PR Career Progression– bridging the gap between traditional research and industry perception

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Abstract

Public relations research into career advancement has been frequently criticised for its focus on gender discrimination and the prevailing dominance of American academics, while widely ignoring the perception of 'industry insiders'. This paper aims to provide new insight into PR career progression, by considering alterative aspects, as emphasised by general management and professional development literature and by furthermore paying particular attention to PR practitioners' perception of career impacting factors. The results gained were used to develop a Five-Step PR Career Progression Model, which may act as a useful starting point for further research into career advancement factors and the move towards a widely accepted set of career progression benchmarks for the public relations industry. Overall, this paper aims to encourage both PR academics and practitioners to work closely together on future research projects into career advancement in order to maximise the potential of the industry as a whole and improve career chances for individual practitioners.

Introduction

Based on PR practitioners roles literature, such as Broom and Smith' (1979) pioneering four role typology and Dozier's (1984) subsequent manager-technician dichotomy, research into career advancement factors has traditionally been one of the dominant themes within public relations literature. However, despite the ongoing debate surrounding the professionalisation of public relations, the industry still lacks a defined career route, outlining basic skills and qualifications needed to enter, as well as a guideline stating how to advance a career within the field of public relations. The only established fact so far appears to be that PR is increasingly an all-graduate profession. In comparison to traditional professions, such as law and medicine, which are offering a structured career route, this sounds rather meagre.

Career advancement research in General Management Literature

A number of public relations scholars (White and Dozier, 1992, Grunig and Repper, 1992, Dozier and Broom, 1995) have argued that PR, in order to be truly effective and excellent, should be part of the top management team and participate in strategic decision-making processes. However, the predominant focus of PR roles and career advancement research has traditionally been on gender issues and in particular on female discrimination, while widely ignoring career development factors, increasingly stated in modern management literature; such as networking, personal traits, people skills, character and enthusiasm.
One noticeable exception is the research undertaken by Moss & DeSanto (1994) and Moss and Green (2001) into managerial behaviour in the public relations context. Moss et al. (2000) have furthermore emphasised the crucial influence a practitioner's relationship to (top) management may have on career advancement, by illustrating that *"influence on strategy was not automatic but had to be earned (p. 294)"*.
While the public relations industry is lacking academic research on career advancement models and influences, management research offers a wide range of academic papers, which

discuss models such as the 'seniority-based progression', the 'late-selection model' and the 'gatekeeping model' (Ishida et al., 2002). These findings can arguably provide useful insight for the PR industry and form a basis for future research into PR career progression. This paper pays particular attention to Morgan's (2002) *'Holistic Career Pyramid Model'*, a six-step process, leading from entry level to a key executive position.

Changing working environments

Mainstream management literature has emphasised that working environments have changed significantly. Two main developments have particularly impacted on the end of the traditional 'Career Ladder' and resulted in changing demands for career advancement. First, the recent economic downturn in Europe, if not on a global scale, has resulted in less job security (Morgan, 2002). Secondly, organisations have increasingly adopted flatter structures, which have resulted in downsizing, job insecurity and the lack of a clear career route (Holbeche, 1997, Ball, 1998). Across management literature (Ishida et al., 2002, Morgan, 2002, Matejka and Dunsing, 1993) there appears to be a general consensus that while career advancement opportunities and the number of positions available have minimised on the one hand; criteria for professional advancement have tightened on the other. 'Experience' is no longer measured in time but in output. This phenomenon arguably applies particularly to the PR industry, which is recognised as one of the top three career choices amongst graduates (Keaveney, 2001). Competition is strong, with the average PR post advertised in The Guardian receiving 300 applications (Coppola, 2003). Arguably, with the exception of the public sector, there are no more guaranteed pay increases, promotions or career paths and most certainly *"there is no more such thing like a 'Job for Life (Forsyth, 1998)''*. As a result, traditional factors may have become increasingly replaced by a largely 'social skills'-focused set of competences, such as networking, own initiative and continuous personal development (Ishida et al., 2002, Morgan, 2002, Ball, 1998, Matejka and Dunsing, 1993).

The importance of personal qualities and social competencies, communication and listening skills, as well as an ability to work well as part of a team have been particularly emphasised within public relations literature (Keaveney, 2001; Hart and Waite, 1994; Dunham, 2002). Particularly, the ability to 'network' has traditionally been associated with public relations and communications related professions (Hart and White, 1994). However, despite prospective employers' emphasising enthusiasm, communication skills and social competencies in position descriptions and job advertisements, these factors have been largely ignored in academic research into the PR industry to date.

