An Online Ethics Training Module for Public Relations Professionals:
A Demonstration Project

Lee Anne Peck, Ph.D., and Nancy J. Matchett, Ph.D.

The researchers developed and tested an online training module with both experienced public relations professionals and newcomers to the field with the hopes of helping them sharpen and refine their ethical decision-making skills. The researchers' pilot study found that although most testers reported the Web site was difficult to navigate and/or found the ethical content to be complex, the majority believed their ethical decision-making abilities were improved. The module drew from the resources of the Center for Ethical Deliberation (CED) Web site developed by one of the researchers. The goal of the demonstration project, or pilot study, was to develop a specific "Public Relations" area on the CED Web site that would be devoted to the ethical issues likely to arise in the public relations field.

These issues included
1) disclosure of information,
2) conflicts of interest, and
3) lying, or spinning information, for a client or an organization.

The researchers tailored the CEDs Guided Deliberation Processes to these three, highlighting the specific links between these issues and more general ethical concepts and analytical tools. With some changes to the PR module and the CED site, this tool could be used by professionals, newcomers to the profession and students preparing for a PR career.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A December 2007 study published by the Institute for Public Relations examined the current state of public relations ethics and found many PR practitioners rely on codes of ethics for their decision-making (Bowen, 2,3). Codes used are created in-house or come from professional organizations such as the Public Relations Society of America (3). It should be noted, however, that not all PR practitioners belong to such organizations, and even if they do, it does not mean they use codes as guidelines. Also in question is whether PR practitioners have had training in ethical decision-making— while in college or while on the job.

Although classic PR cases exist, that can teach PR professionals lessons from the past, poor decision-making continues. Examples of poor PR behavior are posted regularly on the Web sites of The Center for Public Integrity, PR Watch and Corporate Watch,

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among others. Because PR professionals are oftentimes involved in decision-making at the highest levels of influential organizations, it is crucial that practitioners work with professional moral values and good ethical decision-making skills.

According to Bowen's 2007 study, 70% of those questioned in an International Association of Business Communicators survey reported they had little in the way of ethics training (7). "The deficit in communication professionals who are thoroughly versed in ethics may pose potential problems," Bowen said. "Those who do not have training in ethical decision making may be unfamiliar with alternate modes of analyses that could yield valuable input into the strategic decision-making process" (8). Bowen suggested in her report that PR practitioners get the training they need before an ethical dilemma arises with their own work or in the workplace (11).

Martinson (2004) pointed out that public relations students often are confused by questions that involve communicating ethically while also advocating for their clients. They become confused, he noted, because of the negative perception that PR professionals have because some do not communicate truth. The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) emphasized that "a consideration of ethics should pervade all content of public relations professional education," noting that if a curriculum cannot provide such education, short courses or mini-seminars should be made available (4).

In an effort to address the above, especially Bowen's study. the researchers developed and tested an online training module with both experienced public relations professionals and newcomers to the field with the hopes of helping them sharpen and refine their ethical decision-making skills. The module drew from the resources of the Center for Ethical Deliberation (CED) Web site developed by one of the researchers, now hosted at http://www.mcb.unco.edu/ced. The site was originally designed to help undergraduate college students grapple with personal ethical conflicts that arise on residential campus settings.

Web-based ethics training

Although Web-based tools for ethics teaching and training exist, none deploys the unique combination of elements within the Guided Deliberation Process and the wider CED Web site. These other tools can be grouped into three overlapping categories:

(1) sites that link users to fairly static information or content about ethics, such as Ethics Bites (http://www.open2.net/ethicsbites/), the Ethics Resource Center (http://www.ethics.org/), Ethics Updates (http://ethics.sandiego.edu/), the library at Global Ethics.net (http://www.globethics.net), the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (http://www.scu.edu/ethics/), the Online Ethics Center (http://www.onlineethics.org/), and Case Place.org (http://www.caseplace.org/). Many of these sites have some content that might be useful to public relations professionals; however, none of these

sites guides users through the process of applying ethical values and patterns of reasoning to concrete dilemmas that arise in a public relations setting.

(2) sites that provide users with opportunities for self-exploration via the use of personality tests and opinion polls, including Your Morals (http://www.yourmorals.org/) and Ethics Etc. (http://ethics-etc.com/) as well as several of the sites identified in (1) above. Again, understanding one's "ethical personality" and how it relates to the ethical personalities of clients and colleagues can be valuable for working professionals. The Public Relations module of the CED Web site incorporates this element by helping users understand the differences between duty-based, consequentialist, and virtue-based ethical reasoning. It also trains users to apply all three modes of thinking to public relations dilemmas.

