



Determining factors leading to strategic management PR practitioner roles



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 July 2014

Received in revised form 5 March 2015

Accepted 5 May 2015

Keywords:

PR practitioners
College coursework
PR experience
PR management

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

graphic design to name a few. Additionally, a study by [Cho and Auger \(2010\)](#) reported that employers wanted practitioners at all levels to have skills in writing, strategy and planning, new and social media ([Lee, 2013](#)), public speaking, and media relations.

Following their education newly minted students will almost always assume a technical position in PR. As is common in many professions, it is only after employees have been with an organization for a number of years that they assume a supervisory role or strategic management tasks and/or responsibilities whether in a support or more direct capacity. A PR career path can be influenced by a number of factors including learned competencies and experience. Younger practitioners may have the benefit of recent courses that provide PR content and the latest skills sets including traditional and new technologies, all which may facilitate a career fast-track. On the other hand, the current crop of PR professionals especially those who have been in managerial or strategic decision-maker roles for years have the benefit of experience and organizational knowledge. This paradigm raises the question: Can the trajectory of a PR practitioner's path to becoming a strategic manager, or combined manager/technician be related to coursework s/he took while in college? Therefore,

RQ1: Is there a significant relationship between coursework and number of years in the profession on the respondent's PR role?

2.2. Organization type and gender as contributing factors to pr roles

Undergraduate PR programs should prepare students for the move from the technical role into the strategic management role through coursework that includes skills-based training, principles, ethics, and critical thinking. However, there are additional contributing factors that influence why a technical practitioner moves to a strategic role and how this transition occurs.

Movement from a tactical to a more strategic position can be driven by organizational needs as well as the requirements of specific PR positions within the organization, a process discovered in PR role research. Initially, researchers developed and tested categories that included communication technician, expert prescriber, communication facilitator, and problem solving process facilitator ([Dozier, 1984](#); [Ruihley & Fall, 2009](#)). Eventually these functions were collapsed into two major categories: manager and technician. Other researchers found that the type of public relations work (e.g., not-for-profit, corporate) and the size of the public relations function (one-person departments) were key factors in a practitioner's duties ([DeSanto & Moss, 2004](#); [DeSanto, Moss, & Newman, 2007](#)).

The majority of PR departments today employ fewer than five practitioners; many are one to two-person departments, which necessitate being both a manager and a technician as the need arises often including social media communication skills that afford organizations the ability to respond promptly to unanticipated events ([Kaul, 2013](#); [Wakefield, Plowman, & Curry, 2013](#)). The manager role includes all functions of strategic planning/communication including the use of research methods and analysis to produce an outcome based on strategic plans. The technician role is designed for content development, or output, and in support of the strategic function. It should be noted that some researchers found that the problem-solving process facilitator can serve as a go-between role; it is someone who uses a rational problem solving process that also involves technical tasks that support PR activities ([Johansson & Ottestig, 2011](#)).

PR practitioners essentially work either inside an organization or for an external organization such as an agency. Organizations tend to be stable and predominantly rely on PR technicians who usually engage in programmatic, routine tasks. On the other hand, agencies can be involved with novel, client-focus PR duties, which sometimes are more complex and can have potentially volatile outcomes. These situations rely more on expert prescribers and strategic planners, who have the occasion for making "untested" decisions and frequently provide innovative solutions to new and complex challenges often based on incomplete information. Consequently, PR demands vary based on the range of strategic planning within these organizations. The need for measuring can range from low to high, with more measurement associated with greater strategic planning and complexity. Additionally, there is the government sector, which focuses on providing information that constituents can use but for which there is little desire on their part to obtain feedback ([Grantham et al., 2011](#)).

