

Global Capabilities in Public Relations

Amy Thurlow, Ph.D.
Mount Saint Vincent University

Alexandre Sévigny, Ph.D.
McMaster University

Mark Dottori
University of Ottawa

Abstract

This research provides insights into the Canadian arm of a global initiative to identify capabilities in public relations and communication management. The Global Capabilities project, is dedicated to surfacing the core capabilities required by and reflected in the public relations discipline. This paper articulates the findings from Canada, in phase one of this project. Results indicate that academics, practitioners and employers appear to have agreement around the central nature of two capabilities: planning communication to be in alignment with strategic purpose and the ability to apply critical thinking and problem solving to organizational issues.

Introduction

The Global Capabilities project¹, is a nine-country, two-year undertaking dedicated to surfacing the core capabilities required by and reflected in the public relations discipline. This paper articulates the findings from Canada², one of the partner countries in this study, in the first phase of this three-phase project. In this phase researchers employed a Delphi technique to gather data from experts in the field of public relations to identify core capabilities required by practitioners. Specifically, this research sought to; i) to provide a holistic, humanistic, and cultural understanding of professional capabilities required in Canadian public relations, and through inference, the profession in general, ii) provide critical insights into public relations theory for scholars, and (iii) assist professional bodies and educators to assess priorities and future directions for the public relations field.

Public relations has been characterized as an applied science and a management discipline in communication theory (Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006). The term public relations is not a neutral technical term, but a concept that connotes different meanings in different cultural con-

¹ The Global Capability Framework for Public Relations and Communications Management is a two-year research project (2016-2018) designed to be used by PR professional bodies and practitioners around the world, as well as influencing curricula. It is funded by the University of Huddersfield and supported by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA). <https://www.hud.ac.uk/about/schools/huddersfield-business-school/research/gcpr/>

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texts (L'Etang, 2013b). Although the origin of public relations is a topic of debate, it is generally agreed that the modern public relations industry emerged during the late 19th century, primarily, but not exclusively, in the United States (Heath & Coombs, 2006). Changes to the concept and practice of public relations reflect the evolving roles of organizations in society (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007).

Public relations scholars have struggled to articulate the competencies, capabilities, or skills required in public relations practice (Figuee, Gosselt, Linders, & Jong, 2017; Flynn, 2014). Most of the work done has focused on the definition of the public relations role and practice (e.g. Curtin, 2012; Rickey, 2012; Vieira & Grantaham, 2014), to the exclusion of a general body of knowledge of the field. As Gregory (2008) pointed out, the resulting confusion around terminology and role definition has produced a disjointed body of literature in which terms such as roles, competency and capabilities are used interchangeably. With this challenge in mind, the Global Capabilities Project in Public Relations was initiated in 2016. It included researchers from nine countries with the goal to investigate public relations capabilities from a global perspective. The initiative adopted Sen's (1999) capability approach which provided an alternative way of understanding professional competence and allowed for the integration of values, agency, and the mitigation of Western cultural dominance.

This research provides insights into the Canadian arm of the project, articulating the findings from the first phase of this three-stage, two-year project. This first phase employed a Delphi technique to gather data from experts in the field of public relations to identify core capabilities required by practitioners. Specifically, this research sought to; i) to provide a holistic, humanistic, and cultural understanding of professional capabilities required in Canadian public relations, and through inference, the profession in general, ii) provide critical insights into public relations theory for scholars, and (iii) assist professional bodies and educators to assess priorities and future directions for public relations.

Literature Review

Public Relations

Public relations continues to be an emerging field of study with no consensus definition of its boundaries, changing nature, or theoretical underpinnings embraced by both scholars and practitioners (Curtin, 2011; Edwards, 2011; Greenwood, 2010; L'Etang, 2013a). Thus, public relations research is informed by rather different sets of assumptions, values, and worldviews that have been subject to debate (Davidson, 2016; Fitch & L'Etang, 2016; Russell & Lamme, 2016).

In 1977, Rex Harlow of Stanford University, one of the founders of modern public relations scholarship, reviewed public relations definitions. He found 472 which lead him to comment,

a review of public relations shows that the definition has changed considerably over the past 70 years. This historical review reveals how inextricably the development of the definition has been, and is bound to the movement of thought and action of the society in which the public relations practitioner does their work. It shows the present form, content, and status of the public relations definition, but even more the effect of environmental factors and change upon its development (p.49).

Common terms used in most definitions of public relations include; deliberate, planned, performance, public interest, two-way communication, and strategic management function (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008; Wilcox & Cameron, 2012) and reflect the dominant functional/normative public relations paradigm of Grunig's "Excellence" framework (Gower, 2006, L'Etang, 2013b). The framework resulted from a landmark study in 1984 that concluded public relations could achieve organizational goals through its interactions with strategic constituencies, its identification of stakeholders, classification of potential publics, and its use of symmetrical communication to develop and cultivate important relationships (Grunig, 2013).

Increasingly however, the "Excellence" framework is being contested (Gower, 2006; Edwards, 2012), and consequently, there exist multiple constructed definitions of public relations (L'Etang, 2013b). Thus, public relations research and practice is informed by rather different sets of assumptions, values, and worldviews that have been increasingly subject to debate (e.g. Curtin, 2012; Edwards, 2012; Pieczka & L'Etang, 2006). In 2009, the Canadian Public Relations Society adopted the following definition developed by public relations scholars Terry Flynn, Fran Gregory and Jean Valin, "Public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest" (Flynn, 2014: p.381). In 2011, the Public Relations Society of America launched a crowd-sourcing initiative to create a baseline definition of public relations that "captures the core essence of what public relations professionals do" (Rickey, 2012: p.34). However, it was found that the work of public relations is "so complex and there are so many moving parts, that trying to get the most elegant and simple definition is a challenge" (Rickey, 2012: p.34).

