Critical Communications Skills: A Profile of What Technical Proficiencies Entry-level Public Relations Professionals Need to Succeed

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Abstract

In recent years, studies focusing on public relations education and practice have shown dissatisfaction by workplace professionals in regard to the level of abilities, skills, and experience of recent college graduates entering the profession. But studies have not clearly documented what skills employers rate most valuable. This research is a first effort in that regard. A survey of public relations professionals, many of whom had more than 20 years of experience in the field, identified key skills, abilities and experience that entry-level public relations professionals should posses.

Introduction

More than a decade ago, James Axtell made note of disheartening issues in higher education – too many students, too many curricular and institutional demands, and grossly insufficient resources to support it all (2003). This assessment still rings true. In recent years, as the nation's economy destabilized and state budget deficits climbed (Kelderman, 2008), politicians became less interested in the public good that comes from higher education (Miller, 2008) and more interested in relieving government of education's financial burden. Private colleges and universities also came under stress in the competition for financial support. Higher education faculties, just as they were a decade ago, are strained to provide students the best possible learning experience as resources diminish (Hersh & Merrow, 2005).

At the same time, employers continue to be unhappy with the knowledge and skills of new graduates. In 2008, a survey found many employers believed undergraduates were underprepared for the realities of the workplace (Kuh, 2008). A recent study focusing on communication educators reached the conclusion that educators are not as proactive as they need to be in finding out about the realities of the workplace and how undergraduates need to prepared (Moody & Bates, 2013). In the workplace, many professional communicators "are not convinced that educators are teaching students the communication skills they need to effectively work in today's industry" (Todd, 2009, p. 80).

At the same time, undergraduate students increasingly look to higher education for its career advancement potential more so than for learning and personal growth. A recent study showed undergraduates' main reason for attending college is "to get a better job" (Grasser, 2013, p. 88).

In order to get that better job, new college graduates need to be better prepared than their competition. But what exactly does *better preparation* require – particularly in an increasingly technological field such as public relations? What kinds of technological abilities, skills, and experience do employers most want entry-level college graduates in

public relations to demonstrate? This study surveyed public relations professionals in one of the most dynamic, competitive markets in the United States in an effort to find out.

The answers help us understand what employers are looking for, and how graduates should prepare for the realities of today's public relations workplace. The answers can also help public relations educators, already struggling to balance workloads amid increasing institutional demands for research and publication (Gose, 2010; Wilson, 2010), establish their priorities and do more with less.

Literature Review

This section will present what recent research has documented about common workplace expectations in public relations. It will discuss the recommendations of the Commission on Public Relations Education and the common challenges identified in preparing college students for the technological expectations of the public relations profession. All of this will serve to establish the conceptual context for this study wherein we ask workplace professionals to rate the importance of entry-level practitioners being technologically prepared.

The Public Relations Society of America describes the profession as encompassing "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (*What is public relations?,* 2012, para. 4). Traditionally, PR has been recognized as a profession intent on controlling and responding to the communication of various publics, while attempting to develop mutually beneficial relationships with those publics (Newsom & Scott, 1985). In the formative years of public relations at the end of World War II, the profession was by nature more purpose-driven than function-oriented (Bivins, 1993). This orientation seems to have changed in recent years.

As we enter the 21st Century, the public relations field is characterized by monumental change as a result of technological advancement, a new and powerful social media landscape, and shifts in client expectations. International public relations is experiencing explosive growth. Nations such as South Korea and China are emerging as world communications leaders. The result is an increased worldwide competitiveness and new challenges to long-held beliefs about appropriate ethical and technical practice (Jeong, 2011). The change has reshuffled our understanding of what is – and is not – valuable knowledge and skill. Some futurists believe the weakening of journalistic institutions and the rise of social media will make public relations the primary conduit for information dissemination to the world community (Sullivan, 2011).

In PR today, job security is dictated by one's ability to "actively engage in social media in a pragmatic, controlled and open manner" (Cahill, 2009, p. 26). This necessitates that PR professionals not only grasp the concept of social media's power, but also be able to use media tools in ways that were formerly more closely associated with marketing than with public relations.

