

**Episode #: 09**

**Episode Title:** Internal comms at a crossroads with Jennifer Sproul

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## Intro

### **Louise Everett (00:11)**

Welcome to ClarityMatters. Internal communication is at a crossroads. Expectations are outpacing many teams, and the gap between what organisations need and what internal comms delivers is widening. The latest research highlights a growing readiness gap. Organisations want internal comms to act as a strategic partner. Yet many functions still operate as broadcasters or reactive service desks.

Change communication, in particular, remains a critical weakness. At a time of continuous transformation, information overload and rising people risks - like burnout and declining trust in leadership - internal comms is under more pressure than ever. Layer on AI and the rapid evolution of digital workplaces, where governance, skills and operating models are still catching up, and that pressure only intensifies. Today we're unpacking what this crossroads really looks like and what it takes to move to the strategic side of it.

Joining me is Jennifer Sproul, Chief Executive of the Institute of Internal Communications and co-host of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. Together, we'll explore the shifts reshaping the function, what leaders need to do differently now, and what responsible, high-performing use of AI really looks like. We'll also examine how success should be measured, as IC takes on greater accountability for turning strategy into action in the years ahead.

If you're thinking about how to evolve your function and strengthen your impact, this is a conversation you won't want to miss. Let's get into it. So, Jennifer, a very warm welcome to ClarityMatters. It is great to have you here.

### **Jennifer Sproul (01:56)**

Thank you so much for inviting me.

## Main conversation

### **Louise Everett (01:58)**

You've spent more than two decades working in communications, including the last ten years at the Institute of Internal Communication. So there really is no one better for me to be having this conversation with right now. The recent Gallagher Employee Communications report, which is a study that gathers insights from more than 1,300 communications and HR professionals across 40 countries, highlights a widening gap between what organisations need from internal comms and what teams are set up to deliver. Let's get into what's really going on here.

From your perspective, what shifts are genuinely reshaping internal comms, and what should leaders be doing differently now as a result?

### **Jennifer Sproul (02:46)**

I think an answer to that question is to start from a couple of kind of contextual points, if you like, that kind of lead towards that. I think if we go back a step in terms of what is shaping internal communication and therefore, as you said, the Gallagher report shows gaps between what we want to be able to do and what we have the efficiency to do.

But I think that in terms of why we are where we are goes back a number of steps. So from a business context, it's just a lot. It's complex. It's change. It's constant. There is a pressure for organisations, for leaders to transform, to become future-fit businesses, to move into a space that is market responsive, that's agile, that innovates, changes, transforms at pace and all these sorts of things, without actually having full confidence that we know what the future looks like from an economic perspective.

On the flip side, you also have people that are supposed to be following this leader's vision of where we're all going together, who isn't quite clear on the vision themselves because the market is so difficult, feeling quite confused, chaotic, overwhelmed and struggling. And then you bring the next thing about where are we now, there comes that history of internal communication, where if there is all this complexity happening and there's a misalignment happening between the leadership and the people, but we're still fundamentally being resourced and seen as a function to send stuff out, where actually we need to create a fabric organisation that positions communications as a core capability, as a core asset to resilience, as a core enabler of them being able to move at speed and at pace and being a core function that aligns this vision that the leader is still struggling with to some degree, but sets it out, and bringing people along with them. That's far more than sending stuff out.

Are we resourcing our functions to be able to play that kind of role in an organisation, as opposed to sending information?

### **Louise Everett (05:16)**

Why do you think internal comms is still set in that position then? Is it down to resourcing, or is it down to significance or what's deemed as being important, urgent? You know, what's driving that?

### **Jennifer Sproul (05:36)**

I think it will be different in different organisations and in different contexts and in different spaces. But I think that if we talk honestly about the work that we're doing, right. So are we still just doing what we've always done because we haven't worked out the shift to the new space yet? So we're fulfilling that historical brief constantly.

Rightly or wrongly, and some of that just has to be done because we haven't got the capacity to think, to do differently, because our resources are so tight. So we're perpetuating that constant narrative of what we are to do, and therefore that then sustains the brief of what we're there to do or what people believe we're there to do.