(3) sites that provide users with substantial networking and feedback opportunities, such as Global Ethics.net and Ethics Etc. as well as Ethics Share (https://www.ethicshare.org/) and Ask Philosophers (http://www.askphilosophers.org/). These types of sites provide users with opportunities to "try out" their ethical reasoning on others in a relatively safe, anonymous setting. Although not incorporated into the pilot test, the guided deliberation process was designed to do this as well by allowing users to submit completed deliberation for feedback from a trained ethics coach.

Three sites that combine all of these elements and are most closely related to this project include the Online Learning Tool for Research Integrity and Image Processing and the closely related Online Tools for Education in Issues of Scholarly Integrity (http://www.democmesite.cme.uab.edu/ORI/Case_Study/default.html and http://www.uab.edu/graduate/rcr/index.html, respectively). Both engage users in the process of working through interactive case studies, prompting them to explain their reasoning along the way. (One of the researchers collaborated on the development of both of these tools.) However, each is limited in scope to ethical issues related to scientific conduct. Similarly, the Open Seminar in Research Ethics (http://openseminar.org/ethics/) encourages users to relate insights from some of the most influential ethical theories to their own conduct and to network with other users on the site. However, this site is also limited to scientific research.

By contrast, the Guided Deliberation Process embedded within the Public Relations module of the CED Web site uses the digital environment to facilitate sustained deliberation and meaningful personal reflection with and about ethical values in general as well as to engage users in the process of applying ethical values and principles to the choices faced as PR professionals.

The Public Relations module

The core of the CED is an interactive "Guided Deliberation Process" designed to help users (1) identify the ethical dimensions of their choices, and (2) deliberate more effectively about how to resolve ethical conflicts. It is informed by ethical theory, but rather than teaching the theory didactically, it engages users directly in the process of

using time-tested conceptual and analytic tools in order to reason about concrete issues faced in their daily lives. Because this process helps users understand the relevance of "abstract" ethical thinking with their everyday decision-making, the CED Web site also provides them with many opportunities to explore a wide variety of ethical theories and concepts in more detail.

The goal of the demonstration project, or pilot study, was to develop a specific "Public Relations" area on the CED Web site devoted to the ethical issues likely to arise in the public relations field. These issues included
1) disclosure of information,
2) conflicts of interest, and
3) lying, or spinning information, for a client or an organization.

The researchers tailored the CEDs Guided Deliberation Processes to these three, highlighting the specific links between these issues and more general ethical concepts and analytical tools. Key concepts for public relations ethics – including the relevance of values such as honesty, openness, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity and clear communication (Bowen 2007, 3)—were also highlighted.

METHOD

The core content of the PR module was developed during fall 2008. This content included information about the module and its relationship to the CED Web site as a whole, navigational advice, and three detailed case studies created with the CEDs Guided Deliberation Process. (The case studies were created specifically for the pilot study.)

During winter 2009, the researchers
(1) oversaw the creation of the module and tested the coding of the site,
(2) recruited 12 public relations professionals in the Northern Colorado/Denver area to test the site and provide feedback on its effectiveness, and
(3) developed a demographic questionnaire, "pre" and "post" assessment cases, and a usability survey to be completed by the 12 testers.

The month of May and the first half of June 2009 were devoted to the following: collecting demographic data, testing the training module's effectiveness via the pre- and post-test and other case studies using the guided deliberation process, and collecting information about the usability of the site with the volunteer public relations professionals. In addition to using pre- and post-test information to determine how much growth in ethical decision-making skills were facilitated by the training module, the researchers collected data on the types of issues described on the site as well as users' perceptions of how helpful it was in helping them resolve an issue.

A volunteer sample was used for the pilot study; eight testers were recruited with the help of a member of the Colorado chapter of the Public Relations Society of America and the remaining four were recruited by one of the researchers, a public relations

instructor. The project was cleared through the authors' university Institutional Review Board. The demographic questionnaire and pre- and post-tests case studies were modified from one researcher's dissertation project.

The PR module was coded and added to the CED Web site by an independent Web-programming consultant working with the director of applications and databases, IT Applications and Database Support, at the researchers' institution. No changes were made to the core structure of the CED Web site itself: The PR content was formatted according to the existing site template, and hyperlinks were used to demonstrate relationships between the specific PR content and the site's more general information about ethical deliberation. Although the researchers had originally planned to include objective quizzes to enable users to self-test their understanding of the module, this proved to be cost- and time-prohibitive because such a tool was not already part of the basic coding of the site. The 12 testers created e-mail aliases specifically for the pilot study so their identities would be anonymous; they each were given one month to complete their part of the pilot study—although about one-third requested more time. This additional time was granted, and all participants completed the pilot within six weeks.