The change faced by the profession is exemplified by the recent reinvention of one of the world's leading PR firms. In early 2011, GolinHarris radically restructured itself and abolished its seniority-based hierarchy in favor of working groups that are focused around specific client situations and connected 24/7 by social media technology. Many see GolinHarris as the model of the agency of the future (Barrett, 2011).

In this new public relations model, a lack of understanding about the impact of social media or a slow response to events that incubate through social media can dramatically impact a PR campaign. There have been numerous examples in recent years. Some reflected appropriate corporate understanding of the new realities (Olenski, 2012; Schreiner, 2011) while others reflected corporate confusion or lethargy (Jacques, 2009; Kiley, 2011).

As PR and other related professions rapidly embrace increased computer-mediated communication, one might expect universal agreement in the business community that new college graduates need more technical skills. However, this has not been the case.

In 2007, the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise offered a report with "four essential learning outcomes" for all college undergraduates (*College learning for the new global. . .*, 2007, p. 12). These outcomes included: Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, personal and social responsibility, and integrated learning. Also included was "intellectual and practical skills. . . including information literacy." None of these outcomes identified specific technical skills that should be possessed by new college graduates.

In fact, the report offered a strong defense of a collegiate education that allows graduates to be "broadly prepared" rather than educated to specific technical competencies. "Employers do not want, and have not advocated for, students prepared for narrow workforce specialties," said Roberts T. Jones, president, Education Workforce Policy LLC (2007, p. 16). Jones and other business executives quoted in the report repeatedly argued for general critical thinking skills across in a wide range of subjects and issues, as opposed to a focused technical knowledge or skill set.

Another report, also drafted under the supervision of the American Association of Colleges & Universities, referenced more than 800 interviews conducted with small business leaders and CEOs in 2006. The report concluded that executives believe "real world application of knowledge" was critical (*How should colleges prepare. . .*, 2006, p. 2). Only 22% of the business leaders surveyed supported a primary focus on knowledge and skill in a specific field. None of the "most important skills" identified in the report were technical competencies (p. 5).

In 2006, the Commission on Public Relations Education, a group of educators and practitioners from a dozen different professional societies, recommended seven categories of college courses "that are essential for a quality public relations education" (*The Professional Bond. . .*, 2006, p. 9). CoPRE's curriculum categories included planning and management, writing and production, a review of professional practice, and

campaigns. Two additional recommended areas included public relations elective options and "supervised work experience."

The CoPRE recommendations are recognized worldwide as the standard for undergraduate public relations education. In 2010, Toth and Aldoory published a study of more than 200 public relations programs in 39 countries. The researchers found the number of programs was growing and that curriculum generally reflected the CoPRE's recommendations. One of Toth and Aldoory's key conclusions was that undergraduate PR education exists to prepare future public relations professionals "to assume technical and managerial positions" (pp. 13-14).

A recent survey of 274 public relations practitioners of different levels of experience and in a variety of workplace environments found strong acknowledgement of the importance of technical skills in public relations practice (Hays & Swanson, 2012). At the same time, among 82 open-ended comments offered by survey respondents, none identified a specific technical task that a PR person should be able to perform or a particular type of hardware or software that an employee should be able to use.

A 2008 essay on the future of technology in public relations practice acknowledged a variety of professional and organizational consequences. It acknowledged that technology will change everything about how PR people do their work. It offered a list of ten research questions to pursue – but none of the questions addressed specifically what new employees need to know to be technically proficient (Pavlik, 2008). The studies referenced here, and others suggest a continuing lack of consensus on what, exactly, new PR professionals need to know or be able to do when they join the workforce (Celebi, 2012).

Although professionals continue to disagree on what specific technological skills are most important, there's no question that young people being graduated from colleges and universities face significant professional expectations. In a 2010-2011 survey of Bachelor's degree recipients, Becker, Vlad, and Kalpen reported that 79% were using the Internet for employer-related research; 56% reported working on social media sites; 34% were engaged in blogging; 22% reported designing and building web pages; and an average of 11% of survey respondents across all communications disciplines reported being employed in technical work such as photo imaging, creation of computer graphics, and non-linear video editing (Becker, Vlad, & Kalpen, 2011).