Methodology

In order to allow triangulation, this study opted for a multi-method approach. During the first stage, eight semi-structured interviews, equally distributed between in-house departments and consultancies as well as gender, were used to gain additional insight into possible career determinants. Furthermore, the collection of qualitative data helped to prevent 'pigeon-holing', for which PR career advancement research has been frequently criticised in the past. The key areas chosen to be explored included the practitioners' perception of career influencing factors as well as their attitude to active career planning. These were followed by a UK-wide questionnaire survey, aiming to substantiate the results gained throughout the interviews. The survey design was predominantly based on career advancement factors emphasised in general management, career development and PR related literature, while furthermore considering traditional advancement factors discussed in PR research.

Furthermore, results gained during the first stage of this research project were also taken into account for the design of the 34-question strong survey, combining closed and open ended questions. The survey made predominantly use of the five point *Likert-style rating scale*, thereby providing respondents with a variety of nuances to express their agreement/disagreement while judging the importance of various factors. For both research stages, a pilot test with industry insiders provided the opportunity to conduct a preliminary analysis, assessing the questions validity and the likely reliability of the data that would be collected. 652 practitioners were chosen randomly, from a cross-section of the UK public relations industry, again equally distributed between consultancies and in-house departments. The author was given permission to make use of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' (CIPR) membership database, thereby gaining access to PR professionals who are more likely committed to industry relevant research and education, the improvement of industry standards and the move towards the professionalisation of the PR industry. The distribution and data collection processes made extensive use of new technologies, such as e-mail and online data-collection, while fully protecting the respondents' anonymity.

Findings

Overall, respondents in this study have indicated increasingly higher and more demanding standards within the public relations industry, similar to findings in general management literature. These are the result of an overall increase in graduates entering, as well as due to the ongoing effort to improve the reputation and sophistication of the PR industry as a whole.

Table 1, summarising the Top 10 career-influencing factors as perceived by industry professionals who took part in this survey, emphasises the importance of social skills. Practitioners' responses were grouped by their overall median and listed according to their mean. The top factor named by the sample of PR industry insiders was 'strong personality and enthusiasm', followed by five categories, which can be summarised under the umbrella label 'networking'. PR practitioners thereby

**Table 1: Perceived Career Influencing Factors**

Rank	Career Influencing Factor	overall rating	overall mean
1	Strong personality & enthusiasm	very important	1.36
2	Relationship with Top Management		1.47
3	Networking with clients		1.49
4	Networking with journalists		1.53
5	Networking with colleagues	quite important	1.64
6	Networking with peers		1.73
7	Personal interest in core business area		1.82
8	Continuous Professional Development		2.03
9	Hard work & out of office hours		2.06
10	Structured company training programme		2.11
11	Years of experience		1.19
12	Membership in industry association		2.23
13	Visiting seminars & workshops		2.25
14	Professional mentor		2.27
15	Relevant Marketing or PR qualification		2.33
16	Involvement in PR industry events		2.49
17	Changing companies frequently	neutral	3.13
18	Gender		3.17

confirmed career advancement authors in their belief that networking has moved on from being an 'additional extra' to a necessity for career progression, with practitioners relying on a tightly woven network of contacts to move up, on and around professionally. This becomes particularly relevant for today's PR industry, where jobs appear to be *"hidden rather than advertised (Deeble, 2003)"*. Moreover, traditional employability determinants such as 'years of experience', a 'relevant qualification' and 'gender' ranked towards the bottom of the Career Advancement Factors list. Overall, the sample agreed with previously discussed

modern management scholars that in today's crowded and insecure market place, social skills are gaining more importance. 'Own initiative' and continuous personal development appear to be the key in today's increasingly competitive PR environment; alongside the necessary 'soft skills', such as an ability to work well in a team and to 'get on' with a wide variety of people. Despite networking being perceived as crucial for career advancement, a code-book analysis of the qualitative data indicated an increasingly professional and sophisticated approach to networking, particularly highlighting the journalist-PR relationship, arguably bringing the rule of 'old school journalists' to an end. The importance of enthusiasm and personality becomes particularly apparent in relation to standards of education and industry specific qualifications. Respondents and interviewees were generally very pleased about the rising standards of PR specific qualifications and industry entrants' increased awareness of general management skills. However, while industry specific education was seen as important for the reputation and professionalisation of the occupation as a whole, it was nevertheless not perceived as a guarantee for entry into the industry, nor the sole determinant for career progression.

As discussed earlier, PR research has long been criticised for its traditional focus on gender discrimination, resulting in potentially superficial results and arguably the omission of alternative career impacting factors. While 52 percent of the sample's female practitioners agreed that they had to work harder, possibly while balancing family commitments and work, gender was rated as the lowest career determinant in the list of influences provided and was overall perceived as a 'neutral factor'. However, while gender may not be perceived as a direct influence on career advancement, the industry's predominant focus on social skills, traditionally associated with the female gender, may explain the continuously increasing number of female professionals at all levels. The only 'traditional determinant' to be fully endorsed by survey respondents, was the implication their relationship to (top) management was perceived to have on their role enactment and progression. A 'good relationship to top management' ranked as the second most important factor overall, with 92.5 percent of respondents perceiving it as an important influence on their career progression. Interestingly, responses did not vary according to seniority or gender.