At the same time, within public relations scholarship, there is a tacit agreement that the discipline is concerned with persuasive communication between an organization and its environment (Heath, 2010), or as Vasquez and Taylor (2000) stated, "many different definitions of public relations have been offered, but it is generally accepted that public relations is strategic communication between an organization and its publics" (p. 324). While many define public relations in terms of an organizational function and/or part of strategic management as suggested in the "Excellence" study (e.g., Grunig, 2013; Kim & Ni, 2010), others define it as a descriptive collection of communication techniques (e.g., Gregory, 2012), suggesting a technical role for the field (Dozier, 1992). To some, especially critical scholars, public relations is viewed as manipulation and propaganda which places the organization above society, especially marginalized publics (e.g., Dinan, & Miller, 2007). Critical scholars challenge normative concepts of public relations, including the notion of symmetry, through their emphasis of power disparities between organizations and their publics (e.g. Berger, 1999, 2005; Roper, 2005), as well as between organizational executives and their employees (e.g. Berger, 2005; Reber & Berger, 2006).

Still others define it in terms of an activity that is part of societal dynamics, a view that implies companies are required to adapt to societal expectations (e.g., Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012; van Ruler & Veric, 2004). Such a paradigmatic worldview arises from the work of German sociologist Jurgen Habermas (L'Etang, 2013b) and the concept of the "public sphere", and the role of public relations as cultural intermediaries (L'Etang, 2013b). Finally, some scholars view public relations as a normative ideal of how public relations ought to be ethically practiced (e.g. Gregory, 2000; Grunig, 2013). Ethical concerns link specifically to societal impact, propaganda and corporate social responsibility, with a core problematic of determining the social worth of the practice (L'Etang, 2011).

A growing body of scholarship in Canada has examined how public relations is defined through the development of post-secondary educational programs purporting to provide training for aspiring participants in the labour market. Wright and Flynn (2017), describe the definitional confusion that came out of different institutional histories: public relations programs in the United States are either housed in schools of journalism or in speech communication department housed in colleges of arts and sciences; while in Canada the university public relations programs have tended to be offered through schools of continuing education, with a handful of notable exceptions. The marginalized nature of schools of continuing education in Canada and the institutional separation of journalism and speech communications faculty in different colleges or departments has meant that there is little dialogue between the public relations scholars housed in either journalism or speech communication units. Killingsworth and Flynn (2016) reinforce this point in their evaluation of *Pathways to the Profession*, the official recognition program of the Canadian Public Relations Society, which outlines five different academic pathways that could legitimately lead to a career in public relations: technical, career, management, leadership and scholar. This broad set of pathways suggests that there is no unified curriculum for public relations programs Canada, in the manner of the legal profession, for example. Flynn and Sévigny (2009) reinforce this point, critically examining the fact that public relations in Canada has been taught but not adequately studied, with most research conducted from an ideologically-driven critical perspective, rather than an empirical one. Sévigny and Flynn (2011) theorize that the field of public relations is in an unstoppable process of merger with several other fields of professional communication: promotionalism (including advertising and advocacy), communication metrics and journalism. This tendency the result of a shift from a professional arena marked by broadcasting where the means of cultural production is in the hands of a few experts, which privileged fixed and official versions of texts, to an oral culture emerging from the user generated content and relationship management strategies that drive social media and other forms of networked digital communication. This new interdisciplinary de facto reality for public relations practitioners has meant that arriving at a global characterization of knowledge, skill and abilities is challenging.

Thus, defining public relations and understanding its scope has been difficult, unlike more formally defined areas of study such as medicine, law, architecture, or accounting. In public relations there is no core body of literature, no binding code of conduct, and no formal expectations of practice or roles (Greenberg, 2014). Further muddying the waters are the variety of environments in which public relations is practiced. Finally, while normative prescriptions of public relations practice are taught in college and university curricula, it is also learned on the job and through workplace socialization, where they are applied, modified, or rejected depending on the situation and circumstance (Greenberg, 2014). In other words, public relations is an ever-changing field and practice that means many things to many people.

Public Relations in Canada

Public relations practice in Canada has emerged as a field of practice distinctly rooted in a history of public policy and government relations. Emerging work on the history and historiography of Canadian public relations has indicated the origins of practice in Canada was focused on programs involving immigration and settlement (Emms, 1995; Johansen and Ferguson, 2005; Thurlow, 2017; Thurlow, 2014; Thurlow and Yue, 2015; Wright, 2011). From the 1850's until well into the 1920's, government communication and recruitment publicity campaigns were by

far the most advanced and most prevalent examples of public relations practice, with corporate interests not factoring significantly in the early Canadian experience (Thurlow, 2014).

This was in contrast to the field's development in the United States which reflected the evolving roles of organizations in society, specifically, powerful business interests in the early 1900's which employed public relations to defend themselves and their monopolies against muckraking journalists and a growing interest in government regulation (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2009). As Emms (1955) described, "The development of public relations as an occupation in Canada probably lacked the... flamboyant publicists, controversial big business promoters and high profile public relations counselors with a social responsibility mission and a penchant for writing about their own field – all characteristic of well-documented American public relations history" (Emms, 1995, p. 27). Thus, the conflict between journalists and public relations practitioners sometimes found during the American development of the profession, was not as present in the Canadian experience.

After the second world war, the field in Canada began to expand, and corporate communication emerged as a significant role within public relations practice. In 2014, the Canadian Public Relations Society partnered with Mount Saint Vincent University to conduct a study of the Generally Accepted Practices (GAP) of public relations in Canada (Thurlow et al, 2014). The GAP study revealed media relations as the most important area of practice. This was closely followed by responsibilities for social media management and the development of social media content. The survey also indicated that Canadian practitioners were fully engaged in organizational management functions, with almost 80% of respondents indicating that they were engaged in management decision making and taken seriously by the organization in that process. At the same time, Canadian practitioners reported that differences in region, language, and sector influenced their practice, and there was no one clear indication of what specific type of education or job preparation would best suit practitioners entering the field.