That same survey reported almost 40% of undergraduate programs in communications reported a freeze on faculty hiring (Becker, Vlad, Desnoes, & Olin, 2009) even as enrollment increased. In 2009, it was reported that more than 70 percent of the U.S. 2009 high school graduating class was enrolled in college the following fall (Rampell, 2010). This represents the largest proportion of college freshman enrollment since record keeping began in 1959.

The public relations discipline is among the academic subject areas struggling to deliver learning opportunities that students need in ways that are institutionally efficient and

expedient. Although growth in overall undergraduate enrollment in journalism and mass communication programs has slowed, more than 51,000 undergraduate degrees in communication disciplines were awarded in the U.S. alone in 2010-2011 (Becker, Vlad, Desnoes, & Olin, 2011).

The significant questions that are being asked about the technological preparation of undergraduate public relations students are not that different from the questions asked generally about the preparation of Americans for life in the 21st Century. Rushford (2004) and other researchers have concluded that Americans are not as technologically literate as they should be, and that our educational system is not providing the level of preparation that is needed.

In a 2013 report prepared for the National Academy of Engineering, Gamire and Pearson concluded that all levels of our public education system are doing a poor job of teaching the skills people need to succeed in life and in the workplace. The authors concluded, "the assessment of technological literacy is in its infancy," and offers very little verification of the "technological literacy levels among American adults" (2013, p. 176, 184). Gamire and Pearson call for more research "to determine the current level of technological understanding and capability" of Americans (p.2). We agree, and are offering our research as one small, focused step toward this goal.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of social order has been selected to guide this research. Social order recognizes that nothing happens by accident (Duncan, 1968). This is especially true in the workplace, where social order is demonstrated through "an organized set of meaningfully understood symbolic patterns" (Alexander, 1992, p. 295). These patterns guide the establishment of strategic goals and the work conducted so that the organization will reach those goals.

Every choice that professionals make at work communicates something about what professionals hope to achieve. This demonstrates social order. In the socially ordered workplace, leaders and subordinates make plans and then work to turn those plans into finished product. Social order is established and maintained through both written and unwritten rules about work and the way it is undertaken (Edgerton, 1985). Even a choice to disagree with others or to oppose collaboration on a task makes a statement about social order, because, as Duncan wrote, "a social order defines itself through disorder as well as order" (1962, p. 281).

The social order of a workplace can be seen through its division of labor, the established trust among involved people, the regulation of power for decision-making, and the set of systems that legitimize activity in the workplace (Cowan, 1997; Eisenstadt, 1992). The ideal socially ordered environment is one "where people share power responsibly, communicate clearly, and work productively together no matter what cultural, economic, social, or technological uncertainties may develop" (Swanson, 2012, p. 134).

Social order theory has been used previously as a theoretical basis for making sense of leader-subordinate relationships in the public relations workplace (Hays & Swanson, 2012). Social order is also appropriate to use as we consider public relations professionals' expectations for conceptual knowledge and hands-on skills in regard to technology use. In the modern public relations workplace, success is achieved by communication *through* the application of technology and communication *about* the use of technology. If this communication is strong, or if it suffers, social order shows us that the organization's productivity and success will be impacted in a variety of ways.

Research Questions

We created an original survey instrument to gather data from respondents that would address the stated research questions below. Items in the instrument were modeled after a review of literature focusing on the skills sets needed for today's public relations practice. The survey instrument questions were informally pre-tested on academic faculty and working professional colleagues to establish that the survey instrument was understandable, and that the questions used would likely result in collection of reliable and valid data.

In their book *Public Relations Strategies and Tactics*, authors Wilcox, Cameron, Ault and Agee (2007, pp. 26-27) wrote:

"Those who plan careers in public relations should develop knowledge and ability in five areas:
1. writing skills,
2. research ability,
3. planning expertise,
4. problem-solving ability, and
5. business/economics competence."