RESULTS

All quantitative results were completed using SPSS for Windows, version 9.0. Information from the demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) follows. The testers ranged from age 24 to 61 with 50% of the testers between the ages of 24 to 28 (Figure 1). One-third of the testers were male while two-thirds were female, which reflects the percentage of males and females working in the industry today (Figure 2; Seitel, 2007, 251).

Figures 1 and 2: Sex, age of respondents
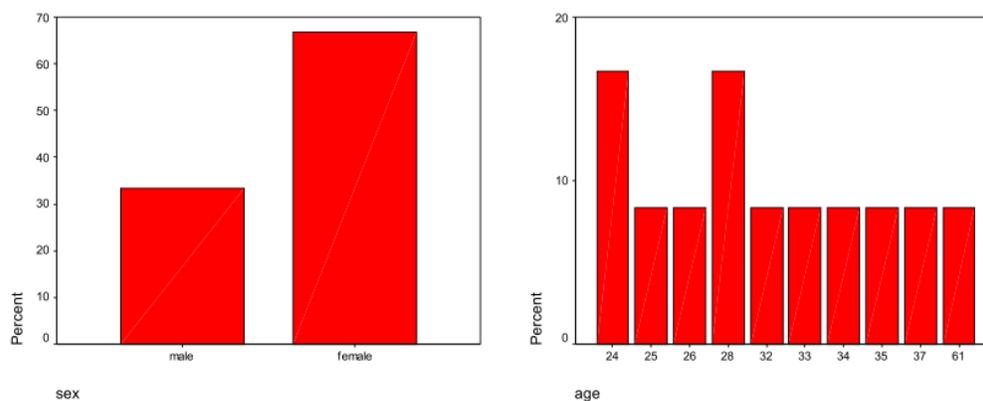
The testers' job titles were diverse—from public relations associate to opportunity manager—which reflects the diversity of job titles in the public relations field today (Seitel, 2007, 3). All participants, except one self-employed professional, reported to someone who had a professional title such as vice president of retail operations or development director; no two titles were similar.

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Additional Demographic Data

One-third of the testers did public relations work in the education sector while one-fourth worked for non-profits. Seventeen percent worked in specific public relations/marketing firms while another 17% worked in the financial sector; one tester, the 61-year-old, was retired from the public relations industry although taught introductory public relations courses at a university. One person was self-employed while others worked in PR departments that ranged in size from two-person teams to 70-person teams. Forty-two percent reported they had bachelor's degrees, 17% had master's degrees, one person had some undergraduate education, and one-third had some graduate work. All respondents had studied in the communications fields.

Half of the respondents said their organizations followed a code of ethics, one-fourth said no code of ethics was followed, and 17% said they didn't know (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Does your organization follow a code of ethics?
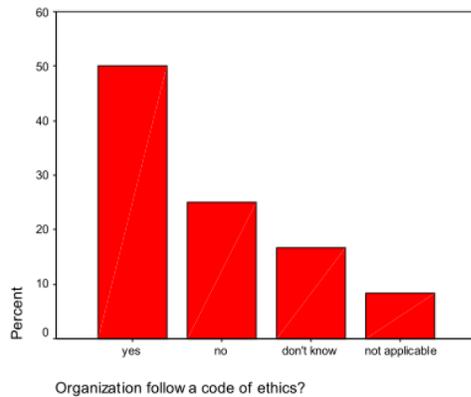
Of the 12 testers, one said the organization followed the PRSA code of ethics while 42 percent reported the code used was unique to his or her organization.

More than one-third had not had a media ethics course during their studies while 58% had taken a course; one person did not remember. One-fourth of respondents said that, yes, they had taken a course in formal ethics training since being employed while three-fourths said they had received no formal training (Figure 4).

*Figure 4: Formal ethics training since being employed?*

Formal training since employed
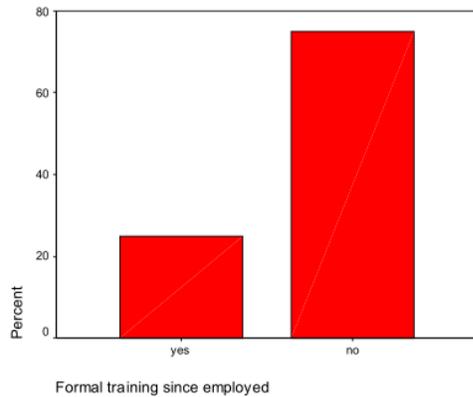
To the question, "Do you consider yourself spiritual?" more than half (58%) said they considered themselves more spiritual than not while the remainder answered "more no than yes." Half were a member of a church. When asked if ethics was discussed formally in workplace, 75% said no, yet 75% said that ethics was discussed informally (Figures 5 and 6).