And don't get me wrong, there are, I have seen in the years that I've been running the Institute, a shift from people looking at how to become great writers to how to become great leadership coaches, and that shift, or how we understand and invest in our knowledge of neuroscience and behavioural economics etc. But I also don't think we've ever really shown the evidence and the story of what we're there to do in an organisation in the most compelling ways. And I put that on IOIC as well.

### **Louise Everett (06:44)**

Interesting. So it's about demonstrating impact.

### **Jennifer Sproul (07:52)**

Yeah, I think it is. I think that sometimes when we, it's really hard to give a generic response because there's some brilliant work that goes on out there. But I think that when we go into organisations and I think there's, you know, we see the constant conversations in our community about we're not valued,

we're not seen or we see the constant, you know, how do we get a seat at the table, to where should we report? We are in this constant thing where we just need to break out and go: actually, what we do is really important. How do we just go in and show a stronger, braver, more evidence-led, but also show how we are going to be the critical thing that is going to ensure an organisation achieves its goals, not just something that happens.

Yeah. And we know that. We all know that. Yeah. But we seem to be stuck in the weeds to get out there and show that through perhaps time, resource, gaps. But there's a great thing I've been talking about as well in the work that we've been doing. And this comes from one of our recent podcast guests, Perry Timms, which I think is the best way I can describe the challenges that we've got, is that leaders, us internal communicators, whatever, we want to be this future organisation that looks at communication as a core capability that's built into it, that looks at trust, looks at impact, looks at how we support the human work, how we become part of it.

Organisations also want to move to this future state of agility and responsiveness and AI and adoption and technology. But we're still running a legacy organisation, so we're still running a legacy profession because we fall back on systems and processes that we know how to do. And I think it's not, it's just a state that we're in.

And I don't think any of us, I don't mean any other profession as well, or community's working out how to navigate to one side or the other.

### **Louise Everett (08:49)**

It seems there is this huge sense of overwhelm, and we see that with the clients that we work with when they come to us to work on a project, maybe it's a toolkit, maybe, you know, it's a briefing.

And we find that often we are adding that strategic lens to it. You know that and I believe from, you know, my hugely experienced client base that we have, I believe it's because they may not be thinking about it because they're so stuck in those weeds and the sort of overwhelm of the tactical work and the operational work is just filling their time.

You know, going back to exactly what you said earlier about resource, about time, you know, that's really holding some of these fantastic IC professionals almost back.

### **Jennifer Sproul (09:44)**

Yeah, it is. And I think it's that question of, and I hear that in any conversation I have, I also hear when I go and talk to a lot of senior internal communicators, this desire to move over here or this desire to be understood in this, and if we could just get to that work, we would make a demonstrable impact.

But we're also stuck in this space in organisations where we're all trying to work out what our boundaries, our roles, our visions look like. And I think that we are stuck in that space. And how do we get to a new space? And I think we're all trying to work that out, and how do we evolve forward? So I guess for me, it's how do we move internal communication and the work that we're doing and the skills that we want to be seen as a core capability that make sure an organisation achieves its goals?

How do we become the internal intelligence unit of a business? And that's where we need to get to, as opposed to the key postman of the business. And that is something that any internal communicator has as their greatest asset. This bridge role that we play.

### **Louise Everett (11:00)**

Yeah. So we're also seeing, I'm going to mention it, get it out there quickly, a lot of change is being accelerated by AI - whether we feel ready for it or not. One of Gartner's latest communications predictions is that by 2028, 75% of employees will rely on chatbots to get their internal communications, get their information, instead of traditional channels like newsletters or intranets.

Does that feel realistic based on what you're seeing with employees?

### **Jennifer Sproul (11:40)**

I'm trying to give a really clear answer, and really what I'm going to say is one that probably is putting a bit of my neck on the line, but I'm going to say it anyway. No.

And it's no with a number of caveats around it, if you like. No, but with a few buts. And I'll tell you why. I'll tell you why. I'll give you my buts, if you like, why I think that we won't, but we could in this scenario. Do I think that intranets as an interface will be more chat based as opposed to search based?

Yeah, but I don't think anybody is working with IT to work out the capability, the skill, the data. Imagine if you start putting all your policies into a chatbot that then learns, machine learns how to make them incorrect within a year's time. I don't think we're working out the ethical guardrails, the technical guardrails to be able to do that.

