



Structure of the public relations/communication department: Key findings from a global study



Danny Moss^{a,*}, Fraser Likely^b, Krishnamurthy Sriramesh^c,
Maria Aparecida Ferrari^d

^a University of Chester Business School, University of Chester, United Kingdom

^b Communication Department, University of Ottawa, Canada

^c Brian Lamb School of Communication, Purdue University, United States

^d School of Communications & Arts, University of São Paulo, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on some of the core findings from a program of research focused on examining the structure of public relations/communication departments. It draws on a recent major global study that was sponsored by the former Research Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). Analyzing the results from interviews with 26 Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) located in each of the five continents and from a survey sample of some 278 CCOs based in organizations headquartered across the globe, the study found quite notable variations in the type of departmental structures. No one dominant structural model emerged. In effect, each organization appeared to adopt a structural design to suit their individual circumstances, although there were nevertheless some reasonably common component functional elements within each department. CCOs identified those variables that they believed most influenced the design of the public relations department structure. While recognizing department structure is situation dependent, the evidence suggests that CCOs create hybrid structures unique to the circumstances. What was perhaps most surprising was that department structure did not appear to be strongly influenced by department size, other than in terms of the vertical structural design. In short, there do not appear to be any common formulas or prescribed solutions for how organizations should or do orchestrate the design of the public relations department structure, rather CCOs appear to be able to exercise a degree of latitude in determining what works best for them.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Organization and functional structure

While the past two to three decades have witnessed remarkable growth in the body of literature focused around the role of communication and public relations within and on behalf of organizations, arguably one obvious area where scholarship has remained far from complete is in the development of comprehensive theory to explain management practice and behaviour

* Corresponding author at: University of Chester Business School, University of Chester, Queens Park Campus, Chester CH1 4BJ, United Kingdom.
E-mail addresses: d.moss@chester.ac.uk, Danny5moss@gmail.com (D. Moss).

in the public relations/communication departmental context. Comparatively little research has been conducted to explore the structure of the public relations/communication department.¹

From a public relations perspective, where organizational or functional structure has been examined at all, it has been largely in the context of other mainstream debates such as those about functional relationship between public relations and marketing, or in terms of public relations reporting and access to the dominant coalition and leadership influence or power within organizations (e.g. Berger & Reber, 2013; Gregory, 2008, 2013; Grunig, 1990; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Zerfass & Franke 2012; Zerfass, 2010).

The notion of organizational structure (sometimes referred to as organization architecture) can be seen as a multifaceted concept. Typically, structure comprises on one hand the physical roles and relationships between the component elements of an organization but also delineates the lines of command and control, the framework for distribution of resources and, from a communication perspective, the conduit along which information is both disseminated and collected within the organization. Despite the considerable importance attached to question of structure and structural design amongst management scholars, it is not a topic that has gained much traction within the public relations literature.

1.2. IABC research foundation sponsored study

Recognizing this gap in the body of knowledge, the *International Association of Business Communicators'* (IABC) former Research Foundation (as of 2015 called The Foundation with a non-research mandate) funded an international study of communication department structure (awarded through competition to the authors of this paper),² with the aim of providing an in-depth insight into the structure of for-profit sector and not-for-profit sector public relations functions, as well as identifying the factors that influence the choice of department structure. This paper draws on this program of research, offering insights into some of the significant findings from a study of organizations located across all five continents: Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and North America.

2. Literature review

2.1. Management/organizational perspectives

Recognising the need to rely heavily on literature drawn from the management and organizational design fields, we also recognized that little, if any, of that literature referred directly to the structural experience of functions within an organization and specifically to that of the public relations function. Much of the academic literature on organizational structure has inevitably focused on the issue of identifying the most appropriate structural design or form that will enable organizations to perform most effectively. Seminal works by scholars such as Weber (1947), Chandler (1962), Burns (1963), Pfeffer (1982) and subsequently Mintzberg (1979, 1983, 1990) and Robbins (1990) have discussed different forms of organizational structure, exploring how structure may affect or be affected by different variables. Indeed, while there are differing schools of thought about how best to tackle the task of analyzing and prescribing the most effective forms of organizational structure, two principal approaches have generally dominated the literature on structural design: the traditional *dimensional approach* to understanding structure; and the *configuration approach* (McPhee & Poole, 2001). While the 'dimensional approach' involves deconstructing the structure into a set of variables or dimensions for analysis, the 'configuration school' focuses on capturing the interrelationship between different structural dimensions and to define 'organizational types' reflected in structural configurations.

2.2. Traditional dimensional and configurational approaches

Traditional dimensional analyses of organizational structure have tended to focus on a number of core dimensional variables, the most important of which scholars, such as Pugh (1973) and Robbins (1990), suggest comprise the following: *complexity* (the extent of differentiation, the number of different component parts and the degree to which work is divided up into sets of operational activities/skills); *formalization* (the extent of formalized roles, rules and regulations defining peoples' scope for action); *specialization* (the degree to which work is undertaken by specialist roles); *centralization* (the degree to which power and control over decisions is held within the top management hierarchy); and finally *configuration* (the 'shape' of the organization's hierarchical structure, including chain of command and span of control).

While organizational structures have begun to change more radically in recent decades in response to marked changes in technological, economic and market forces (Fritz, 1996; Scott, 2004; Stanford, 2007), a number of broad structural forms have emerged that have evolved through the history of industrial development. These continue to be relevant in describing the structure of contemporary organizations. Two key variables appear to act as the principal drivers and determinants of structural design, namely, organizational *complexity* and *organizational size* (Mintzberg, 1989).

¹ Practitioners use the terms 'public relations' and 'communication' almost interchangeably. Here we have tended to use the term 'public relations' throughout the paper other than when stating the formal research questions where we have used a combined term – "public relations/communication".

² See Acknowledgements.

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