*Figures 5 and 6: Have you discussed ethics in the workplace . . .*

Formally?   Informally?

Ethics discussed formally in workplace   has ethics been discussed informally
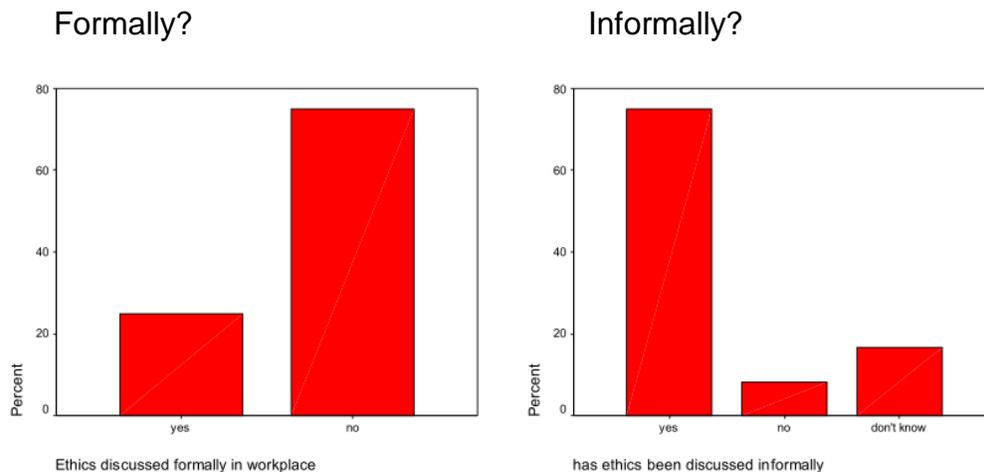
One-fourth of the testers said they could "regularly" recognize an ethical dilemma while 75% said they could oftentimes recognize a dilemma (Figure 7). One-fourth said they could regularly "take a stand" with a dilemma that involved their own work while two-thirds said they could oftentimes take a stand, and one person said he or she could seldom take a stand (Figure 8).

Figures 7 and 8: Pre-deliberation

Able to recognize
an ethical dilemma?

Able to take a stand when a
dilemma involves your own work?
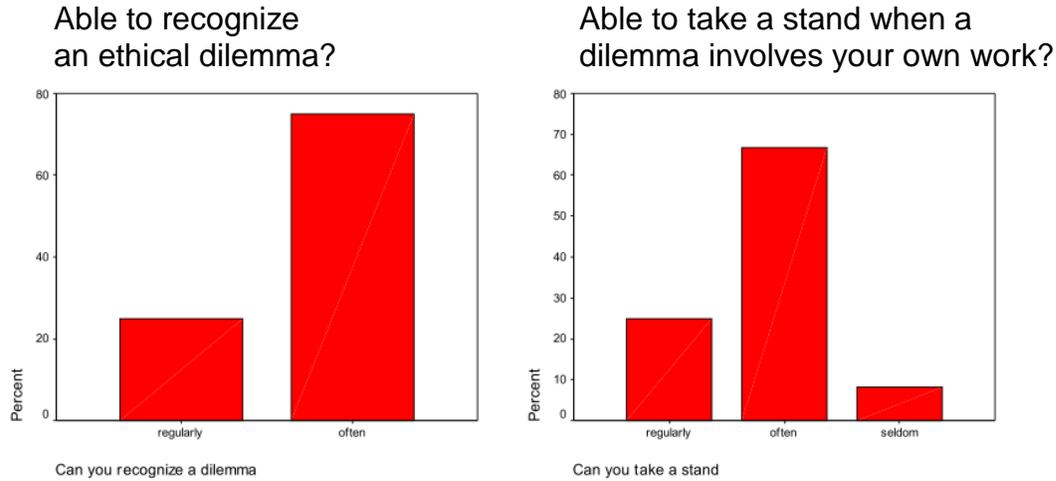
When faced with an ethical dilemma, the testers were asked to answer "yes" or "no" to several suggestions for solving the problem (Figures 9-12). One-third said they went with their "gut reactions" to help them come to a solution. Ninety-two percent would ask others' opinions. Eighty-three percent said they would follow the guidance of a supervisor; 92% of the testers said they would not review a code of ethics or seek the guidance of a philosopher; and all testers said they would not follow church teachings.

Figures 9-12: When faced with an ethical dilemma, I . . .

Go with my gut reaction.