Public Relations Roles

Public relations engagement with concepts of competence has largely arisen within the concept of role definition and has been approached from different perspectives (Gregory & Fawkes, 2017; Viera & Grantham, 2013), but founded by the seminal work of Broom and Smith (Broom, 1992; Broom & Smith, 1979). They identified a typology consisting of four roles—expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator and communication technician. Dozier (1992) argued that communication *managers* enact elements of the expert prescriber, communication facilitator and problem-solving process facilitator roles whereas the communication *technician* role could be conceptualized as separate and focused on the technical aspects of public relations work.

In summary Dozier (1992) demarcated managers as those that, "make policy decisions and are held accountable for public relations program outcomes. They view themselves and are viewed by others in the organization as communications and public relations experts" (p. 333). In contrast, he noted that technicians carry out the "mechanics of generating communication products that implement policy decisions by others" (p. 333).

More recently, Viera and Grantham (2013) conducted an exploratory study in partnership with the Public Relations Society of America to discover key public relations practitioner roles using cluster analysis. Their results suggested an expansion of public relations roles to five,

which they labelled: negotiator, policy advisor, brand officer, internal communicator, and press agent. Of these roles, negotiators and policy advisors primarily consisted of those in management positions (Viera & Grantham, 2013). Their findings were similar to a study conducted on European public relations practitioners by Beurer-Zullig, Fieseler, and Meckel in 2009. Other industry focused research suggests public relations is evolving due to the proliferation of the internet and social media platforms, increasing media outlets, business commercialization, and demands for greater measurement/business impact (Alfonsi, 2012; Ruihley, Pratt, & Carpenter, 2016; Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012). This lead Alfonsi (2012) to suggest practitioners must integrate three new roles into their practice, those of strategic counselors, business environment trend spotters, and digital experts.

While there have been other role classification systems used in public relations scholarship, many have a common characteristic, that practitioners largely fall into the overall roles of technician, manager, or some combination of the two (Hogg & Doolan, 1999; Viera & Grantham, 2013). However, as Dozier and Broom (1995) concluded, that while practitioners may enact both manager and technician roles, one role will predominate.

Smith and Place (2013) postulated that the current emerging integrated digital environment for communications may empower the public relations function through recognition of practitioner expertise and value in an integrated organizational structure. However, while the rise of digital communications has elevated the status of the communications function in many organizations (Lewis & Nichols, 2012; Rowe & Hutchins, 2014), public relations has not taken advantage of this opportunity to position itself as a key management function. While Moss and his colleagues (2000), and Murray and White (2005), discovered that CEO's were aware public relations can make significant contributions to their organizations and desire senior practitioners, they also found there was a scarcity public relations professionals capable of operating at a board level. For example, in a content analysis of the 2012 Financial Times Global 500 companies, Vehoeven (2014) examined if the position of communications officers (CO's) existed on executive boards. Results showed that three quarters of the companies did not have a CO. Accordingly, in most organizations, a CO is not yet included in the company's innermost managerial circle. As Steyn (2012) noted in contrast to the GAP study in Canada, public relations practitioners are not perceived as playing a strategic role in their organizations, or contributing to strategic decision-making. Instead they are viewed as reactive, awaiting the initiative of their chief executives. However, by encouraging an understanding of the capabilities required of public relations professional, it is anticipated that this may be a key to unlocking the corporate boardroom to communications professionals.

A Capability Approach to Public Relations

Due to the amorphous nature of public relations and its roles, it is not surprising that public relations scholars have struggled to articulate the competencies, capabilities, or skills required in practice. The limited number of public relations theories and methodologies employed, and the lack of evidence of a dominant theory or methodology generally embraced (Meadows & Meadows, 2014; Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2011), has had implications on public relations practice. According to the practitioner community, one of the largest challenges facing the profession is talent attraction and skills development (Holmes & Cook, 2016). While numerous professions have developed frameworks for understanding, benchmarking and setting standards for practice, public relations has struggled to do so (Gregory, 2008, Lester, 2014; Manley & Valin, 2017).

Traditionally, such industry frameworks have been descriptions of tasks to ascertain expertise, or references to a body of knowledge whose purpose has been to assist with curriculum design or create industry standards (Fouad, Grus, Hatcher, Kaslow, Hutchings, Madson, & Crossman, 2009; Keating, 1994). Such undertakings are competency-based, describing the skills, knowledge, attributes and/or behaviours of individual practitioners. In terms of public relations, the largest study to ascertain the competencies required of the profession was the Global Body of Knowledge (GBOK) study commissioned by the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communications Management, which combined competency descriptors from around the world (although mainly using Anglo-America sources) to generate a matrix of knowledge, skills, attributes, and behaviours desired at different levels of professional development in public relations practice (Manley & Valin, 2017). However, the GBOK approach was also criticized for lacking cultural variation and being too descriptive (Gregory & Fawkes, 2017). In addition, as many professions find their core practice becoming unstable with increasing technological, social and economic changes, these competencies can quickly become outdated. As such, this research uses a capabilities approach, which is more dynamic, fluid, and future-looking (Lester, 2014).

Capabilities can be both ordinary, those that “allow the performance of the activities needed to meet current objectives” (Teece, 2016, p. 2110) or dynamic, which is “the capacity of the organization to purposefully create, extend, or modify its resource and capability bases to address changes in its environments” (Eriksson, 2014, p. 309). The concept of dynamic capability has relevance to public relations practice, particularly in its environment scanning role, as communicators are often able to play a key role in interpreting environmental change at many levels (Gregory & Fawkes, 2017). For example, Steyn (2007) proposed that public relations assists an organization in adapting to its social and stakeholder environment by feeding the organization’s strategy formulation process intelligence through organizational environmental analysis (both internal and external) and issues tracking in regards to stakeholders.

