own.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

“It takes more time to ensure that all of the various people at client offices receive the information needed. Previously in-person [meetings] accomplished all of the team being present for a discussion. Now there are many more one-on-one conversations.”

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

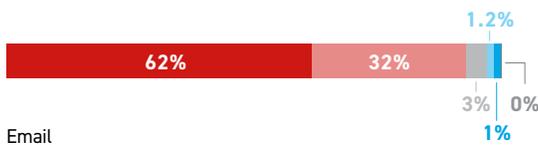
TRANSITIONING TO VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

FIGURE 10: VIDEO CONFERENCING IS EFFECTIVE FOR INTERNAL COMMUNICATION; CHAT TOOLS LESS SO
 % of policy professionals who find the following digital tools as effective for communication with internal stakeholders

How effective have the following tools been in helping communicate with your INTERNAL Stakeholders?



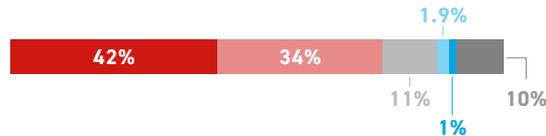
Video Conferencing (eg: Zoom, Skype, etc)



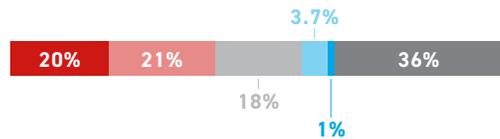
Email



Cell phone communication (call)



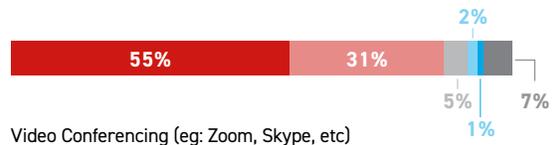
Cell phone communication (text messaging)



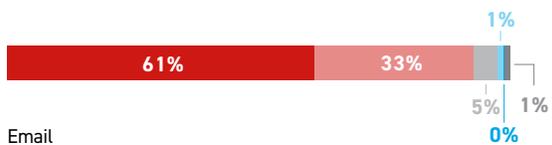
Chat Tools (eg: Slack, Gchat, etc)

FIGURE 11: EFFECTIVENESS OF VIDEO CONFERENCING DECREASES WHEN COMMUNICATING EXTERNALLY
 % of policy professionals who find the following digital tools as effective for communication with external stakeholders

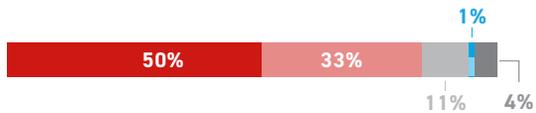
How effective have the following tools been in helping communicate with your EXTERNAL Stakeholders?



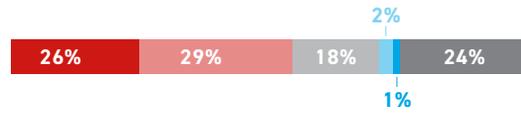
Video Conferencing (eg: Zoom, Skype, etc)



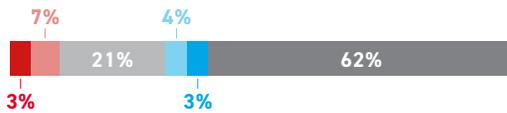
Email



Cell phone communication (call)



Cell phone communication (text messaging)



Chat Tools (eg: Slack, Gchat, etc)

■ Very effective
 ■ Somewhat effective
 ■ Neutral
 ■ Somewhat ineffective
 ■ Very ineffective
■ Haven't used this form of communication

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE FOR POLICY PROFESSIONALS

Covid-19 is changing how policy professionals work. Policy professionals struggle to manage information overload amidst growing policy portfolios and staffing constraints. They are working longer hours as the lines between life and work are blur with childcare concerns top of mind. They are also facing more scrutiny from executives and greater demands on their time and attention from cross-functional stakeholders. An increase of virtual meetings is taking the place of in-person communication, but policy professionals find this method of communication inefficient and sorely miss face-to-face communication with colleagues and stakeholders.

The lasting effects, if any, of the Covid-19 pandemic on policy professionals' workflow are unknown. Our research uncovers several insights on how the pandemic may shape that workflow moving forward. The outbreak of Covid-19 accelerates many trends for professionals working in policy. Policy professionals are slowly shifting away from external, direct lobbying to focus on greater demands from internal stakeholders such as management or investor relations. This change, while exacerbated by the pandemic, is likely to be permanent. Digital tools are proven to be an effective form of communication for respondents, so perhaps travel will be permanently reduced, or at the very least, re-evaluated. Lastly, Policy professionals are using electronic platforms to focus on frequent, consistent communication, thus strengthening existing relationships. While building those relationships is a challenging endeavor in this environment, those relationships will likely become stronger as a result.

Digital tools and platforms have become more important levers of influence and the pandemic has accelerated that shift. Policy professionals will likely continue to emphasize digital advocacy, digital advertising, and social media as critical tools well beyond the era of Covid-19.

Because the Covid-19 policy response largely fell to state-level policymakers, the importance of state and local governments grew. State leaders saw an influx of authority, with governors such as Andrew Cuomo and Ron DeSantis, taking center stage in the media. As state leaders are unlikely to relinquish newfound prominence, we can expect this trend to continue. It will require more work for policy professionals, and the usage of digital tools, to monitor legislation across various states to remain a step ahead.

Despite all of this, policy professionals have remained resilient and innovative - finding success where they can. Arguably, the role and importance of the policy professional is undervalued. Many policy professionals have found difficulty competing for resources with others in revenue-generating functions. Proving RoI (Return on Investment) has been a key challenge over the past few years, but one positive note from the Covid-19 era is that it has highlighted the key role policy professionals play in the survival of an organization. The work being done has always been important, but was not always a tangible item impacting the bottom line. Today, policy professionals have proven their value to organizations by securing priorities through the CARES Act, accessing emergency grants and loans, and navigating policies such as the Paycheck Protection Program. Clients, executive leadership, and membership will likely see a strong RoI for the work of their policy professionals. One can hope that this will have a lasting impact on the view of policy professionals and their return-on-investment (RoI). One future prediction that we know will hold true is that the work of policy professionals will remain indispensable to their organizations.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE FOR POLICY PROFESSIONALS

organizations by securing priorities through The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, accessing emergency grants and loans, and navigating policies such as the Paycheck Protection Program. Clients, executive leadership, and membership will likely see a strong RoI for the work of their policy teams. This will no doubt have a lasting impact on how policy teams are viewed and will lead to a greater understanding from leaders on the value and return-on-investment (RoI) policy teams provide.

DON'T TAKE IT FROM US

Quotes from your peers on the value of policy professionals during the Covid-19 pandemic

"Hard work, availability."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"Policy agendas and provisions included in Covid legislation; positioning clients for the rest of the must-pass legislation remaining in the congressional calendar."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"Direct benefit to members, showing value of membership, while driving real results on through policy implementation."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"By showing with concrete results that the role of communicators is vital during a worldwide crisis."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"Advocating for policies that keep businesses open."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"By staying ahead of issues which allows our operations team to plan ahead to avoid costs down the road."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"Data points showing positive public image communications and outreach are playing an increasing role in what our Board is wanting to see."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"Great levels of outreach and communication."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"Producing a lot of Thought Leadership work that hopefully will provide returns after this is all over."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT

"Keeping the C-Suite informed regarding Washington updates."

- SURVEY RESPONDENT