



Determining factors leading to strategic management PR practitioner roles



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ABSTRACT

This study used multinomial logistic regression to assess if relationships existed between practitioners' college coursework, years of experience, and their subsequent public relations (PR) role. A number of significant relationships were found consistent with the implementation of recent PR coursework recommendations and the transitional state of PR practitioner and organizational characteristics. Consultants and managers possessed more experience than manager/technicians and technicians; men and women equally held managerial positions; and agency practitioners were less likely to function as strategic planners. This research suggests that periodic studies are required to assess current college PR student coursework and required PR practitioner skill-sets.

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1. Introduction

Within the public relations (PR) profession there are a wide-range of positions available ranging from creating communication products (technician) to strategic decision making and planning oversight (manager), and everything in between (technician/manager). According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics \(2014\)](#), PR has a predicted growth rate of 12 percent annually through 2012. In fact, PR practitioners fared better in the recent economic downturn than other professionals in communication related jobs and [U.S. News and World Report](#) list PR as number 85 in its 2014 top 100 jobs list. PR has been on growth trajectory for years and this may account for the number of universities and colleges offering degrees in public relations. A recent search of schools offering a Bachelor's in public relations produced 267 results and this does not account for programs awarding a Bachelor's in Communication Studies where students can major in PR ([College Board, 2014](#)).

Interestingly there is no universal understanding about what PR is, let alone what PR practitioners do. PR practitioners are viewed as people who do everything from skewing the truth to serving as the organization's conscience. At its core, and from a practitioner's perspective, the PR profession is seen as a distinctive and strategic management function ([Bartlett, 2009](#)). [Grunig \(2006\)](#) found that "... our research showed that involvement in strategic management was the critical characteristic of excellent public relations. We found that public relations must be empowered through representation in the dominant coalition or from having access to these powerful members of the organization. Unless it is empowered to be heard, public relations will have little effect on organizational decisions. The importance of involvement in strategic management expanded our knowledge of the managerial role to include strategic managerial and administrative managerial roles ... —the

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strategic manager being the essential role for excellence” (p. 160). A 2011 study by McDonald and Hebbani found that there is a renewed focus on strategic management as a public relations practitioner focus globally, which is important given the global nature of many industries and communication channels. So how can we best prepare students to become effective, ethical, and strategic practitioners who assume management responsibilities? To contribute to this discussion, this study examines the role of PR curriculum and other factors as it relates to PR practitioners and strategic management positions.

In the PR discipline, and from the standpoint of the strategic management function, recent trends include organizational transparency and work functions that align the organization’s core values and provide a positive environment and experience for employees and stakeholders. Additionally, the pressure to be “accountable” has gained momentum in recent years (McCoy & Hargie, 2003). Thus, strategic PR management requires a systematic approach to assessing current circumstances, designing and implementing strategic measures, and evaluating outcomes. Given this framework, PR professionals can provide a highly desired level of accountability of PR’s contributions in support of the organization. In fact, studies have validated the linkage between PR research and organizational success (Eisenmann & Paine, 2007; Jeffrey, Jeffries-Fox, & Rawlins, 2010; Paine, 2007; Paine, Draper & Jeffrey, 2008). PR practitioners are also expected to possess strong writing skills, remain current with the various technological advances that provide additional communication channels, and effectively communicate with internal and external stakeholders among other tasks. As the PR discipline expands and communication channels increase, educating current students to become valued employees is a continually evolving responsibility for PR educators.

2. Literature review

Students believe that they understand the importance of PR functions, but perceive themselves slightly less prepared to perform them (Gower & Reber, 2006). This perception seems to follow them through their initial years within the PR profession. A study by Kim and Johnson (2011) reported that new practitioners (mean = 2.8 years of experience) believed themselves to be knowledgeable in areas ranging from ethics, relationship building, communication concepts and trends, and societal issues. They reported feeling less knowledgeable about legal, financial, research and forecasting (Watson, 2012), and management and global issues (Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012). These findings are similar to those reported by Gower and Reber (2006). Kim and Johnson’s (2011) study asked both recent graduates and their employers about the employees’ knowledge and skills. The employers unilaterally stated that their employees had less knowledge than they indicated in areas where employees reported the most confidence. Conversely, the employers felt that the employees had more knowledge in areas the employees reported having less knowledge. Employees almost always reported their skills at a higher level of competence than their employers indicated. This finding may be common across a variety of disciplines where young adults perceive themselves to be better informed than those who have been in the profession for a longer period of time.

2.1. Course recommendations

In order to best prepare students to become strategic practitioners, it is useful to examine existing coursework paradigms. According to O’Neil (2005), few studies have actually looked at how PR programs are constructed. O’Neil’s examination of the field confirmed what the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) had found. That is, there are few programs that require a PR research course (Todd, 2009), although in a recent study of 75 graduate programs comparing 2006 and 2011 U.S. data, Briones and Toth (2013) found an increase from 23 percent to 64 percent in research methods offerings. The need for this type of instruction is not a recent discovery. Over 60 years ago, Lang recognized that, “... PR policy should be based on effective and thorough research” (Lang, 1951, p. 54). Research improves an organization’s ability to engage in two-way communication (Grantham, Vieira, & Trincherro, 2011; Vieira & Grantham, 2014) and establish accountability. Studies have supported that PR research is “the strategic foundation of modern public relations management” (Stacks & Michaelson, 2010).

The PRSSA is the largest pre-professional organization for future PR practitioners. There are currently over 250 PRSSA chapters housed at various college and university campuses throughout the United States. The PRSSA requires schools that want to have a student chapter to offer, at a minimum, the following five courses: Introduction to PR, PR Writing and Production, PR Research, PR Strategy and Implementation (e.g., Case Problems, Campaigns Course), and Supervised PR Experience (Public Relations Student Society of America, 2014). There is no requirement that the students actually take the five courses, only that the courses are available or that there is sufficient exposure to specific knowledge and skills (e.g. PR research) offered in the institution’s PR course sequence. Alternatively, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) does not have a list of required courses, but instead focuses on student/professional mentoring relationships and professional development opportunities. A student can be an IABC student member without being part of a chapter.

A 2006 Public Relations Society of America Commission Report identified 14 key areas for knowledge and 22 areas for skills that undergraduates should have in order to contribute fully to the PR industry (Turk, 2006). A key recommendation was that, “More critical than ever is the need for solid research skills and the ability to interpret and use research in decision-making. Students must be capable of conducting research, analyzing and interpreting data and information, integrating research into planning and management, and conducting evaluation that demonstrates results” (Turk, 2006; p. 44). The report endorsed the five courses PRSSA lists as well as a range of additional liberal arts courses that students should take to round out their education and complement their PR major. These courses include interpersonal communication, consumer behavior, and

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