Ask others' opinions.
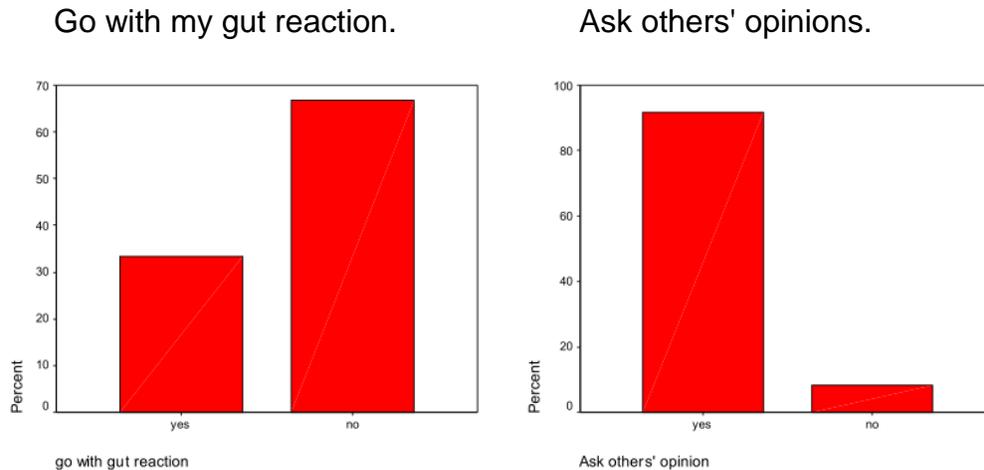
Follow guidance of a supervisor.   Consult a code of ethics.
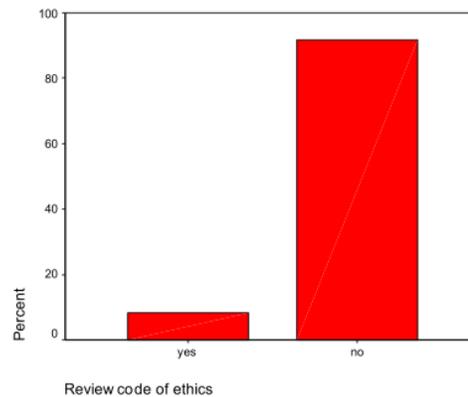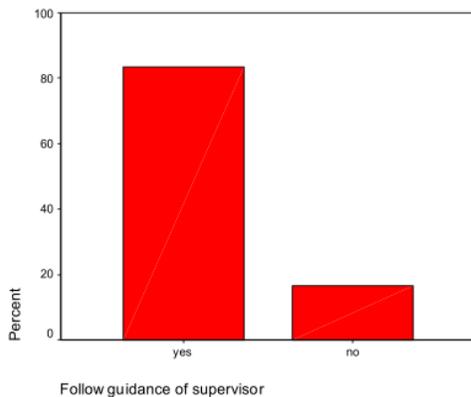

Pre-test and Post-test Data

Pre-test and post-test cases each had at least one of each of the following issues: conflict of interest, disclosure, and lying. In the pre-test case (Appendix B), which testers worked through before using the site, 17% said they would do the supervisor's requested work while 83% reported they would not do her work. One-third of the testers said they would not do the work because of their future reputations of being a "flack." One-fourth expressed the concern that Helen was, in fact, unethical, and another one-fourth said there was a problem with "misrepresentation." Two-thirds identified all three issues, one-fourth identified two while one tester identified none (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Pretest number of PR ethics issues identified
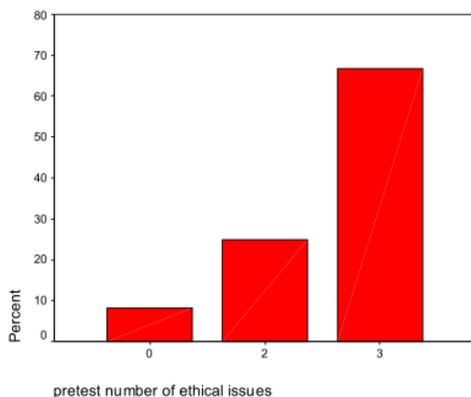
In the post-test case study (Appendix C), which was written as a different situation but set up with the same three issues, 83% of the testers again reported they would not accept the politician as a client with one respondent replying he or she would work for him, and one saying he or she did not know. Two-thirds, the majority, said the firm should not work for the politician because it would be dishonest work. Of the remaining percentage, one person said it was a clear conflict of interest and another said it was

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too great of risk to the firm's reputation. Three-fourths of the respondents listed every ethical issue, slightly higher than the pre-test (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Post-test number of ethical issues
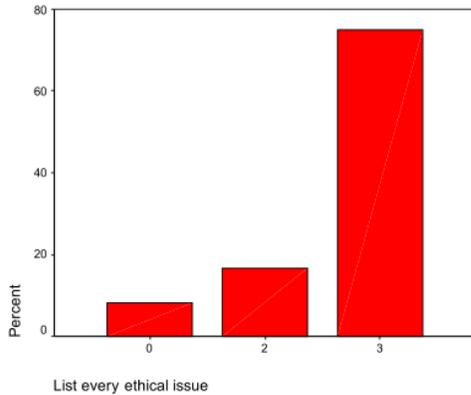
Online Deliberations (Case Studies)