Agency-settings tend to be less male dominated compared to organizations in general ([Froehlich & Peters, 2006](#); [Pompper & Jung, 2013](#)). Previous studies have shown a correlation between gender and the practitioner role. Nearly 85% of PR practitioners are women, up from 27% in 1970 ([Working, 2010](#)). Moreover, despite "feminist values" that contribute to professionalism, this has not equated with women assuming management positions, in part, due to the organizational culture ([Aldoory & Toth, 2004](#); [Dozier, Sha, & Shen, 2012](#); [Pompper & Jung, 2013](#)). With practitioner gender and organizational type in mind, we pose the following hypotheses:

H1. Males will be more likely to hold a management position than females.

H2. Practitioners in an agency will be more likely to function as strategic planners than practitioners in other organizational settings.

3. Methodology

Through the PRSA Research Foundation, PRSA staff emailed an invitation to 5000 members to participate in the study. Two weeks later, a follow-up email was sent to the same invitees. Individuals who were invited, but whose primary function

Table 1
Regression coefficients for public relations roles.

Outcome/predictors	β	Wald	df	<i>p</i>	Odds ratio
Manager					
Number of PR courses	0.021	0.24	1	0.624	1.021
Years of PR experience	0.049	8.032	1	0.005	1.051
Constant	−1.538	10.748	1	<.001	
Consultant					
Number of PR courses	−0.078	1.929	1	0.165	0.925
Years of PR experience	0.082	13.214	1	<.001	1.086
Constant	−2.518	15.514	1	<.001	
Technician					
Number of PR courses	0.096	1.738	1	0.188	1.101
Years of PR experience	−0.128	13.693	1	<.001	0.88
Constant	−0.229	0.132	1	<.001	

Note: combined manager/technician role is reference category. *N* = 256.

was to teach students, were sent to an exit page, which thanked them for their interest and informed them that this study was seeking responses from current practitioners. Five percent (*N* = 256) of the invited members completed the survey.

4. Results

There were 66% women (*n* = 170) and 34% men (*n* = 86). Twenty-six percent of the respondents were 40 years old or younger (*n* = 68), 29% were between 41–50 (*n* = 74), 34% were between 51–60 (*n* = 86), and 11% were 61 or older (*n* = 28). Fifty-four percent of respondents (*n* = 137) stated they had an associate/bachelor (*n* = 137), 41% masters (*n* = 106), and 4% doctorate (*n* = 11). The mean number of years in the profession was 20.5 (*sd* = 10.05) years and median was 20 (range 1–50) years.

Those in management roles comprised 30.5% (*n* = 78), technician 10.2% (*n* = 26), combined manager/technician 44.1% (*n* = 113), outside agency consultant 15.2% (*n* = 39). Participants reported working in the following types of organizations: corporations (29%, *n* = 75), non-profit (26%, *n* = 65), PR and communications agency (21%, *n* = 55), government (10%, *n* = 25), and other (14%, *n* = 36).

Research question 1 – Is there a significant relationship between coursework and number of years in the profession on the respondent's PR role? – was evaluated using multinomial logistic regression. Most respondents had been enrolled in a combination of the PRSA recommended coursework: Introduction to PR (51.6%), a PR Writing course (52.7%), PR Research (50.4%), PR Strategy (30.3%) and PR Implementation (36.7%). In addition to the PRSA required courses, students primarily took communication courses.

The years of professional PR experience by position were as follows: consultants from an external agency (*m* = 26.18, *sd* = 10.29), managers (*m* = .35, *sd* = 8.99), technician/managers (*m* = 19.01, *sd* = 8.86), and technicians (*m* = 10.58, *sd* = 9.05).

We regressed the four PR positions on number of course completed and years of PR experience. We found a number of significant relationships ($\chi^2(6) = 59.00, p < .001$). As depicted in Table 1, based on our sample, years of PR experience has a significant relationship with PR role. Since the technician/manager combination accounted for the most frequencies, it served as the reference category. Compared to the combination manager/technician role, managers are 5.1% more likely to have more years of PR experience ($\beta = .049, p = .005$), consultants are 8.6% more likely to have more experience ($\beta = .082, p < .001$), and technicians are 12% less likely to have as much PR experience ($\beta = -.128, p < .001$).

