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Laying the foundation for a global body of knowledge in public relations and communications management

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ABSTRACT

An internationally recognised body of knowledge is both possible and necessary for the future success and professionalisation of public relations. Through extensive content analysis of 31 credential schemes, education frameworks, and scholarly articles produced across six continents, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management has developed a foundational list of knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours (KSABs), which entry and mid/senior-level practitioners across the world should possess. This study and list of KSABs is laying the foundation for development of an internationally accepted framework which professional associations and academic institutions across the world will be able to use to benchmark professional credentials and curriculum outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communications Management is working to establish a global body of knowledge (GBOK) which may be proposed as a foundation for professional credential schemes and academic curricula across the world. The international landscape of business and media is changing and public relations practitioners are being given greater strategic responsibility in representing their organisations domestically as well as across countries and cultures. Establishing an internationally recognised benchmark of knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviours for both entry and mid/senior-level practitioners is necessary for future-proofing and professionalising the growing practice of public relations.

The world may have become smaller during the 21st century, but public relations' influence and reputation has grown significantly. No longer a technical role, there is a growing organisational acceptance of public relations as a "necessary and effective strategic management function" (Waddington, 2015; p. 275). There are myriad reasons for this change in public and organisational perception such as the advent of digital and social media, an increase in undergraduate and graduate-level programs, and considerable growth in employment rates (Statistics Canada, 2013; Williams, 2014). However, with this increased focus on the organisational function of public relations, practitioners—both entry and mid/senior-level—are expected by organisations, clients, and the public to possess a common body of knowledge, skills, and abilities across countries, cultures, and sectors. Unfortunately, while this expectation exists "there is still little general knowledge and acceptance of the role, responsibilities, skills, and competencies required to function at the various levels of the profession" (Pieters, 2007).

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For senior-level roles this is evidenced by the international lack of success with professional credentials in public relations and communications management. A number of scholars and practitioners have argued that certification has little value in public relations and is easily substituted by age, experience, and higher education (Berger, Rebar, & Heyman, 2005; Likely, 2009; Manley, *in press*). In Canada less than 1.5% of practitioners possess an Accredited in Public Relations (APR), Accredited Business Communicator (ABC), or a certified Communication Management Professional (CMP) designation. The situation is similar in the United States with the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB) experiencing a steady decline in general membership and APR applications (Manley, *in press*; PRSA, 2014).

This is partially attributed to designations lacking a shared global benchmark of KSABs. In North America for example, the APR designation is offered by both the CPRS in Canada and the PRSA in the United States. While both organisations offer the APR designation they have different definition of public relations, use different assessment models (computer based exam vs. work sample, written exam, and oral exam), and identify different KSAs and competencies (CPRS 2012; PRSA 2014, 2016b). These differences in the APR designation are found between two developed countries sharing a border. The APR is also offered by associations like the Institute of Public Relations in Malaysia (IPRM) and the Institute of Public Relations and Communication Management Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA); both with their own methods of assessment and KSAs (IPRM, 2011; PRISA, 2016).

It is an internationally accepted notion that public relations is recognised as a strategic function. Unfortunately, the practice does not have an internationally recognised benchmark of KSABs. If public relations does not establish its own standards, an outside influence will. Therefore, the Global Alliance collected 31 current credential schemes, education frameworks, and scholarly work from its member organisations across the world and set out to define shared KSABs and competencies to lay the foundation for a global body of knowledge. The resulting list of KSABs is intended to be broad and flexible enough to represent both developed and emerging markets, while also recognising niche competencies or variations across cultures. However, much work remains to be done to future-proof this foundational GBOK and de-westernise its roots in order to make it truly a global benchmark.

2. Literature review

2.1. *Moving from a practice to a profession*

Public relations is in a unique paradox: it is becoming increasingly recognised as a strategic management function, yet organisations remain unclear on the role of the practitioner. One of the leading reasons for this is the lack of barriers to practice public relations. Few newcomers to the field possess specialised undergraduate or graduate training and very few at the mid/senior-level practitioners are accredited. With these varying levels of skillsets, organisations are “unlikely to understand the public relations function and [its] potential contribution to the bottom line” (Bowen, 2009, p. 409). In order to solve this issue, educational institutions and professional associations need to establish an internationally recognised body of knowledge for which to benchmark practitioners at all stages of their careers. Without this cognitive base, public relations will continue exhibit certain aspects of professionalisation, but it will never be recognised as one (Flynn and Sevigny, 2009, p. 7).

In order to meet the sociological definition of a profession, an industry must possess the following traits: a cognitive base, licencing, work autonomy, colleague control, code of ethics, and professional associations (Larson, 1977; p. 208). In addition to these traits the Global Alliance believes that in order for public relations become distinguished as a profession, practitioners must engage in lifelong learning and training, accept duties to a broader society outside of one’s clients, and have high standards of objectivity and performance (2016). While more work needs to be done to attain the Global Alliance’s definition, public relations comes close to meeting a number of the traditional traits required of professions.

Recent surveys of American Fortune 500 and European organisations show a rising number of CCOs and senior communication officers, the majority of whom are given leadership responsibilities roles strategic autonomy (Korn Ferry Institute, 2015; p. 8) ; Ketchum & EUPRERA, 2013. As for licensure, outside of regions like Brasil, Panama, Peru, and Puerto Rico, the practice of public relations is widely self-governing with a dozens of professional associations across the world managing their own credentialing schemes and code of ethics. It is estimated that only 10% of public relations practitioners are members of a regional or international professional association, and within that only 3% participate in a credentialing scheme (Meintjes & Neimann-Struweg, 2009, p. 3).

Despite possessing a number of traits required of professions public relations will remain a practice without increased membership in professional associations and an internationally recognised cognitive base. The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management was formally established to address this. Representing over 38 active public relations associations and over 160,000 practitioners and scholars and practitioners across the world, the Global Alliance aims to unify the profession of public relations, raise professional standards across the world, and provide an accessible forum for sharing knowledge and research (Global Alliance, 2016).

2.2. *Identifying international KSABs*

Canadian scholar and practitioner Terry Flynn and Sevigny (2009) captures the one of the primary issues facing the professionalisation of public relations: it is taught but not studied. The paucity of empirical and theory-building research in

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