As mentioned previously, the informational content on the PR module included examples of three cases that were resolved using the site's interactive Guided Deliberation Process. These sample cases were developed by the researchers; one wrote the case studies, and the other resolved them using the Guided Deliberation Process. Each case dealt with one of the three types of issues highlighted above (disclosure of information, conflicts of interest and lying or spinning information for a client). At the end of the module, testers were given three additional cases to work through on their own (Appendix D). Three-fourths of the testers submitted all three cases using the online Guided Deliberation Process; one person did not complete any of the cases but completed the pre- and post-tests and the usability surveyi; and one person completed only one deliberation. It should be noted that one tester used the guided deliberation process to work through an additional, real-life issue with which he or she was dealing during the period of the pilot test. This submission was unprompted.

Usability Survey

After finishing the requirements of the pilot study, testers were asked to complete a usability survey (Appendix E), which included a four-point scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 4 being strongly agree. When asked whether the general resources on the CED site were easy to navigate, 42% disagreed while 58% agreed. Twenty percent disagreed the site's content was clear while 80% agreed it was clear. When asked whether the site was comprehensive, one person disagreed while 92% of testers either agreed (50%) or strongly agreed (42%).

When asked whether the content of the PR module alone (independent of the rest of the site) was clear, 25% of the testers disagreed while 75% either agreed (58%) or strongly agreed (17%) (Figure 15). When asked whether the PR module was comprehensive,

one person disagreed and one person strongly disagreed while 84% either agreed (42%) or strongly agreed (42%). Twenty-five percent of the testers disagreed that the relationship between the PR module and the CED was easy to understand while 58% agreed and 17% strongly agreed.

Figure 15: Was the content of the PR Module clear?


content of site clear
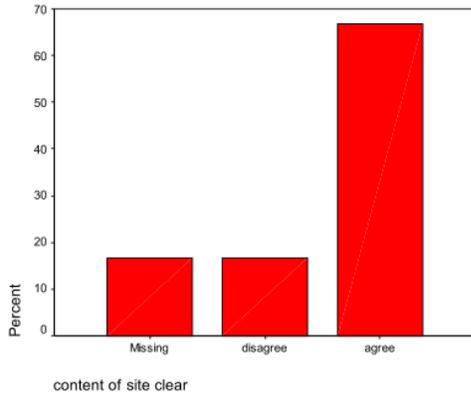
Did the testers believe that the PR module (and the site as a whole) increased their ethical decision-making skills with public relations issues? One-fourth disagreed while three-fourths agreed, with 58% agreeing and 17% strongly agreeing. One person disagreed when asked whether the site increased confidence in their ability to identify dilemmas, while 92% of the testers agreed (75%) or strongly agreed (17%) (Figure 16).

Figures 16 and 17: Working through the module increased . . .

My confidence in being able to identify ethical dilemmas.
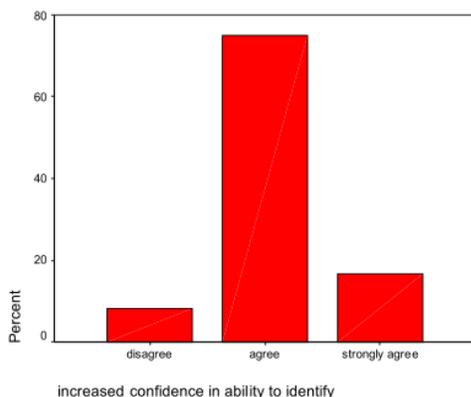
My ability to resolve ethical dilemmas

increased confidence in ability to identify

Increased ability to resolve issues
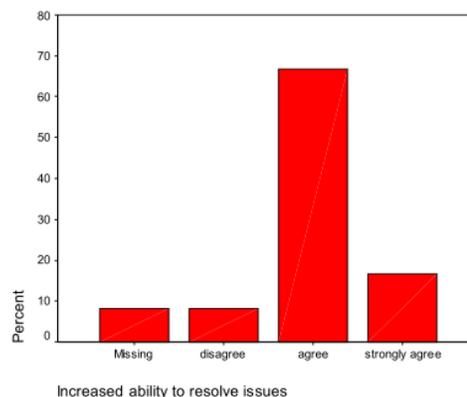
One tester disagreed that the module helped to increase his or her ability to resolve issues, while 73% agreed and 18% strongly agreed that the site was helpful (Figure 17). Twenty-five percent of testers disagreed that the guided deliberation process was

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helpful when responding to the case studies in the module while 75% either agreed (33%) or strongly agreed (42%) that the process was helpful. It should be noted that both of the respondents who took an ethics course outside of a communication or mass communications program reported that they strongly agreed that the site was a useful one; all of the respondents who did not take a media ethics course at all during their education (one-third of the testers) agreed or strongly agreed the site was useful (Figure 18).