But do I think the intranet design will move towards that? Yes. Do I think it will move towards personalisation? Yes. I think those things will happen and we need to upskill and be ready. And I think that comes from our understanding of data or understanding of actually what that means and what ethical practice is. But the question I think was: do we think that's what it will be and what people will want?

That's my no. I think people will expect that from a hygiene factor. That would be the hygiene factor of internal communication. So yes, but is that what we're there to do in five years' time? Just to make sure people can find information? And do people just want to go to work to find information? Do people want to go to work to?

Is that how that's going to help them do their jobs? To be part of a vision, to be part of a strategy, to feel a connection, to have shared meaning, to understand the change in how it's going to be adopted? Do I think a chatbot-based intranet will solve those challenges? No. So no, we won't because I don't think that will solve the problems, but we will probably have to change our interfaces to meet modern expectations of how people interact digitally.

Does that in a convoluted way answer the question?

### **Louise Everett (13:49)**

Yeah, absolutely. So if AI becomes more embedded in listening and workflows - we've touched on it there - what does a responsible, high-performing approach look like in practice, at least at this stage? Any thoughts on that? I know it's still very early.

### **Jennifer Sproul (14:09)**

It is very early. I'll give my thoughts on that thing you mention about high performing and on what that means. I think that what that looks like right now is it starts with data literacy and critical thinking. I think we have to accept that technology is probably moving faster than we're able to keep up with.

But what we need to understand, however the technology evolves itself, whatever platforms or providers that we are going to be using, that is going to be part of it, that we are going to embrace, because that is something that will happen. Irrelevant of that, what do you know now that helps you understand how data plays a part in it, and how critical judgment of what comes out of it? If you build those, a lot of people say about the skills are changing, and they are - we do need to learn new things - but understanding ethics, data, critical thinking, human judgment, they're not old, sense making, we just need to dial them up significantly in this age. And what do I mean by that? So you're talking specifically about listening. So there's lots of ethical things you want to think about with listening, right.

If you're going to be using technologies as your tool to do it, rather than human interactions. What is the future of listening to conversations? To observational research? What is ethical practice? What is not?

What is the future in, we know, for example, in the insight world, the research world is adopting at pace to use synthetic data. So again, what I'm saying is we need to understand all those things that are happening and how we apply our ethical judgment and how data is playing a part in whatever technological world we live in to understand.

And we're thinking about listening and being able to be the internal intelligence unit that gives a breath and a pace of the business on a daily, weekly, monthly, not an annual basis, because that's the responsiveness we need. What are we collecting? Why are we collecting? What are we asking? Does it give just genuine intelligence? Is it done ethically?

Is it done correctly? Are we interpreting the right signals in the right context to give the right advice? So what I'm saying is those are the questions we need to build ourselves up on so that as technology evolves, we can bring that continual lens of going, okay, this is how we can, this is how the technology works. This is how it can give us information.

This is the type of information it gives us. This is the context and the questions in which it was collected. And if it's ethically sourced, is it free of bias? Has it been done with privacy in mind? Has it been done with all those ethical things? I've then looked at and gone well, critically, if we're looking at this problem.

So you're looking at this small segment of the population. So is that critically good advice? Is that bad advice? Does that mean everything we should base every decision on? Does that have everybody into it? Is it enough to give a sign back for the issue I'm particularly looking to solve? And then what sits behind that? And then how can I, with all of that in mind, use AI powerfully and correctly to analyse patterns, trends and make sure we interpret information intelligently?

It feels like a really long answer to your question, but I think I'm trying to get some examples behind why I'm saying what I'm saying.

### **Louise Everett (17:43)**

And I'm hearing that there's this deep sense of what we should be doing immediately is this really acting with caution, this deep questioning. Things that we've not really, we've questioned our work as we go until now, you know: is this the right target audience?

You know, what are they wanting to hear? What do we want them to feel? What do we want them to know? We've asked these sorts of questions. This is next level questioning of our actions, isn't it? This is much, much deeper and something that, again, we've probably got to learn to ask these sorts of questions of ourselves.

### **Jennifer Sproul (18:19)**

Yeah. And I think that's the best thing I could suggest right now is think about those questions you want to always have in your back pocket. And the reason why I think those questions are more critical or going to be more needed, or we're going to have to practise and rehearse. A, yes, the pace is changing. B, we actually do need to take advantage of those opportunities. We don't need, we're not here to resist it. We're here to embrace it. But we also want to make sure for our own professional credibility, our own professional impact, also to make sure that when we're in a room and we're making advice or we're working with our stakeholders, we're doing so in a way that is to the benefit and the goal of the business.