In current literature, the term capabilities has often been used in management studies and defined from an organizational perspective, which provides a very different focus from the professional studies or human development literature (Gregory, Fawkes, 2017). Stephenson (1998) described capability as being about intelligent judgment, ethical practice and self-efficacy as well as competence. He suggested that a high level of capability does not necessarily mean being comprehensively competent, but implies being able to know what level of competence is needed, and to exercise it wisely. In their discussion of the “capable practitioner”, O’Reilly & Cunningham (1999) included the ability to go beyond what would normally be considered competent, instead submitting that excellence, creativity or wisdom, and the ability to exercise judgements about the “right” or “best” ways of doing things, was required to be considered capable. Lester and Chapman (2008) commented that while competence “is typically concerned with fitness for purpose (or getting the job right), capability infers concern also with fitness of purpose (or making judgements about the right job to do)” (p. 2). In summary, it is asserted that capabilities suggest a conceptually higher level of operation than that typically captured in most notions of competence.

In terms of public relations practice, this higher-level operations can be addressed through the use of the “capability approach” (Gregory & Fawkes, 2017). The capability approach was developed by Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen in 1999, and modified by philosopher Martha Nussbaum in 2000. As noted, while capability, as a concept, has been used in many business and educational contexts (Cairns & Stephenson, 2010), this approach extends the

notion of competence and contextualizes it, providing a framework to the development of a culturally sensitive capability framework required for public relations (Gregory, Fawkes, 2017). Walker and Unterhalter (2007, p. 2-7) summarized the core concepts of the capability approach as a) the centrality of a person's (or group's) well-being to human flourishing; b) distinctions between the capacity to flourish and the functioning or demonstration of valued achievements; and c) the freedom to choose what is valued (agency and choice).

While the capability approach has its origins in global development policy (Ibrahim & Tiwari, 2014), it has also been applied across a wide range of sectors (e.g. Walker & Unterhalter, 2007; McCarthy, Kelley, Verani, St. Louis, & Riley, 2014; O'Connell, Gardner, Coyer, Gardner, & Coyer, 2014). This includes communication theory and practice. For example, Kleine (2011) examined communication technology in three countries and developed a "Choice Framework" that was able to identify shortfalls in education, training and/or infrastructure. Jacobson (2016) argued that a capabilities approach should be employed as an overarching conceptual framework in the field of communication for development and social change due to its "interdisciplinary, cosmopolitan and orientation to public communication" (p. 789). He noted that communication is undervalued by world leaders and development agencies, and concluded that a capabilities approach addresses issues of voice and access to communication channels. In addition, he sees communication as a dimension of capability, in which people do not make choices in isolation but as "the outcomes of public communication" (p. 807).

From a profession viewpoint, the use of a competency approach encourages a more holistic overview of the needs and requirements of the public relations vocation, and includes how capabilities are realized, enacted, and considered (Lester, 2014). In fact, a capability framework provides standards in a profession, rather than focusing on specific job roles. It also safeguards that pervasive themes such as ethics, judgment, and professionalism, are written into capability standards in such a way that ensures they apply across the breadth of practice rather than become treated as separate topics or areas of competence (Lester, 2014).

In summary, capability approaches emphasize potential, or opportunities to achieve or acquire competence, and so are more dynamic than competency-based approaches (Cosic, Shanks, & Maynard, 2015; Lester, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2014; O'Connell et al., 2014). It is a departure from the instrumentalism of previous profession-defining applications in both management and public relations research, providing a more humanistic and complete understanding of the professional capability required by the field of public relations. Such findings can be used to help define the practice of public relations, improve working conditions and career paths of public relations workers, and finally inform professional standards as well as educational curriculum and professional skills development within Canada and beyond.

Method

To most effectively tackle the question of core capabilities within Canadian public relations practice this study employed a Delphi methodology with a view to developing an initial framework of capabilities based on expert input from the profession. The Delphi method originated in the 1950s by Dalkey and Kaplan of the Rand Corporation. The name refers to the Oracle of Delphi, a priestess at a temple of Apollo in ancient Greece known for her prophecies.

The Delphi method is a forecasting method which uses several rounds of questionnaires sent to a panel of experts. Generally there is no one prescription for conducting a Delphi (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975; Taylor, 1978; Tersine & Riggs, 1976). A Delphi

study typically has two or three rounds of contact with experts' comments first elicited, then summarized, and returned for further discussion (Watson, 2008). Sheng (1995) explained that the ultimate objective of a Delphi study is "for panelists to work toward consensus by sharing and reconsidering reasoned opinions with regard to comments, objections, and arguments offered by other panelists" (p. 99–100). However, Delphi studies can be useful even if consensus cannot be achieved, as long as "holdouts" (those who continue to disagree with the majority) are given an adequate vehicle for voicing their continued rationale (Rowe, Wright, & Bolger, 1991).

In this case four rounds of questionnaires were used with the anonymous responses aggregated and reflected back to the group after each round. The expert participants could adjust their responses in subsequent rounds, as process worked toward some form of consensus on the question of capabilities through a creation of a capabilities list for the public relations profession.

As public relations is an applied social science, a panel of both academics and practitioners was deemed important to create a consensus in both scholarship and practice (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999, L'Etang, 2007, L'Etang, 2006). In public relations, it is appropriate and perhaps desirable to capitalize on the experience of both scholars and practitioners (Pavlik, 1987). Scholars understand the theories and principles that enhance performance in the field, but may not fully comprehend the day-to-day realities of the practice, while professionals, immersed in the daily challenges of their work, often do not grasp the theoretical principles behind effective practice (Wakefield & Watson, 2014). Therefore, recognizing the strengths and weakness of these two sources, a combination of scholarly opinions and daily experiences is the best way to develop useful insights (Wakefield & Watson, 2014) and so both academics and practitioners were involved in the study.

Specifically, the panel consisted of 14 participants, all based in Canada. The panel was comprised of four academics, six senior practitioners and four senior employers of public relations practitioners. The panel was assembled using purposive sampling, with a list of potential participants comprised of names gathered from the researchers' professional networks and recommendations made to the researchers by professional colleagues. These expert participants reflected a range of ages and geographical diversity, as well as gender balance.

