

TALENT BAROMETER 2021



mepra 
youth board

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In a bid to find out just what makes young communicators in the region tick, the **MEPRA Youth Board** has embarked upon developing a comprehensive white paper to reveal the motivations, challenges, ambitions and opportunities of young PR professionals. With talent retention increasingly becoming a challenge in the industry, this white paper seeks to offer a practical perspective on what young communicators expect and need to thrive in their careers.

The white paper was developed upon the results of a national online survey targeting communications professionals **under the age of 35** in the UAE. The survey was completed between August and October of 2020 by a total of



128 PR professionals

across various organisations
including agency, corporate,
government and semi-government

The key findings included a range of insights around the motivations, skillsets and drivers for pursuing a PR career.

When polled around the motivations behind exploring a career in PR, the majority of respondents cited exposure to international and leading brands as well as industry leaders, followed closely by the growing significance of PR and communications to businesses globally. Salary and benefits ranked very low as a key driver to pursue a PR career. From a skills perspective, writing was believed to be the most important technical skill and was also the highest ranked for in-house and agency communicators. While video editing ranked last for respondents, trends suggest that there will be less dependency on creative agencies and departments, meaning that young professionals may soon be expected to sharpen their multimedia and content production skills.

Talent retention was found to rely heavily on workplace culture, with it being ranked as the top deciding factor when selecting a workplace. Salary ranked third, showing that while compensation is important it is not a primary motivator for most. Ranked last was training and development, which may indicate that today's young professionals often look beyond the workplace for resources to upskill themselves.

Perhaps most promising were the insights uncovered around the state of the industry and the future of PR.



The survey revealed that a new working model, career progression and company culture were high on the agenda for the next generation of PRs.

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, an increasing number of workplaces have successfully adopted hybrid work environments (work from home and work from office) with no significant bearing on productivity. We also found that respondents expect mental health and wellbeing to be prioritised more heavily in a post-pandemic world, citing it as one of the most crucial factors for a supportive and positive company culture.

Furthermore, it is clear that young professionals today are more ambitious than ever before — they are prepared to invest in and commit to the industry, so long as they can cash in their return on investment through career progression and development



#1 REASON FOR PURSUING A CAREER IN PR/COMMS: Exposure to leading brands and industry leaders as 28% of respondents revealed



SALARY SCORED THE LOWEST for the reason to pursue career in comms with only 4% of respondents selecting this as the primary reason



DELIVERING IMPACTFUL RESULTS FOR CLIENTS/BRANDS is what drives professionals in this industry said 43% of respondents



VIDEOGRAPHY ranked the lowest in technical skills with both in-house and agency professionals ranking this as their weakest skill



MOST CRITICAL SOFT SKILL in PR determined by more than 30% of both in-house and PR agency young communicators is **TEAMWORK**



38% of respondents revealed **WORKPLACE CULTURE** is most important when considering a job switch

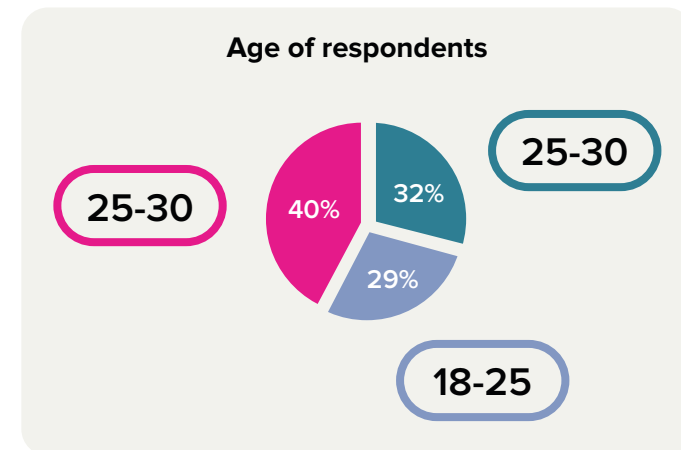


Most valued benefit from employer aside from salary and health insurance: **FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS.** 90% of young communicators are looking for a hybrid working model



60% of respondents revealed **MENTAL HEALTH + SALARY REDUCTION** were the two biggest challenges faced as a result of COVID-19 impacts

The purpose of this white paper is to outline the challenges and opportunities faced by young communicators in the Middle East today. Attracting, managing, and developing the future leaders of public relations and communications in the Middle East has emerged as a key challenge in the field. This paper offers a practical perspective of young communicators' expectations of the field.