In her *PR Week UK* article (August 10, 2011), author Kate Magee wrote:

"the … continued pressure to add value and prove ROI, the PR skill set has changed to include:

1. digital and social media skills,
2. commercial (business) acumen,
3. international experience,
4. experience with integrated campaigns, and
5. core skills such as literacy, strategic thinking, creativity and client relationship expertise."

We combined these observations to develop questions that would measure respondents' feelings on the relative importance of 11 different skill sets:
1. Business competence
2. Creativity

3. Digital and social media skills
4. Experience with integrated campaigns
5. Good people skills
6. International experience
7. Planning expertise
8. Problem-solving ability
9. Research ability
10. Strategic thinking
11. Writing skills

In the context of this research we define technological ability as a general level of literacy about technology, personal interest in using technology in the workplace, and a broad spectrum of general competence in applying technology (Gamire & Pearson, 2013). We define skill as the capacity of a professional to appropriately apply a specific technology in the completion of a specific task, while experience is the ability to communicate interpersonally with authority about the application of technology in the workplace (Microsoft Education Competencies, 2006).

Three research questions were posed to guide this inquiry into professionals' perceptions of the importance of technological abilities, skills and experience:

RQ1: What abilities, skills, and experience will public relations industry leaders rate as most important for entry-level professionals?

RQ2: How have the expectations of public relations industry leaders changed in recent years in regard to the abilities, skills, and experience most important for entry-level professionals?

RQ3: How and where do industry leaders think entry-level professionals should acquire the abilities, skills, and experience necessary for the public relations workplace?

Methodology

We were unable to find previous studies that characterized the technical abilities, skills, and experience determined to be most important by public relations professionals. An online survey was developed to allow us to gather this information.

This section details the methods used to identify a sample of public relations industry professionals from whom information was gathered to address the research questions. It then explains the study procedures, including the time frame for investigation. Finally, the section includes information about the survey instrument and the related system devised by the researchers to gather information from respondents.

Population for Study

We chose to survey members of the Orange County Chapter of Public Relations Society of America for the following reasons: (1) The Public Relations Society of America is recognized as the largest professional organization within the discipline; (2) Many Orange County Chapter members are familiar with our academic program and goals; (3) With 284 members and an email list of more than 1,400 individuals, the local chapter provided a large enough population of PR practitioners from a variety of workplace environments and disciplines who could be surveyed. After the 2013 OC-PRSA Board reviewed our survey and offered revisions, they became a research partner.

Survey Method and Response Rate

The target population for this web-based survey study was comprised of 1,472 email list subscribers to OC-PRSA's periodic email blast, *The Inbox*. Three survey announcements (October 11, October 22, and October 31, 2013) were made.

In order for recipients to see the survey announcement and click on the survey link, they needed to "open" the e-newsletter. This produced a smaller sample size than the 1,472 population.

While the total unique viewers for the three e-newsletters cannot be exactly determined, we surmised that the number of people who *could* have read the survey announcement totaled between 338 (if the first e-newsletter viewers were duplicated on each subsequent post) and 861 viewers (if there was no viewer duplication on any kind for the three e-newsletters). Of that total, 101 clicked on the survey link. Thus, the click-thru rate for the survey fell between and 11.7% and 29.8% respectively.

A total of 79 participants started the survey, and 60 participants completed it. This represents a 78.2% conversion rate (those who started the survey after reading the summary) and a 75.9% completion rate (those who completed the survey compared to those who started it).

Results

Survey respondents represented a wide variety of occupations across the spectrum of public relations work. Corporate PR (18, or 30.2%) had the largest representation, but others – agency (8, or 13.6%), nonprofit (8, or 13.6%), government (5, or 8.5%), and independent practitioners (10, or 16.9%) were well represented.

Almost half of the professionals who responded reported 20 or more years of experience in the business (28, or 47%). Only 10% of respondents reported three years or less of experience in the field.