Analysis and Results

The first round of questionnaires informed panelists of the goal, to identify eight to 10 core public relations capabilities which bring value to the organization. Prior to distributing the questionnaire, a brief description of the term capabilities was provided, as well as examples how they could be clustered. For example, it was illustrated capabilities could be clustered into:

- Strategic communication practice, such as *Capability to help an organization define and realize its values and purpose*,
- Operational communication practice, such as *Capability to express complex meaning in a variety of platforms, traditional and digital*; and
- Generic professional practice, such as *Capability to apply ethical frameworks*.

Participants were encouraged to suggest other cluster headings in the first two rounds of the study. The questionnaire itself included a comment box for reflections and feedback. The first round of Delphi study consisted of only one question, "please list and define the most im-

portant capabilities of the public relations profession”. The results of the first round solicited 12 potential capabilities and illuminated that participants had a great deal of difficulty in identifying capabilities without the use of examples or scenarios, as many of the capabilities suggested were derived from specific experiences.

Table 1 Initial List of Core Capabilities for public relations practitioners in Canada

CAPABILITIES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT	INDICATIVE QUOTES
1. To plan communication in alignment with strategic purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Help an organization define and realize its values and purpose - Create and communicate organizational mission statement - Ensure that organizational values, priorities and initiatives are communicated using language, tone, approaches and channels that respect the needs and expectations of publics
2. To participate in the development and maintenance of corporate culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To help an organization understand and manage its own culture - Knowledge of how branding including voice, style and culture permeate internal and external communications.
3. To communicate effectively across a variety of platforms and technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To express complex meaning in a variety of platforms, traditional and digital - Ability to recognize and leverage technology as well as emerging communications channels while remaining proficient in the use of established traditional and digital work. - To recognize appropriate modes/roads/lines of communication for specific audiences and ability to use each effectively and efficiently
4. To conduct communication research and evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding the use of big data, metrics, dashboards and primary and secondary research in formulating and measuring a plan. - Capability to conduct primary and secondary research in the development and measurement of communication strategies and programs.
5. Capability to weigh evidence, tolerate ambiguity, act ethically and reflect the values that underpin public relations while adhering to professional codes and standards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To build strong values and ethics to guide the organization - Capability to apply ethical frameworks - Capability to translate organizational values and professional ethical standards into sound practice and to defend those values and standards in the face of expedience and provocation
6. To offer leadership in risk management and crisis communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engage with organizational leaders and employees/members to ensure early identification and mitigation of issues and potential crises as and before they arise - Issues management – identification and mitigation of emerging issues - Crisis management – lead the organization’s strategic response to crises

CAPABILITIES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT	INDICATIVE QUOTES
7. To provide valued counsel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lead, and to advise and counsel organizational leaders in, the development of strategies to effectively communicate organizational values, directions and priorities - Capability to counsel and build effective working relationships.
8. To provide business leadership and management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Align communications strategy to business plan or marketing objectives - Provide financial planning and knowledge of business models - Should this not read, “Apply knowledge of financial planning and business models”?
9. To manage relationships and build trust with stakeholders, internal and external	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To help an organization stay ‘in tune’ with its stakeholders - Ability to read audiences and identify trends - To communicate values to internal and external stakeholders - To build and protect trust with internal and external stakeholders – redundant, given the one below? - To help an organization develop trust internally and externally
10. To engage in continuous professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Capability to plan for lifelong learning and professional development.
11. To provide contextual awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Capability to understand the context of an organization and the risks and opportunities it faces - Excellence in verbal and oral communications while understanding and demonstrating awareness of the larger cultural, geographic and global contexts. - To recognize, understand and respect the complexity of sociocultural and international diversity. - To show sensitivity to diverse audiences
12. Capability to apply critical thinking and problem solving to organizational issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To listen with literal and critical comprehension - To organize and synthesize information in order to communication type? new understanding (does this mean “knowledge”?) in public relations, by the use of reading, research, and critical and creative thinking skills. - To apply critical thinking and problem solving skills

Initial results also indicated there would be significant overlap between some capabilities that dealt with skills or knowledge areas. For example, some panelists identified ethical practices as a capability, while others included it as part of context for other more specific capabilities, such as reputation management. Once the responses from the first round were compiled, a second questionnaire was distributed which principally asked panelists to rank the 12 capabilities compiled from the first round on a seven-point Likert Scale which ranged from extremely important to not at all.

Results from the second round demonstrated that panelists found it very difficult to differentiate between what they considered *extremely important*, versus what they considered merely *important* or *somewhat important*. Of note, none of the 12 capabilities included in the second

questionnaire was ranked as not at all important or of low importance. Nonetheless, some trends did emerge. Specifically, two primary capabilities were forming around the concepts of:

- i. Planning communication to be in alignment with strategic purpose:
 - to help an organization define and realize its values and purpose
 - create and communicate organizational mission statement
 - ensure that organizational values, priorities and initiatives are communicated using language, tone, approaches and channels that respect the needs and expectations of publics
- ii. Ability to apply critical thinking and problem solving to organizational issues:
 - to listen with literal and critical comprehension
 - to organize and synthesize information to communicate new understandings in public relations through reading, research, and critical and creative thinking

Further rounds solidified these two capabilities as core in terms of performance throughout the study. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the study also revealed two other capabilities which were consistently identified as less important than the others, these were subsequently dropped from the third-round questionnaire. The two dropped capabilities were:

- i. Participation in the development and maintenance of corporate culture
 - assisting an organization to understand and manage its own culture
 - knowledge branding including how voice, style and culture permeate internal and external communications
- ii. Engaging in continuous professional development
 - the capability to plan for lifelong learning and professional development

Upon further analysis of panel comments, the capability which concerned the maintenance of corporate culture was ultimately subsumed in a broader capability which emerged, to provide contextual awareness. This was understood as the ability to understand the context of an organization and the risks and opportunities it faces, as well as excellence in verbal and oral communication in regard to understanding and demonstrating awareness of larger cultural, geographic, and global contexts. Related to this was the capacity to recognize, understand and respect the complexity of sociocultural and international diversity, demonstrate trend awareness of the social environment, and sensitivity to diverse audiences. It should also be noted that the panel commented on the need for practitioners to engage in continuous life-long learning, especially regarding their professional life, and gave no indication that public relations practitioners should not be doing this as part of their own professional practice.