The professionals who responded to the Talent Barometer survey represented a wide variety of agency, corporate, government and semi-government organisations working in the public relations and communications profession.

The survey was completed by 128 public relations and communication professionals aged under 35.

This paper is based upon a national online survey emailed and promoted to public relations and communication practitioners aged below 35 in the UAE.

The survey, designed by the MEPRA Youth Board, included

20 open-ended and multiple-choice questions

to provide both quantitative and qualitative data. Participants completed the survey between August 21 and October 25, 2020.

A newsletter with the survey details was first sent to MEPRA members then posted on the MEPRA website mepra.org and through MEPRA's social channels across Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter.

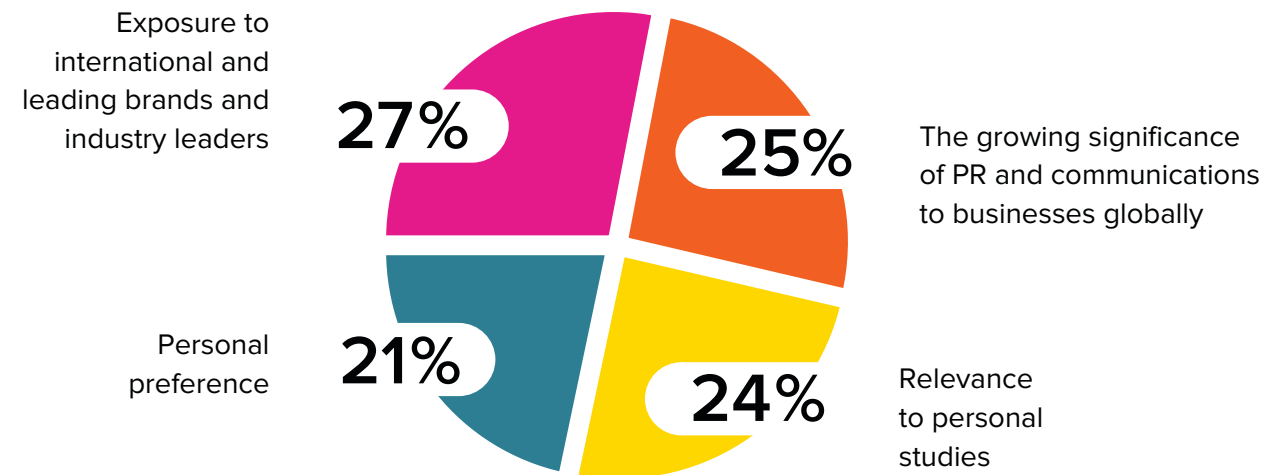
The results were discussed and analysed by the **MEPRA Youth Board** members and then written into this paper for public distribution and to help guide **MEPRA**, employers and the wider industry address critical issues facing young communicators today with regards to skills, employment preferences, aspirations, work arrangements, expectations and the future of our industry.

This survey will be held annually and benchmarked against previous results and data to monitor changes, improvements and gaps to address.

4.1 ASPIRATIONS FOR YOUNG COMMUNICATORS

Poised for huge future growth, students and professionals are seeking a career in PR more than ever. The survey aimed at pinning down the aspirations of rising PR professionals, in order to explore what motivates them to pursue — and maintain — a career in PR.

When asked about what encourages them the most to enter the world of PR, various reasons stood at very close levels.



43%

of professionals said progress to senior positions in the same industry is the main achievement they want to accomplish in their career.



11%

would look to start their own business in the same industry, a testament to the eagerness of the next generation of professionals to learn and absorb the fundamentals of communications in the real world ahead of venturing into their own projects.