The largest segment (19, or 31.1%) of respondents worked in an organization with more than 500 employees. The second largest segment (12, or 19.7%) were respondents who were self-employed.

RQ1: What abilities, skills, and experience will public relations industry leaders rate as most important for entry-level professionals?

When presented with the list of 11 professional technological abilities, skills, and experience, respondents rated writing skills and digital and social media skills as more important or significantly more important than the others. International experience was rated lowest. A rank order listing of the responses is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Technological abilities, skills, and experience rated
"more important" or "significantly more important" by respondents

n = 67-71

Ranking	Technological experience	Rated as important
1	Writing skill	64, or 84%
2	Digital and social media skills	61, or 80%
3	Good people skills	58, or 76%
4	Research ability	57, or 75%
5 (tie)	Strategic thinking	56, or 74%
5 (tie)	Creativity	56, or 74%
7	Problem-solving skills	49, or 64%
8	Planning skills	38, or 50%
9	Experience with integrated campaigns	33, or 43%
10	Business competence	28, or 37%
11	International experience	10, or 13%

Respondents were then presented with a list of 17 technical skills used by entry-level practitioners. Respondents rated the importance of social media engagement and social media management skills highest. Accounting skills was rated lowest. A rank order listing of the responses is shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Technological abilities, skills, and experience rated
"more important" or "significantly more important" by respondents

n = 58-60

Ranking	Ability, skill, or experience	Rated as important
1	Social media engagement	58, or 97%
2	Social media management	57, or 95%
3	Writing	56, or 93%
4	E-communications	53, or 88%
5	E-research	46, or 77%
6	Media relations	40, or 67%
7	Blog development	38, or 63%
8	Presentations	36, or 60%
9	Video production	35, or 58%
10	Document sharing	34, or 57%
11	Website development	33, or 55%
12	Digital design	32, or 53%
13	Surveys	29, or 48%
14	Photography	27, or 45%
15 (tie)	Timekeeping	23, or 38%
15 (tie)	Video (web) conferencing	23, or 38%
17	Accounting	3, or 5%

Respondents next were asked to identify the most important software packages that entry-level employees should master. Respondents overwhelmingly identified the software packages in the list (Figure 3) below as more important than their competitors:

Figure 3

If a student masters only ONE software for the following tasks,
which ONE would you recommend?

n = 37-59

Task	Software
Accounting	Excel
Blogging	WordPress
Design	InDesign
Media relations management	Cision
Photography	PhotoShop
Presentations	PowerPoint
Relationship marketing	Constant Contact
Research	Lexis/Nexis
Surveys	Survey Monkey
Social management	Google Analytics
Social networking	Facebook
Social posting	Twitter
Video conferencing	Skype
Word processing	Word

RQ2: How have the expectations of public relations industry leaders changed in recent years in regard to the abilities, skills, and experience most important for entry-level professionals?

Respondents were asked how the importance of the 11 professional technological abilities, skills, and experience had changed in the past five years (2008-2013). They rated all 11 as more important or significantly more important than before. Digital and social media skills was ranked the highest. A rank order listing of the responses is shown in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4

Change in importance of technological abilities, skills, and experience
over the past five years, "more important" or "significantly more important"

n = 56-60

Ranking	Ability, skill, or experience	Rated as more important (2008-13)
1	Digital and social media	58, or 98%
2	Experience with integrated campaigns	50, or 83%
3	Strategic thinking	38, or 64%
4	Creativity	35, or 60%
5	Writing skills	32, or 53%
6	Research ability	30, or 51%
7	Business competence	29, or 50%
8	Problem-solving ability	26, or 45%
9	Planning expertise	25, or 44%
10	International experience	23, or 41%
11	Good people skills	23, or 40%

Respondents were then presented with the list of 17 technical skills used by entry-level practitioners, and asked to rate how the importance had changed in the past five years (2008-2013). Respondents rated social media engagement and social media management skills highest. Accounting was ranked lowest. A rank order listing of the responses is shown in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5