In round three, study participants were sent a final list of 10 capabilities identified during the earlier rounds and were asked to rank them in terms of importance. The results of this questionnaire indicated the panelists were uncomfortable ranking the capabilities as they saw many of them as equally important. As one panelist commented,

“Ranking these in order of importance seems a bit odd to me as I also see where some of these capabilities must be mastered before you can adequately do one of the others listed. For example, how can you effectively communicate effectively across a variety of platforms if you are not proficient in research? Overall, I believe all the capabilities listed are important for a communicator.”

This was reiterated by another participant who noted, “I found these extremely difficult to

rank because sometimes you need one capability in order to do another, but the “other” capability is far more important than the one “needed” to carry out the task.” One participant indicated in her comments section that she had developed a sub-process for herself in order to complete the ranking, “That was difficult. I ranked this based on what I believe a CCO (Chief Communications Officer) should have. I went through the exercise three times and took the average of the three.”

The difficulty panelists denoted in ranking the capabilities was reflected in the Delphi survey results. Upon the completion of round three, the differences in ranking between capabilities was very thin, which made their ranking order unreliable as a measurement of their importance. One panelist summed up the challenge in ranking like this:

“I found this an unexpectedly challenging assignment, in that it asks respondents to rank many capabilities that are, in my view, are of equal or approximate value and importance: not unlike, perhaps, asking parents to rank their children. I would also observe that the question of “importance” is often organization-specific; for example, reputation management may be of critical importance in organizations that are well acquainted with issues and crises and of lesser relative value in more stable organizations. An interesting exercise to be sure.”

Respecting the panelists’ reluctance to rank the capabilities, the research team did begin to see patterns arising in the feedback. Two of the capabilities from earlier rounds, planning communication in alignment with strategic purpose, and applying critical thinking to and problem solving to organizational issues, consistently emerged as core and very important. The team also noticed that panelists consistently indicated that two other capabilities were not necessarily less important, but that they could not occur in the communication process until after elements of the previous capabilities had been addressed. These two capabilities were: providing contextual awareness, and offering business leadership and acumen.

In acknowledgment of the difficulty of ranking from the third round, the fourth round of questions simply asked participants to confirm their agreement with the representation of capabilities in the Category A grouping (consistently emerging as very important) and the Category C grouping (emerging as important at a later point in the public relations process). The panelists confirmed these results and the final list of capabilities as indicated in Table 1 below. Thus, the 10 competencies were split into Category A, B and C competency characteristics.

Table 2
Top 10 Core Capabilities for public relations practitioners in Canada

Core capabilities for public relations and communication management	
• indicative quotes	
Category A	<p>To align communication planning with strategy and purpose.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help an organization define and realize its values and purpose ; Create and communicate organizational mission statement; Ensure that organizational values, priorities and initiatives are communicated using language, tone, approaches and channels that respect the needs and expectations of publics

Core capabilities for public relations and communication management	
• indicative quotes	
Category A	<p>To apply critical thinking and problem solving to organizational issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To listen with literal and critical comprehension; To organize and synthesize information in order to communicate new understanding in public relations, by the use of reading, research, and critical and creative thinking skills. ; To apply critical thinking and problem solving skills
Category B	<p>To weigh evidence, tolerate ambiguity, act ethically and reflect the values that underpin public relations while adhering to professional codes and standards.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To build strong values and ethics to guide the organization; Capability to apply ethical frameworks; -Capability to translate organizational values and professional ethical standards into sound practice and to defend those values and standards in the face of expedience and provocation
Category B	<p>To manage relationships and build trust with stakeholders, internal and external.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To help an organization stay 'in tune' with its stakeholders; Ability to read audiences and identify trends; To communicate values to internal and external stakeholders; To build and protect trust with internal and external stakeholders
Category B	<p>To offer leadership in reputation management.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with organizational leaders and employees/members to ensure early identification and mitigation of issues and potential crises as and before they arise; Issues management – identification and mitigation of emerging issues; Crisis management – lead the organization's strategic response to crises; Provide leadership in risk management
Category B	<p>To conduct communication research and evaluation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding the use of big data, metrics, dashboards and primary and secondary research in formulating and measuring a plan. ; Ability to conduct primary and secondary research in the development and measurement of communication strategies and programs.; Ability to translate data / extreme numbers in a manner that resonates; bringing context to the data
Category B	<p>To provide valued counsel; be a trusted advisor</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lead, and to advise and counsel organizational leaders in, the development of strategies to effectively communicate organizational values, directions and priorities; Capability to counsel and build effective working relationships.
Category B	<p>To communicate effectively across a variety of platforms and technologies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To express complex meaning in a variety of platforms, traditional and digital; Ability to recognize and leverage technology as well as emerging communications channels while remaining proficient in the use of established traditional and digital work. ; To recognize appropriate modes/roads/lines of communication for specific audiences and ability to use each effectively and efficiently; Ability to coach and provide counsel on the appropriate communications channels for each audience; when to use them and when not to;
Category C	<p>To provide contextual awareness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capability to understand the context of an organization and the risks and opportunities it faces; Excellence in verbal and oral communications while understanding and demonstrating awareness of the larger cultural, geographic and global contexts.; To recognize, understand and respect the complexity of sociocultural and international diversity.; To show sensitivity to diverse audiences
Category C	<p>To offer business leadership and acumen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align communications strategy to business plan or marketing objectives; Provide knowledge of business models; To provide business leadership and management; To manage projects and people in order to deliver content, and events; Capability to deliver projects and organize work; Understand the business you are in; how you make money

Upon additional review of the relationships among the capability concepts, it was noted that the Category B capabilities of leadership in reputation management and providing trusted council and advice, were specific undertakings of the the Category A capability of aligning and communicating an organizations strategy and purpose. They were also exemplifications of Category C competencies of leadership and acumen. These determinations were based on public relations scholarship which suggests reputation can be a measure of the value and purpose of the public relations function, and it is the public relations role to influence the behaviour of management (an advisory role) regarding strategy, as reputation is in part, a cognitive representation of strategy (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015).