If we don't really understand those questions or are seeking to find the answers to them, we will make wrong recommendations and wrong steps for this because we haven't questioned things enough. What can I get? This is a really strange example, right? Because technology, we don't know what we don't know, right. But how are these questions? Did we realise in what was it 2007, which when Facebook became so prolific, was it a part of our everyday that when we were just uploading our personal pictures, all our information, we have given up every piece of privacy about ourselves, and they own it.

So we didn't know. We just did it. Yeah, we just did it right. So and that's never and that was in a personal space. And obviously it's been monetised beyond belief in many spheres. But as we, as it creeps into our workplaces now more so than ever, we need to just be questioning what we're doing, that we're doing the right things.

Because I want internal communication professionals to stand in a room as that internal intelligence unit, when decisions are being made, when things are being rolled out, when we're constantly helping to deliver those core capabilities, that we can do so in a way that we give really good advice, really strong advice, really professional, human, critical advice. We're not barriers to advancing innovation, and we're helping to accelerate it by doing so.

And we're helping to become a unit that doesn't just report what we did, whether it's worked, but we're a unit then that starts to help manage risk in a business. And that's something that I think is on the mind of any legal right now..

### **Louise Everett (20:50)**

And risk is typically, you know, tell me if I'm wrong. Risk is typically measured on external factors, you know, what are those external factors. But there's a huge amount of risk that's going on inside the buildings. You know, inside the organisations.

### **Jennifer Sproul (21:07)**

Yeah, and change is one of them, right. So I don't know, I mean I've seen many, I'm sure you have as well, risk registers that boards typically have where you kind of go through or you're looking at stuff. But going to that internal piece, so if an organisation is looking to change and transform and that could be mass technology adoption, it could be process change, it could be upskilling change, it could be role change, it could be merger change, it could be anything, right? That's just BAU to some degree now, we don't think we have to think about it in any other way.

That is huge amounts of money that an organisation is spending or cutting or efficionising or always benchmarking that decision on it being effective and it rolling out on time, on budget and every behaviour change, every reputational change is done well. Tell me that's not an internal risk.

### **Louise Everett (22:06)**

Huge. And isn't the stat around something like 70% of those initiatives fail. And the wastage, you know, because perhaps that risk has been underestimated.

### **Jennifer Sproul (22:20)**

Totally. And that's a space that, you know, I was at another event this week when we talked about just the volume, you know, to be an air traffic control because people want to go, we want to please, whether it's shareholders, stakeholders, customers, whatever, they want to go at pace because that's what it feels like.

So then let's roll that out quickly. Let's spend, you know, some tens of thousands of pounds on this project over here. Get it quickly. But where's the person internally going: you could do that, but because the sentiment over here, and this project over here and this team over here, and actually we've got some toxic management culture, we've got some leaders, actually, there's no trust in the leaders.

So if you say it and you put them out there, then everyone's going to walk away and not believe it. They're not aligned, they're not following you. So if you do that, great. But because of all of this, that will probably fail and you'll probably lose a load of money. Yeah, I'm just trying to put it in that kind of different language if that makes sense.

### **Louise Everett (23:15)**

Absolutely. It's astounding when you break it down like this, isn't it, really. Yeah. And it's hard to not quite understand why internal comms perhaps isn't positioned way more strategically.

### **Jennifer Sproul (23:39)**

I do find that a struggle. I struggle not just internal, but communication isn't seen more critically. And I was in a conversation with somebody over the weekend, I can't remember who. We were just talking about it generally. But if you just look above the parapet right now and we look at what is going on in the world, where things are going, you name me all of that isn't part of a communication problem.

Prime ministers are losing, relationships are being lost, elections are being done, mispromises are being made, disillusion, distrust, relationships, all and political leaders - I'm not here to make a political which way or the other - all I'm saying is that you look at the narratives and the rhetoric that we're hearing and how that's creating polarisation and division, and we're not following the same people, like two party politics are probably going to be over. That's all down to how someone is able to articulate, deliver, build a relationship, do and say and follow behind it.