Additionally, there was a significant chi-square analysis finding of PR role by those respondents 40 and younger and those over 40 years old ($\chi^2(3) = 25.597, p < .001$). The significant difference was between the roles of manager (under 40 [*n* = 14, 17.9%] and over 40 [*n* = 64, 82.1%], adjusted residual = 2.10) and technician ≤ 40 [*n* = 17, 65.4%] and > 40 [*n* = 9, 34.6%, adjusted residual = 4.70] roles. Managers tended to be older than 40 years old and technician were 40 years old and younger.

The gender composition of management positions was explored by testing the following hypothesis:

H1. Males will be more likely to hold a management position than females. There was no significant difference in management position by gender ($\chi^2(1) = .267, p = .61$). Women comprised 64.1% of reported managerial positions and men indicated 35.9%, which were consistent with the total numbers.

H2. Practitioners in an agency will be more likely to function as strategic planners than practitioners in other organizational settings – revealed an unexpected finding. The contrary was supported. Organizational members were more likely to serve in strategic planning roles (*m* = 4.28, *sd* = 1.07 and *m* = 3.95, *sd* = 1.04, $F(5,255) = 4.79, p = .040$).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine the coursework, organizational structure, and gender as they relate to PR practitioner roles. We found a significant relationship between number of years in the profession and the practitioners' role.

The respondents' average number of years in the profession was 20+. The breakdown by age category was ≤ 30 years old: 4.90 years ($sd = 2.32$); 31–40 years old: 11.36 years ($sd = 4.02$); 41–50 years old: 19.61 years ($sd = 5.98$); 51–60 years old: 25.85 ($sd = 6.66$) 61+ years old: 34.07 years ($sd = 8.26$). There was a significant chi-square analysis finding of PR role by those respondents 40 and younger and over 40 years old. Managers tended to be over 40 years old and technicians were 40 and older.

Additionally, an ANOVA of number of courses by age group revealed a non-significant finding ($F(4,255) = .97, p = .42$). In the future with the emphasis on specific PRSA recommended relevant coursework, there might be a shift where there are more managers, who possess the requisite skills set, such as social media analytics and who are 40 years old and younger. Interestingly, the vast majority of research focused on PR education recommends research coursework as a cornerstone of PR education. The recommendations for the required coursework have only been in effect for approximately a decade, which suggests that their impact is yet to be felt on younger and newer practitioners. Thus, it may simply be too early to assess the influence of recommended coursework on career advancement. This begs the question: Will education compensate for lack of experience and the inverse? At some point, will one supersede the other?

This study also examined the relationship among gender, organizational type, and PR roles. The finding of no significance difference between men and women indicates that a change is occurring based on previous research (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Pompper & Jung, 2013). Of the study participants, 64% indicated they were women. Past research reported women comprised 67–85% of PR positions, and up to 81% of PR students were reported as female (Dozier et al., 2012; Turk, 2006). Many women leave the work place for short or long-term periods of time, or keep lower demand technician positions, in order to meet family responsibilities. It is likely that the sheer number of females in the PR profession who move into manager/technician or manager positions may offset the number of women electing to remain in technician positions (consults, $p_f = .62, p_m = .38$; managers, $p_f = .64, p_m = .36$; manager/technician, $p_f = .68, p_m = .32$; Technicians $p_f = .73, p_m = .27$).

The practitioner's organizational type produced significant results. The findings show that practitioners in an agency setting did not function as strategic planners as often as practitioners in corporate, non-profit, or non-governmental organizations. While agency practitioners bring a level of expertise, the fact that they are outside of the organization and not invested as an organizational member may explain this finding. In addition, the average number of organizational members was 247 ($Md = 350$). Since most PR departments are comprised of 1–3 practitioners, they may perform multiple functions including some strategic planning duties.