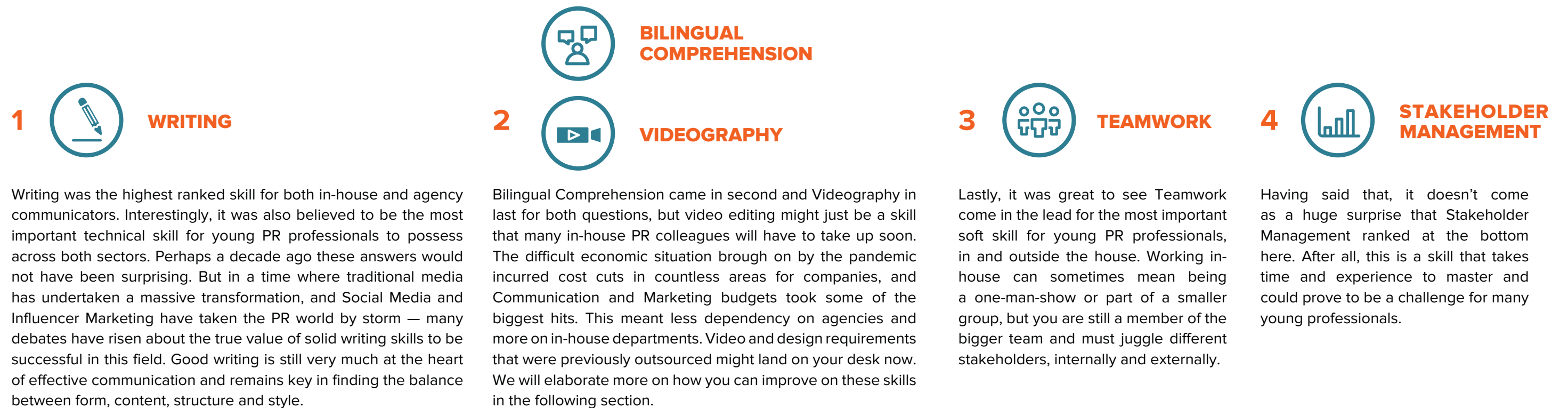


4%

salary and benefits ranked very low as the reason to pursue a PR career despite recent salary surveys showing the industry in MENA offers competitive incomes. This speaks to rising professionals' awareness and acknowledgement of the value the communications industry offers and the vitality of communications to businesses in all different industries.

4.2 PR IS IN THE HOUSE: IN-HOUSE SKILLS

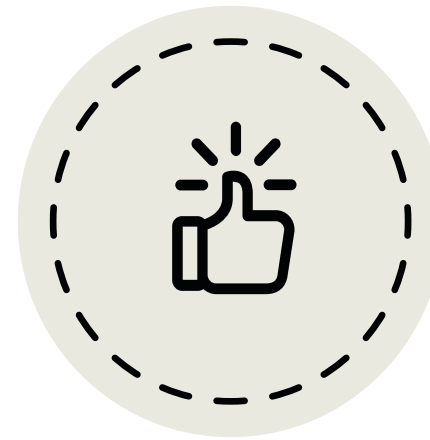
Rank your skills... A question that will make anyone ticking their way through a survey – one no-brainer answer after another, stop and think for a minute. Because it's often a question we haven't even asked ourselves. This one requires some self-critique, a little bit of reflection and a whole lot of honesty. That's exactly what we asked in-house PR professionals in the Middle East to do. How would you rate your technical skills?



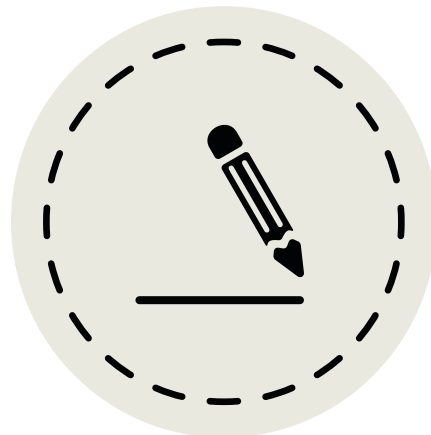
4.3 AGENCY SKILLS

The distanced workplace brought about by the pandemic didn't look like it was going to last quite as long as it has when we first shaped the questions and options, we'd look for respondents to answer. If it had angling the webcam so as not to catch your loungewear bottoms, staying motivated whilst working from under a duvet and maintaining an air of professionalism as you struggle to find an appropriate zoom background in real time might have featured.