The relationship between problem solving, decision-making, and critical thinking is well-documented (i.e. Ennis, 2015; Paul & Elder, 2013). Critical thinking in regard to problem solving is crucial to the public relations profession (Tallent & Barnes, 2015) and requires evidenced-based evaluations of a key variable in public relations evaluation, relationship management (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015). In today’s convergent digital society, relationship management with publics is changing, as organizations must now connect across multiple communication platforms and manage the inherently complex nature of their varying contexts (Taiminen, Luoma-aho, & Tolyanen, 2015; Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012). Thus, it can be concluded that the Category B capabilities of providing evaluation and research, communicating across platforms and technologies, and managing relationships, incorporate elements of critical thinking and problem solving regarding relationship management activities. The Category C competency, contextual awareness is important in relationship management and implicit in public relations role of environmental awareness/scanning (e.g. Olkkaonen & Luoma-Aho, 2015; Steyn & Niemann, 2014).

Finally, the Category B capability of ethics and values was viewed as a separate entity that encompassed all aspects of public relations capabilities. This conclusion was made as ethical public relations practice is a focus of professional bodies such as the Canadian Public Relations Society and encompasses all aspect of public relations practice (Gregory, 2016; Parsons, 2016). These relationships have been visually illustrated in Figure 1.

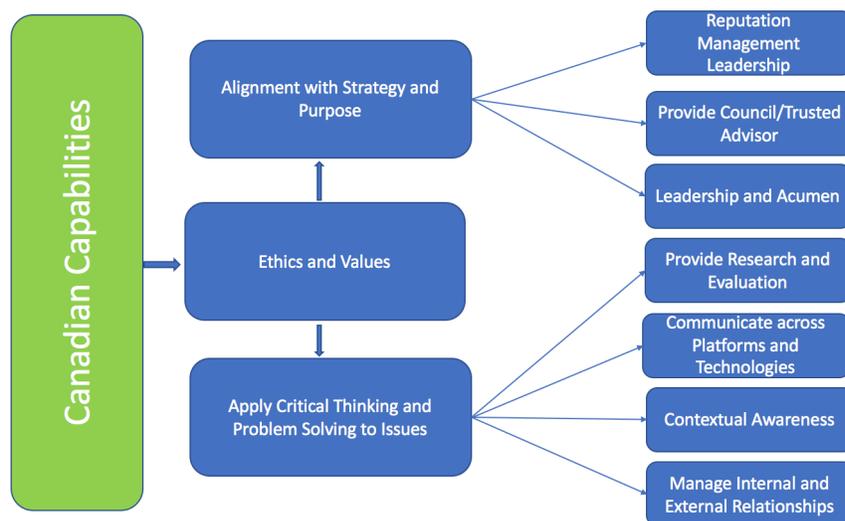


Figure 1. The relationship among identified capabilities

Discussion

The Delphi technique (Martino, 1983; Ono & Wedemeyer, 1994; Landeta, 2006) has proven successful when attempting to ascertain experts' views on the current status and future directions of a field (e.g. Biji, 1996; Rowe & Wright, 1999; Watson, 2008). Public relations scholars began incorporating Delphi research into their research on the late 1980's (Wakefield & Watson, 2014). It has been used to determine the definition of public relations (Vercic, Razpet, Dekleva, & Slenc, 2001), the determination of public relations research priorities (Watson, 2008), the characteristics of European public relations (van Ruler, & Vercic, 2004), interactive communications strategies (Aragon & Domingo, 2014), the use of new technology in public relations (Kent & Saffer, 2014), and the values and ethics of public relations (Boynton, 2006).

According to Lester (2014), capability-informed standards are generally looking for a depth of practical understanding, even if expressed tacitly, indicating i) their potential to extend across the entire profession and different managerial levels, and their ability ii) to evolve/be predictive and be ongoing practice-based. Assessment, from this perspective, becomes more than a matter of signing the practitioner off as able to meet the criteria pertaining to the context in which s/he is assessed; it is as much about using evidence from the specific context to judge whether s/he is able to act capably across an evolving range of situations envisaged as within the scope of the profession. In applying the capabilities concept to public relations the Category A capability dimensions, as well as the independent Category B capability of demonstrating ethics and values, meets Lester's capability standards criteria.

Ethics and Values

As figure one notes, ethics and values are required in all aspects of public relations capabilities.

Extending across the profession and managerial levels: Professional bodies and educational organizations have taken steps to further the cause of ethical practice of the profession at all levels (Gregory, 2016). Ethics and values cross all aspects of the profession as they speak to the fundamental aspects of relationship management that underpin public relations excellence; truth, honesty, trust, and loyalty (Grunig, 2009).

Evolve/Predictive and Ongoing practice based: Pasadeos, Berger, and Renfro (2010) emphasized the need for public relations to focus more on message stakeholder and audience as constructs. As they commented, "The field could devote more attention to audiences and stakeholders who do not only receive communications from organizations, but who are also able today to rapidly communicate and interact with organizations and other publics" (p. 153). This suggests public relations should be viewed in a social context (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). Consequently, public relations is a social reality and therefore a dynamic process (Bentele, 1997), in which social judgments are made regarding the organization by its publics (Bitektine, 2011; Lock, Filo, Kunkel, & Skinner, 2015). As society and its values change, so will the criteria used in forming social judgments about organizations, an area that public relations must manage. In fact, changes to the concept and practice of public relations reflect the evolving roles of organizations in society (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007).