So how can we not think that skill is critical?

### **Louise Everett (24:40)**

Yeah, it's everywhere. It's everywhere around us. And most critically, I think it's the sort of state of things within organisations. And of course, there are hundreds of organisations operating fabulously. We're not saying that. We're just looking at the research and looking at the evidence that's presented to us and drawing on our own experiences of what we see and feel and hear from those we talk to. It sort of brings things back to impact.

Yeah. Because expectations aren't just changing, you know, in how internal comms operates, but it's really about what it delivers. So as it becomes more accountable for how quickly strategy translates into action, how should success be measured differently over the next three years?

### **Jennifer Sproul (25:44)**

I think we need to be much more intentional and much more focused in that space.

So for me, going back to your point, if I go back to what is internal communication, what is it there to achieve within an organisation, which is far richer, far greater, far more powerful, critical than perhaps some people perceive it to do in an organisation. And I say some. There are some great examples there, some not, etc., etc.

If we come back to that, let's take it really down to the wire. What are we here to do? We're here to help internal reputation, you know, look at how people feel, trust, follow behind. We're here to create or inform or shape or influence or move human behaviour. And whether that's what they do, their role, whether that's as simple as safety measures and all those things that are going on.

And we're here to help make sure strategy becomes actioned. Yep, yep. Now if we're going to think about that, then how are we seeking to develop a measurement, intelligence, insights during an element of our function. And I talk about internal communications future being a function, not a role, that looks to make sure we can confidently, articulately in whatever guise that we're doing, show or advise.

Do people understand the strategy? Do they say what it's meant for them? Does it translate action into behaviour? Is the organisation ultimately achieving its goals? And if we look at it with that focused lens, you have to go, I'm not saying that engagement data and all those things aren't important. I'm not saying that those things aren't there to be done and we shouldn't be looking at them.

But how are we measuring, or looking at open rates? And I'm not saying that's not things that can help us in our everyday improvements and that continuous improvement, when we're all going upwards. How do

we know in that box that we're doing that? How can we demonstrate that? How can we be more intentional in how we monitor those impacts and how we contribute to those outcomes, to then on the flip side, how we're monitoring that continuous basis to be able to advise before things are done, not just afterwards.

So, and I think that we need to be more intentional in that space than just every measurement there is.

### **Louise Everett (28:46)**

And the three things that you've outlined that the reason I see exists are huge. They're massive. Without these things, you know, turn the lights off. They are fundamental for success.

### **Jennifer Sproul (29:08)**

I mean, we have got, our annual research is the IC index, which looks at the employee view of internal communication.

And, you know, we're working on the next report at the moment. And I've seen it. But just anecdotally in those spaces, it's not going well. And that's not about internal communicators not doing it. It's because we just need to evidence that better. There's challenge in every one of those spaces.

### **Louise Everett (29:34)**

And our friends in marketing have been good at this for years.

They've been really good at it. So it's time for communications to dial up their own PR and start demonstrating that impact as much as possible. I guess beyond those vanity metrics, it's really about shifting the needle and linking to strategy and those commercial objectives as well.

### **Jennifer Sproul (30:00)**

Yeah. What's your stats and what's our stories to make a difference?

And think about that as well. Because I'll tell you what, having worked in market research as well for a time, and consumer research and marketing work as well also as well, I say this because I think that we're expected because we keep seeing internal communication as a role and not a function. We're expected to be too many skills in one person.

So, you know, the marketing team has a huge insights team, the consumer insights team, that filled in and provide that intelligence, that bring in that skill that we can commission and we can write with. So how do we bring some of that into our world?

### **Louise Everett (30:44)**

Yeah. Very true. And IC is often a one-man band, one-woman band.

### **Jennifer Sproul (30:49)**

How can you expect one human to do all of that, as well as deal with everybody that still thinks their job is to send stuff out? And however much you want to say no, or how much that feels like the simple answer, it's not reality, is it? When you've got a senior stakeholder that is just going to say and you're a team of one and you haven't got the time to critically think, and you also, the job market isn't great.

Things are unstable, things aren't going great. There's a difference between what would be a wonderful world and what's the reality. But how do we nudge ourselves in that direction, how do we. I think, and I say that as IOIC as well, how we PR ourselves is going to be, needs to be much stronger, much bolder, much more critical in the way that we speak and the way that we evidence the value of our work.