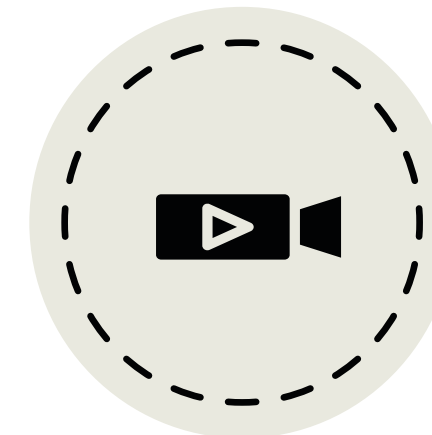
As it was the multiple choice questions we asked of respondents around agency competencies really focused on a key tension between old PR fundamentals and new media growth.



However **social media skills** as well as a recognition of the power of paid media to help amplify messaging were also evident from people's responses. Almost 32% of respondents selected social media skills, paid media understanding and influencer relations as the most important technical skill.



Unsurprisingly perhaps, for most respondents the **ability to write well** still features as the most important skill for young professionals to have in their arsenal. 52% of respondents selected 'writing' as the most important technical skills to have as young PR professionals working in a PR Agency in the Middle East.



Interestingly **videography** featured as the lowest ranked capability, a trend you would expect to see change as younger — video-first generations, raised on the likes of TikTok come into the workforce in the next few years. Only 1% of respondents selected 'videography as an important skill to have.

4.4 THE VITALITY OF VIDEO FOR TODAY'S COMMUNICATORS

How adept do communications professionals in the region consider themselves to be when it comes to video storytelling and how can one keep upskilling?

In his book 'All Marketers are Liars', author and entrepreneur Seth Godin writes: **"Don't just tell me the facts. Tell me a story instead."** Great communicators tell stories we believe and undoubtedly, video formats are engaging ways for marketing and PR professionals to tell a story about their organization or brand.

The origins to video storytelling can be traced back to 1877 when the world's first motion picture was created using a series of photographs showing a running horse. In today's digital world, platforms like YouTube, Tik Tok, Instagram and Facebook that are widely used enable us to so easily create and publish our own stories through video. And courtesy such video-enabled platforms, many brands and influencers have been defining their own narratives and successfully establishing a deeper recall value and meaningful relationships with their audiences.

However, the value of video storytelling has also been demonstrated in times of crisis. Take the global health crisis COVID-19 for instance. In a world where physical distancing and lockdowns are becoming the everyday normal, video storytelling is fostering human connections. Importantly also, since the outbreak of the pandemic, KOLs from celebrities to scientists and government officials to artists have used different video platforms to educate the public and dispel myths and fake news around the virus and vaccinations. Many health workers like Dr. Noc, PhD have taken to TikTok to debunk COVID misconceptions; Dr. Noc's quick and relatable informative videos have gone viral and his account today has 552k+ followers.

Inhouse and agency PR professionals consider videography/video editing as their weakest technical skill

Video is a vital part of a company or brand's marketing strategy. So when the MEPRA Youth Board launched the Talent Barometer Survey late in 2020, it was interesting to note that the majority of respondents (both in-house and agency PR professionals in the region under the age of 35 years) ranked videography as their weakest technical skill, in comparison to other skills such as writing, media relations, social media, to name a few. But there are a lot of resources out there. Any professional in the marketing and communications discipline which is so dynamic and ever-changing should constantly be upskilling. Create a personal development plan and populate it with online courses. Even consider requesting your organization to sponsor some of your learning initiatives.

DIY

Explainer videos, whether live action, whiteboard or animated, have grown in popularity for the lead conversions they are bringing to businesses. There are many websites that you can use for free or at a nominal subscription cost, to create explainer videos for your brand. The soundtrack, fonts, designs, and pictures — everything is easy to customize to match your brand tone.