*Figure 18: The CED process was useful to me.*
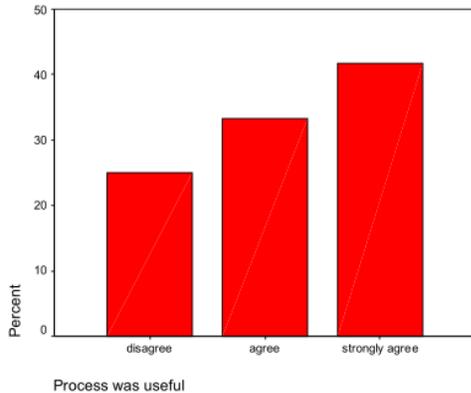
While one-fourth of the testers disagreed they would use the process in the workplace and two testers said they strongly disagreed, 58% said they would use the process with one person strongly agreeing and one-half of respondents agreeing; as mentioned earlier, one tester submitted an unprompted deliberation about an issue he or she was currently faced with in the workplace (Figure 19). Would the testers recommend the site to others? One-fourth disagreed (17%) or strongly disagreed (8%) while the remaining three-fourths of testers said they would recommend it with 42% agreeing and 33% strongly agreeing (Figure 20).

Figures 19 and 20: Use in workplace and recommendation to others

I would use the CED process in my workplace.
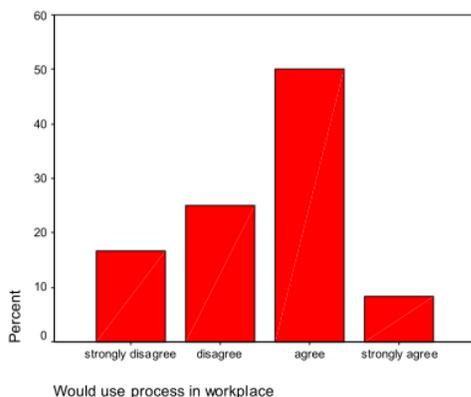
I would recommend this site to others.
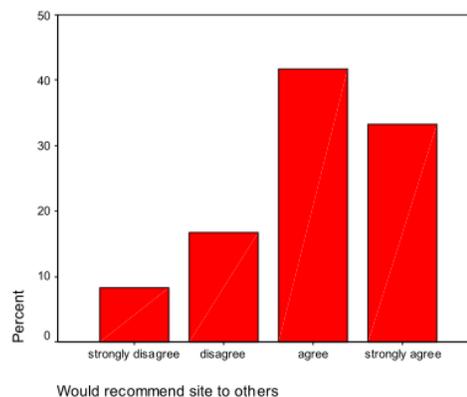
When asked if taking quizzes could help users develop a more accurate understanding of the content on the module, three-fourths said yes and the remainder said they did not know.

Open-ended Feedback

Testers were also given the opportunity to answers the open-ended question, "Please provide any additional comments about how to improve the online ethics training module for public relations professionals." Responses are summarized below:

Many suggested breaking the PR portion of the Web site into multiple pages, so they would not need to do excessive scrolling to arrive at the end of the page; some found the site difficult to navigate or confusing. However, many believed the content and purpose of the site were excellent. "It's a great tool," one tester reported. "I think a little more emphasis on the importance of really exploring and reading the content available in the module would help. Depending on your learning style it may not be overly intuitive to use although I went through the module in a very linear format – clicking on each link to read that content then returning to the main PR module."

Another tester reported that he or she would have also liked pop-up windows for the links to the frameworks and values/ethical standards of professional organizations, but "all in all, found it useful to run through the exercise to support the proposed course of action." One tester said that he or she realized that the "example" button could be clicked but not until halfway through the process. "I think highlighting that button a bit more so people who are unsure of how to best answer the questions can gain some clarification – this way the next step of the process will be clear," the tester said.

Although there was some confusion about navigating the site, one tester reported, what many implied, "Overall the process of thinking through the situation—consequences, duties, and virtues—helped me analyze the situation in a manner that I believe helped me reach the best solution in the end. If I had the time to analyze every situation to this extent, I am sure that my decisions would lead me in the right direction!"