Alignment with organizational strategy and purpose:

Extending across the profession and managerial levels: public relations practitioners who actively engaged in strategy formulation as part of the strategy apex of the organization such as

CO's , are those "individuals charged with overall responsibility of the organization, such as the chief executive officer and any top-level managers whose concerns are global" (Mintzberg, 1979, p. 237). In this role, public relations professionals can be said to account for the sum of the stakeholders' experiences vis-à-vis the organization and their direct influence on strategy development, providing trusted council and advice. (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Vercic, & Sriramesh , 2007; Marchiori & Bulgacov, 2012) However, small communication interactions between the organization and its environment are important to the communication of strategy to both the external publics through media and public relations, and the internal publics of the organization, through internal communications (Dottori, O'Reilly, & Seguin, 2017). These interactions often include many junior communication positions that are the "frontline" of the organization (Minkiewicz, Evans, Bridson, & Mavondo, 2011, p. 190).

Evolve/Predictive and Ongoing practice based: Strategy and purpose alignment will evolve as an organization's corporate and business-level strategies evolve due to environmental turbulence, or changes to the organization's operating environment (Furrer, Thomas, & Goussevskaia, 2008). Thus, as an organization's strategy or purpose changes, so too should the purpose of directed public relations communications and relationship management activities. This will include predictive changes to the management and cultivation of reputation, the cognitive representation of strategy (Grunig & Hung-Baesecke, 2015), a key practice of the public relations profession historically and in current public relations definitions (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Xifra & Heath, 2015).

Applying Critical Thinking and Problem Solving to Issues

Extending across the profession and managerial levels: Whether in corporate, government or not-for-profit public relations, quality critical thinking skills are required (Tallent & Barnes, 2015). In a 2008 study of public relations practitioners, it was listed as the number two demanded skill for the profession, behind only writing (McClenegham, 2009). He went on to add that critical thinking was important to both public relations technicians and managers, stating, "No doubt critical thinking must be done by both public relations executives and independent counselors. They would not be in leadership roles and remain in the business if they could not critically think for a living," McClenegham (13, p 17).

Evolve/Predictive and Ongoing practice based: The technology surrounding the profession of public relations has changed and evolved (Michaelson & Stacks, 2017). As stated by Boyle and Haynes (2014), there is now an immediate communication velocity that social media has created that was previously unknown in public relations. The result is that the traditional corporate communication view of controlled messages is becoming less predictable (Grunig, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2008) with stakeholders able to interact with the organizations and each other more freely and quickly, a process that greatly effects the dynamics of how public relations manages relationships (Grunig, 2009; Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010). The predictable result of this velocity is that public relations professionals are required to take a more consumer or audience centered approach which emphasizes the relationship context (Priem, Butler & Li, 2013; Luoma-aho, 2015). However, despite these changes, the core principles of research and effective measurement remain the same, as how to measure program effectiveness requires the inclusion of research, measurement, and evaluation (Michaelson & Stacks, 2017).

Conclusion

In viewing public relations through a capabilities lens, it is believed the public relations profession will be more empowered in its understanding of the abilities and expertise required to become further integrated and valued in an organization's structure, leading to more senior management positions. By encouraging an understanding of the capabilities required of the public relations professional, it is anticipated that this may be a key to unlocking the corporate boardroom to communications professionals, providing the pathway to become strategic counselors, business environment trend spotters, and digital experts.

Ha and Ferguson (2015) suggested that as the role of public relations becomes more diverse and important, the integration of public relations and marketing would increase. In such a scenario, it is important that the public relations industry have a clear understanding of the capabilities required of it, or risk being subsumed by the marketing field through the growing practice of integrated marketing communications. As Dühring (2015) and Ha and Ferguson (2015) suggested, as the marketing and public relations disciplines become intertwined, there is a need for public relations and marketing to share appropriate roles by mutual consent and understanding, rather than by only trying to differentiate the domains between the two. To take a leadership role in this debate, public relations must not only understand its role, but more broadly understand its capabilities as these roles evolve with changes in an organization's social and business environment.

Capability approaches emphasize opportunities to achieve or acquire competence. For public relations practitioners, the capabilities identified in this study not only shine a light on their potential role within the organization, they also provide guide-posts to follow as the industry evolves. In this digital age audiences seek authenticity and transparency from communicators. At the same time, audiences have access to information to make informed judgments about the authenticity of the messages they are receiving. It is crucial that communicators understand and apply ethics and values to their practice. The current media environment also makes it easier to speak with more publics in a greater variety of ways. Developing a critical thinking mindset, including how best to empirically segment, prioritize, and evaluate strategic relationships will be key in demonstrating the value of the public relations role.

The identification of capabilities helps define the practice of public relations and identify areas of career growth for the profession. It provides a path to expand expertise beyond the traditional associations of media relations, crisis communications, and writing, to include social media, reputation management, internal communications, and community and government relations. Finally, it informs requirements for professional standards, educational curriculum, and professional skills development.

This study was the first phase of a multi-phase study which will unfold over the next year and seeks to aid the public relations profession in carving out its changing responsibilities within organizational structures. With this list of capabilities in hand from the expert Delphi panel, the following phase will seek to validate these competencies across a larger audience through a cross-Canada survey of public relations practitioners. Participants will be asked to reflect upon the 10 capabilities identified, make modifications, and identify their views on the importance of these capabilities and their interrelationships as identified by the researchers. The next research will continue to develop, refine and at its conclusion finalize an authoritative capabilities framework for Canadian public relations practitioners. While contextually specific to Canada, the framework, when applied in conjunction with the work of other scholars in the Global Capabili-

ties Project, will provide critical insights into public relations theory for scholars, and assist professional bodies and educators to assess priorities and future directions for public relations.

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