Fiverr and Animaker are easy to use for creating live action and animated explainer videos. Animoto, and Powtoon make it possible for communicators with little or zero videography skills to say what they have to say in video formats.



Canva and BeFunky have become the go-to tools for professionals to become design capable. No longer do you have to wait an hour for your graphic designer to resize an artwork for you — you can do it yourself! From creating your own banners, posters and invitations, these tools also offer a range of video templates to customize and use for different platforms, your website, YouTube or even LinkedIn and Instagram.

Use an agency or a freelancer

When it comes to video storytelling, it's easy to go wrong. Hence using experts of this medium is always the ideal option. But quality comes at a cost, so availing the services of agencies or freelance content creators depends upon your marketing budgets.

That being said, owing to the competition and market conditions, agencies are becoming agile and evolving their fee structures. The production quality from agencies in the region is commendable. Who hasn't seen the incredible video of David Guetta's performance on the helipad of the Burj Al Arab, the team at Create Media Group was behind that. Boomtown Productions has also been developing high impact video content in the Middle East since 20 years. Their work for the Expo2020 video 'World Plays the UAE National Anthem' remains memorable.

Independent video creators or freelancers are offering competitive rates and winning projects through referral or word of mouth marketing. Mishaal Ashok, a self-taught videographer has worked on commercials for brands such as Rove Hotels, Shein and Hugo Boss.



The pandemic has had a huge impact on employment, the economy and the world as we knew it. In today's post-COVID times, professionals across industries are thinking about the direction of their careers, re-evaluating their skills and preparing for the future. That includes PR professionals too. MEPRA'S Talent Barometer survey asked just over 100 PR professionals (inhouse and agency) in the Middle East what factors they value most when considering switching jobs. The responses may surprise you.

Top 5 factors communicators will consider when switching jobs in today's challenging market

1

They rated workplace **culture as the number one deciding factor** when choosing their next employer.

2

Professional growth opportunities ranked second demonstrating that communicators in the region take their career progression very seriously and are willing to change roles to pave the path for growth.

3

Interestingly, **salary ranks third**, showing that while money is important, it is not the primary motivator for most job seekers in communications.

4

In fourth place of importance is the organisation's vision or purpose which motivates professionals to choose their next employer. Purpose-driven communicators are more likely to deliver high impact results and support the business with their target achievement.

5

Ranked fifth and last place was access to training and development. There could be one way to look at why this falls lowest in priority for our survey respondents: career-driven and self-aware professionals don't necessarily have to rely on the organisation's learning resources and can independently identify avenues for upskilling themselves. With training workshops by professional bodies like MEPRA, thought leadership in magazines like Campaign, insights from a plethora of free webinars, the opportunities to learn and fill in the skills gap are abundant.

Having said that, with the technology keeping the communications landscape ever so dynamic, employers risk losing top talent and their competitive edge if they do not invest in their L&D.

Employers take note: These are the top benefits professionals in PR are looking for



FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Aside from basic salary, travel/housing allowance and medical insurance, our respondents under the age of 35 years tell us about other employer benefits they would value most. Unsurprisingly, the young workforce of this industry most value flexible work arrangements, that includes remote working opportunities and no set work hours. This is in line with the post-pandemic reality: the world of flexible work is calling.

In an industry where flexible working was largely uncommon, COVID forced many PR professionals to work remotely to strategize, execute and measure campaigns – and the remote work experience has proved quite successful. Undoubtedly, if they are to stay relevant to young talent, companies will have to be more open to the world of flexible work.



WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

In times of crisis, an organisation's communications team tends to be on the frontlines. COVID was no different. Many professionals found themselves overworked and stressed. According to MEPRA's 2020 COVID-19 Mental Health Impact Survey almost half of respondents revealed that challenges regarding their mental health had often interfered with their ability to complete work-related tasks and a third asked for direct support in training for management and leadership to better equip them to handle employee issues. It is little surprise that the second most important employer benefit that professionals value is wellbeing and mental health support. The work stress coupled with the fear of the virus, loneliness and fatigue from excessive connection to the online world means employers will need to prioritize taking care of their employees.