Technological skills rated "more important"
or "significantly more important" by respondents

n = 54-56

Ranking	Ability, skill, or experience	Rated as more important (2008-13)
1 (tie)	Social media engagement	54, or 96%
1 (tie)	Social media management	53, or 96%
3 (tie)	Blog development	52, or 93%
3 (tie)	E-communications	52, or 93%
3 (tie)	Digital design	51, or 93%
6	E-research	49, or 88%
7	Document sharing	43, or 78%
8	Website development	40, or 74%
9	Video production	39, or 70%
10	Writing	32, or 58%
11	Video (web) conferencing	30, or 55%
12	Media relations	27, or 49%
13	Photography	27, or 48%
14	Presentations	26, or 47%
15	Surveys	24, or 44%
16	Timekeeping	15, or 27%
17	Accounting	12, or 22%

RQ3: How and where do industry leaders think entry-level professionals should acquire the abilities, skills, and experience necessary for the public relations workplace?

The survey listed six common ways for college students to prepare for work in the profession. An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that the one best method is through an internship (43, or 80%). Other responses were: Classroom (6, or 10%), on the job (4, or 6%), conferences, workshops and seminars (2, or 3%), and student associations such as PRSSA (2, or 3%). None of the respondents thought students could prepare for the demands of the workplace "on their own."

When asked to report the one way they gained the needed abilities, skills, and experience to work in the field, respondents indicated they learned on the job (29, or 49%), through an internship (18, or 30%), or on their own (5, or 8%). The two categories of conferences, workshops and seminars, and professional associations such as PRSSA were each noted by 2 respondents (3%).

When asked to rate how colleges and universities provide training for entry-level professionals, a majority (58%) of survey respondents rated higher education efforts as "good" or "as expected." Twenty-two respondents (38%) citied "needs improvement." Only two respondents (3%) rated higher education as "excellent."

When asked to assess the need for entry-level public relations practitioners to possess the technical abilities, skills and experience respondents overwhelming (87.5%) said that it had become "more important" or "significantly more important." When asked to rate their ability to find entry-level public relations practitioners with the needed abilities, skills and experience during that same timeframe, more than half (55.6%) of the respondents said that it had become "less common" or "the same."

Discussion and Directions for Future Research

From the results of this study, it is apparent that good writing and social media skills are critical for successful entry into the public relations profession. We noted, however, that even though respondents said writing was an important skill (Figures 1 and 2) the importance of writing had dropped during the past five years (Figures 4 and 5).

We also found it interesting that at the same time as respondents want entry-level professionals to possess technologically based skills (Figure 5), they also place increased importance on strategic thinking and creativity (Figure 4).

Respondents also placed higher importance on experience with integrated campaigns. It ranked #9 on our list of 11 skills (Figure 1), but was rated #2 by the respondents as becoming increasingly important over the past five years (Figure 4).

Fifty percent of respondents rated business competence as more important than it was five years ago (Figure 4), yet only 5% cited accounting skills as increasingly important (Figure 5) during the same time period.

In the social engagement category, the respondents felt that Facebook experience was more important than LinkedIn. And Twitter ran away with the social media-posting category over Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube.

It is not surprising that respondents said colleges and universities need to improve their educational efforts. This finding is consistent with many previous studies. We were surprised by respondent comments calling for students to learn work ethics, the chain of command and time management skills.

"Current college graduates have challenges adapting to the grown up world of working. The ability to adapt to this environment is Significantly MORE Important.

"The student interns and young professionals I have mentored also need attitude improvement to get the job done. Many do not understand the chain of command. Some will refuse to do things deemed beneath them."

"Teaching critical thinking, work ethic, and time management skills are critical to long-term success."

None of the respondents said students should learn PR skills "on their own" and yet that's exactly where 8% of respondents said they got the needed skills to work in the field.

Further research might explore these findings and compare the results over time with a larger, more geographically diverse sample. It would be useful to explore ways to increase response rates. It also might be interesting to cross-tabulate survey results by seniority in the profession, employment sector and organizational size. Future studies might also measure the importance of podcasts, mobile media and infographics.

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