5.1. Limitations

There were a number of limitations. Owing to the quality and limited opportunities for internship as little as 20 years ago (Callanan & Benzing, 2004; Todd, 2009), and instrument size considerations, the study did not collect internship experience data even though PRSA requires its chapter schools to offer this option. Second, the response rate was low, which suggests that many participants self-selected. Our sample does not represent those practitioners who are not members of PRSA and/or who are members of competing communication, business or marketing professional associations. Therefore, although we may assume that they shared similarities, our generalizability is limited to PR professionals affiliated with PRSA. This condition could introduce response-bias. Last, coursework was operationalized by number of courses reported by the respondent, which does take into account student interest in specific PR or other courses, the impact of such courses on job performance, and/or perceived or actual skills acquired as a result of completing certain courses.

5.2. Practical implications

Because of the wide range of PR tasks, responsibilities, and required skills, our research findings pose questions such as do newly minted PR practitioners learn on the job what we should be teaching them in the classroom since coursework does not differentiate them by the time they are potential managers? Should we take a common core curriculum-like approach including higher-order skills development such as critical thinking? Is there a value in other types of degrees for those who wish to become PR professionals? Might traits such as work ethic or natural capacities or abilities overshadow formal education? If not, what effects might they have on an individual reaching her/his full PR career development potential? Which courses can best prepare students for a long-term career in public relations and perhaps shorten the time between a technician role and strategic management role?

Based on previous research findings, research courses should be a required component of any PR degree. However, PR measurement arguably cannot be mastered by completing one quantitative analysis or research methods course. With our new technologies and the advent of "big data," there are many opportunities to access not only psychological but online behavioral data (e.g., Facebook, Second Life). Tools to collect and analyze such data are constantly evolving and improving. In light of this, we propose a quantitative analysis/research certificate at the undergraduate level and a quantitative analysis/research certificate of advanced graduate study (CAGS) at the graduate level consisting of 5–7 courses such as Introduction to Statistics, Intermediate Statistics (CAGS), Research Design, Research Design II (CAGS), Survey Development, Research Report Evaluation and Production, and Operations, and Web Analytics.

Additionally, we propose requiring the following six courses, which are similar to PRSA recommendations: introduction to PR, PR Writing across the media, graphic design, PR Research, PR Strategy and Planning, and PR Implementation (Daugherty, 2011). We also strongly recommend Social Media Communication and analytics. Writing across the media,

graphic design across platforms and Social Media Communication are courses that accommodate the dynamic communication environment today. Writing across the media provides skills to PR practitioners who wish to produce copy in different mediums for different audiences who may process information differently depending on the channel. Social media, which is a cost-effective channel, is a relatively inexpensive medium that requires special skills which consider audience “voice” understanding and production, and involves social psychological and sociological factors (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Kelleher & Sweetser, 2012; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). This growing channel of communication, mobile phone apps have surpassed desktops/laptops for internet access (O’Toole, 2014), provides a new arena not only for research-based planning, but also product development.

Optional PR courses might include multicultural or international PR, marketing and consumer behavior coursework, psychology courses, or a minor in a related field.

5.3. Future research

We recommend a number of areas for future research. The first would address the extent to which professionals believe their (lack of) PR coursework was instrumental in their current PR role. Additionally, they would be asked about the relevance and importance of courses noted and recommended by PRSA and how these courses might or might not accommodate the current PR environment? Perhaps a follow-up study of focus group or interviews with 10–15 PR practitioners might help us further understand the “why” of this research’s findings.

Future studies should also assess whether the respondents’ internship participation was perceived as valuable in seeking employment and in preparing them for the PR profession. There should be a structured internship experience for students that includes exposure to the role of research in strategic decision making (Daugherty, 2011).

6. Conclusion

PR has clearly defined itself as a fluid and evolving profession. Changes in required skills, ability to execute with new technologies, regularly update technological skill sets (Lee, 2013), and the globalization and diversification of the business climate in the past decade alone illustrate the need to consistently examine and update curriculum guidelines in order to provide the background that will assist practitioners to assume effective management roles (Valentini et al., 2012). This is a process that should occur at regular intervals and should include new and innovative approaches to teaching and learning appropriate for constantly evolving PR-related technologies (Willis & McKie, 2011).

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