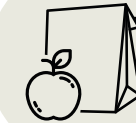
EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT

Third on the list of expectations in terms of benefits are educational support: whether it means an organisation sponsoring relevant online trainings or degree programs, reimbursing an employee's language training expenses, or allowing employees go on a study leave or sabbatical – the idea is for employers to stay open-minded and tailor their support towards employees' professional development.



COMMUNITY SERVICE

With the looming climate crisis and COVID leaving many in society disadvantaged, the need to give back and for organisations expected to deliver on their ESG commitments, it is not unusual to see that our survey respondents value community service and expect their workplaces to involve them in volunteering opportunities.



SPONSORED LUNCHES

Sponsored lunches and snacks at the office was ranked as the last benefit PR professionals would value from their employer. This benefit should not be undermined. Having meals taken care of by the organisation means an employee's time and money saved. Not only that, it brings employees together to bond over food, fostering team spirit and boosting morale.

The future of the PR industry looks bright, as the vast majority of young PR professionals are inspired to continue pursuing careers in the industry

new working model

career progression

company culture

are high on the agenda for the next generation of PRs

The 'WFH' policy of 2020 inspired trust from employers and many of our respondents want to see this continue, but into a hybrid model with an office environment. This ties into company culture which was the highest ranked 'next employment factor.' Respondents said that mental health and wellbeing needs to be recognised more following the pandemic and in general, a positive, collaborative working environment fostered with teamwork as the strongest soft skill reported.

The report found that when it came to career motivation that the majority want to achieve impactful results for clients, and secondly develop and execute award winning campaigns.

Professional growth is an important factor for young communicators, and employers who have development plans for employees are more favourable when candidates are looking for a new venture.

There is real passion coming from the younger generation to showcase exceptional results, rise up the ranks and stay committed to the PR industry.

The MEPRA Youth Board is a leadership team made up of MEPRA Award Young Communicator winners from the past six years which serve the leading industry body for communication professionals in the Middle East — MEPRA. The members include Brazen MENA Senior Account Director **Jennifer Love**, PageGroup Senior Marketing Manager MEA **Hanisha Lalwani**, Weber Shandwick MENAT Senior Manager **Nada Elbarshoumi** and Head of Digital **David Willett**, Mubadala Investment Company Vice President of Employee Engagement **Sara Kazim**, Group Account Director - Technology at Hill+Knowlton Strategies MENA **Shaimaa El Nazer**, Siemens Energy's Internal Communication and Media Relations Specialist **Amneh AlKhatib** and Head of Marketing, Communications and Partnerships at the Saudi Arabian Federation for Electronic and Intellectual Sports (SAFEIS) **Omar Batterjee**.

The MEPRA Youth Board serve as an advisory body to MEPRA's Executive and Strategy Boards and help shape the strategy for engaging young communicators in the region. By committing themselves as MEPRA Youth Board Members, they work towards an industry collective goal to raise awareness and build understanding of public relations in the Middle East by promoting industry standards, sharing knowledge and thought leadership and building the capabilities of young communicators in the region.

The first meeting took place in March 2020, during which, the Board Members elected Jennifer Love as their MEPRA Youth Board President and Hanisha Lalwani as their Vice President to lead the group's initiatives.

To find out more visit www.mepra.org

Over the past 12 months the MEPRA Youth Board have led a variety of initiatives to help support Young Communicators and students in the region including:

- * Regular virtual trivia nights to help boost morale and keep young communicators engaged during COVID-19 lockdowns
- * Development of guides and resources for young communicators which were published on MEPRA COVID-19 Resource Hub
- * The launch of the Student-Connect Programme which support students in the region with one-on-one support on projects, career goals, interview and CV prep plus more
- * University roadshow, presentations to students on the youth board and how to prepare for and make the most of internships
- * University workshops on comms skills led by Youth Board Members
- * Beirut Outreach Initiative — to support local businesses in Beirut following the devastating explosions, offering their time for any NGO, charity or local business based in Beirut who needs help amplifying their story to the world.
- * MEPRA Young Communicator of The Year Prep session to help entrants have the best possible chance in winning
- * Past Forward: End of Year Review - a virtual event with TikTok, Expo 2020 and more