DISCUSSION

Did this project demonstrate that an online ethics-training module could be an effective tool for teaching and training public relations professionals? When one looks at testers' answers to the demographic survey, 50% of the respondents reported their organizations followed a code of ethics with only one of those stating the PRSA code was used. The remaining 50% either said their organizations did not have a code or they did not know if there was one. Furthermore, only one tester said he or she would seek guidance from a code when faced with an ethical dilemma; instead, 83% reported they would seek guidance from a supervisor. Although one-fourth of the respondents said ethics was discussed formally in their workplaces, three-fourths said ethics was discussed informally.

The above suggests that PR professionals are engaged regularly with ethical issues and supports Bowen's view that more needs to be done with ethical decision-making in the PR profession. For those who do not use codes or do not have formal training or discussions about ethics, something similar to the PR module on the CED could be a helpful alternative. It is also noteworthy that testers who "strongly agreed" that the module was useful included both those who had taken ethics courses outside a communications department and testers who had not taken any media ethics courses. The fact that an online module is available 24 hours a day and can be used anonymously and asynchronously may make it an especially attractive training option for busy professionals.

That said, there were no substantial differences between pre- and post-test results, and so this demonstration project cannot be said to have shown any objective improvement in ethical issue identification. Take note that Coleman and Wilkins found that when public relations professionals in their 2005-2006 study "The Moral Development of Public Relations Practitioners" were given ethical dilemmas to work through involving their own profession, they did significantly better than when the ethical issues did not involve their own profession (319). What is interesting to note, however, is the fact that testers did report increased confidence in their abilities to both identify and resolve ethical conflicts. Whether this newfound confidence is due to actual increases in testers' knowledge of ethical values, principles, and skills in ethical reasoning or is simply because practicing an activity tends to increase a person's general confidence about it, remains unclear. A follow-up study designed to answer this question seems warranted. The existing CED interface includes coaching functionality that enables users to submit their case study deliberations anonymously and receive expert feedback. This functionality was not included in the pilot test because the goal of this demonstration project was to determine whether content provided via an online module would be beneficial on its own. However, the one tester who chose to submit a real-life deliberation to the site did take advantage of this functionality, so there is some evidence that PR professionals would like to have such feedback. While the sample size was too small to reach any significant conclusions, it should be noted that this process could be used by organizations to provide additional guidance to their employees. The process could also be opened up so that individuals could submit deliberations to the wider CED user community (or to a subset including only other PR professionals or only other members of their organization, for instance) for anonymous feedback. Given the high percentage (75%) of users who report engaging in informal conversations about ethics in their workplace, further studies investigating the usefulness of this option also seem warranted.

Plans are in place to make the site easier to navigate, or more user-friendly, thus addressing the mortality/fatigue problems with some of the testers. Plans are also in place to add online quizzes to provide users with an opportunity to self-test their understanding of the site content. It should be noted that usability comments from testers in the PR module are similar to those from people who have used the CED Web site's general resources in other contexts. If the site can be tested again with a larger sample size, the researchers would also add or revise the following questions:

- The question "How many years working in the PR profession?" would be added.

- The pre- and post-test cases would be made even more similar and coded for specific values as well as specific issue types. This would allow for a more detailed analysis of changes in user's ability to identify and resolve specific types of issues, and more detailed understanding of the values relied on by PR professionals.

- A detailed scoring system would be devised so that researchers could evaluate the quality of online deliberations submitted by users. This would provide a more objective assessment of how well the module improved users' ethical deliberation skills, which could then be cross-referenced with users' perceptions of how much the site improved their abilities.

- The comparative question "If you had previous ethical training before using the module, which training did you find more useful?" would be added.

CONCLUSION

It appears that even though many of the testers could already identify the dilemmas or issues highlighted in the pre-test, they still believed that the site was helpful for working through similar issues in other cases and that it increased their ethical deliberation skills. Regarding usability, this demonstration project reinforces the fact that there is a difficult balancing act between overwhelming users with detailed content they may have difficulty seeing the relevance of, and providing them with engaging opportunities to apply only the most essential knowledge and skills. The researcher who developed the CED Web site is working with IT and Web-development staff on ways to simplify the top level content while still providing ample opportunities for individual users to access deeper and more difficult levels of content should they want or need to do so. Once these changes are made to the overall structure of the CED, they can be applied to the PR module as well.

The researchers believe with some changes to the PR module and the CED site, this tool could be used by professionals, newcomers to the profession and students preparing for a PR career. In the meantime, the module can be found at http://www.mcb.unco.edu/ced/pr.cfm, and the researchers welcome feedback from any interested parties.

Note: When crosstabs were used, it was discovered that the respondent who did work through the cases—thus, not working through the module—responded negatively to the project in general. He or she also reported he would work for the questionable client in the post-test.

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