### **Louise Everett (31:40)**

So, Jennifer, before we wrap up, can we take a step back for a moment? A couple of questions that I like to ask all of our guests. So this year marks 20 years of Claritas. And we know communications across that period has changed enormously. If you could go back to your 20-year-old self, what's the one piece of career advice you would give?

### **Jennifer Sproul (32:08)**

It's a very long time ago, but I'll try and remember my 20-year-old self. Very bad fashion choices. That's also what rings in my brain as I think about it. But I think the things I would say is, being, and I know we say this quite a lot in internal communication, but I think it's really important that we keep saying that we need to be super, super curious, and we need to be super curious to understand the business, not just communication, because the link between comms and business is going to be the secret to our security and prosperity, for want of a better phrase.

### **Louise Everett (32:44)**

Yeah, fantastic advice, that really is. So, and if you could put one idea or a piece of advice looking the other way, looking forward, into a 20-year time capsule, might be the same thing. What would it be and why does it matter?

### **Jennifer Sproul (33:01)**

I kind of sound like a broken record in terms of the things I'm going to say, I think it's relationships. We really need relationships, and we need people to be able to have constructive, disagreeing, but really respectful conversations with. We need to be able to build that muscle in ourselves. And it's hard when work has become, you know, how many times have you had a Teams message or an email that lacks the tone, and you could read a message in five different ways and feel different about it, right?

How much time are we wasting to that? Because we're not understanding each other's goals and we're not aligned at ourselves. And whereas actually, if we just built a really strong relationship so that I understood you, but also I could have a really professional conversation to talk honestly about where we agree, where we disagree, where the compromise is, what we've seen that for the benefit of what we're trying to achieve, not for the benefit of conflict.

So I think we need to build our muscle to be able to have those conversations and those relationships in our workplaces, because otherwise, actually for our own personal wellbeing, it's not good. It's not going to help the work we do. It's going to put us better on a PR front, makes work more enjoyable because I don't want to be arguing or misunderstood by lots of people.

I don't want people to misunderstand my intention and my words. And I think as communicators, if we want to promote the value of good communication in an organisation for its resilience, for its trust, etc. we've got to role model it.

### **Louise Everett (34:41)**

I love that, especially as things are becoming more automated, it's just us and our agents, you know, plugging away all day.

You know, we've got together on this short call today and I could carry on all afternoon comparing notes about all the things that we've got going on. It's the connection piece, isn't it? It's the human-to-human piece.

### **Jennifer Sproul (35:04)**

And it's not fluffy and it's not soft. It's actually critical. And I think that if we dig into our organisations and this is where curiosity and relationships blend, to be curious, go and just sit and listen to the way people talk.

How do they talk around here? How are things being done? Literally just listening for a minute. They are actually talking. How many times you walk over there talking about the same thing, but they think they're not. So just listening to that and that curiosity, well the FD and the marketing are actually saying the same thing, but they're misunderstanding each other.

I can help with that to then and see the business and then I can also have the relationships because it all does converge. And it's not soft, it's not fluffy. It's actually what's going to drive outcomes and goals for all of us. And actually, work should be to some degree fun. It shouldn't be a horrendous thing to do, it should be a nice thing to be able to do.

### **Louise Everett (35:57)**

With people that we enjoy and work that we love.

Absolutely, absolutely. Jennifer, this has been so insightful. Thank you so much for giving up your time today. It's been such a pleasure to chat to you.

### **Jennifer Sproul (36:15)**

Oh, thank you so much for having me. It's been lovely talking to you too, Louise.

### **Louise Everett (36:17)**

Thank you

## **Outro**

### **Louise Everett (36:19)**

What really stands out is just how pivotal this moment is for internal communications. The expectations are clear, but so is the gap.

And closing that gap requires more than new tools or channels. It calls for sharper strategy, stronger capability, and a much more deliberate approach to how we drive action and impact. The role of AI, the need for better change frameworks, and the shift towards real accountability all point in the same direction. This is a function that's being redefined in real time, and for anyone listening, the question is a simple one.

Are we set up for where internal comms is going, or where it's been? To everyone listening, thank you for joining us on ClarityMatters. If you found this episode useful, do share it with your colleagues and network, and I'll see you on the next one.