Five-Step Career Progression Model (Figure 1)

With the aid of information collected during the two research stages, it was possible to develop a *Five-Step PR Career Progression Model*, or ladder, based primarily on the current situation of the UK's public relations industry and the career advancement of its practitioners. This model has been based on PR roles literature (Broom and Smith, 1979; Dozier, 1984; Toth et al., 1998), Morgan's (2002) Holistic Career Model Pyramid and training and career information provided by both UK PR industry

Figure 1: Five-Step Career Progression Model
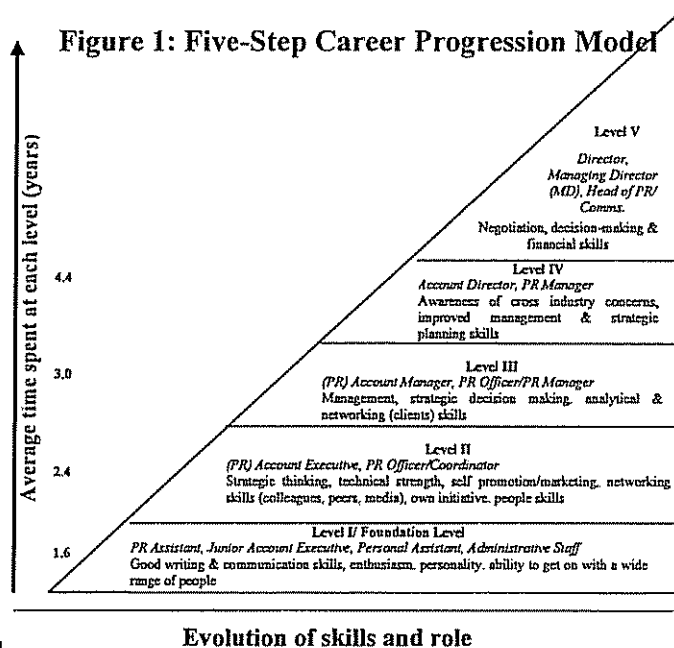
associations (CIPR and PRCA). Furthermore, is takes into account th~ ~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~~~ ~~ ~~~~~~~~~~~~ ~~~~~~~~~~~~~, ~~ch as average time spent at each working level, key tasks performed as well as responsibilities

held. **Step I** does not necessarily represent the common entry route into the PR profession. *Level I* practitioners might be PR Assistants or Junior Account Executives. However, they may also be predominantly employed as Personal Assistants (PAs) or administrative staff, who are either showing a keen interest in public relations or work in close contact with a PR team.**Step II** - arguably represents the most common entry route into the PR industry, particularly for recent graduates. *Level II* practitioners are predominantly employed as *Account Executives* (consultancy) or *PR Officers/Coordinators* (in-house). Whilst still working to a large extent as *(Communication) Technicians*, practitioners are increasingly involved in the daily PR routine and tend to be gradually more aware of strategic decision-making. *Account Managers* (consultancy) are typically working on *Level III*. However, this level is not as clearly defined for in-house practitioners. Depending on their experience, responsibilities, authority and industry sector, well-progressed PR Officers/Coordinators as well as newly appointed PR Managers belong to this group. At this level practitioners start to become increasingly involved in strategic decision-making processes. They will need to be able to delegate work, while management and analytical skills become gradually more essential. Consequently, from *Step III* onwards, practitioners will be increasingly acting in what Dozier (1984) termed as *'manager'* role. **Group IV** includes *Account Directors* (consultancy) and experienced *PR Managers* (in-house). At this level practitioners have to be aware of cross-industry concerns and may also increasingly venture out to gain additional knowledge and insight into management issues. Finally, **Step V** represents the *Director* and *Managing Director (MD)* Level and furthermore includes practitioners, who have decided to work independently as consultants or are in the process of setting up their own agency/consultancy. At this level negotiation skills become particularly important.

Conclusion

Findings in general management literature, emphasising changing working environments, resulting in less job security, flatter structures and the lack of a clear career route, are arguably reflected in the public relations industry. Due to growing competition, particularly at entry level, traditional determinants, such as education and experience measured in years, have arguably become less influential while more emphasis is being placed on social skills, such as personality, enthusiasm and networking with all stakeholders. Respondents have furthermore agreed with modern management scholars that experience is no longer measured in time but in output, ranking 'years of experience' in the bottom half of perceived career influencing factors. This consequently increases the emphasis on 'own initiative' and continuous personal development, but also allows fast track opportunities for top performers. However, to date these factors have been broadly ignored in PR career advancement research. Based on the previously discussed literature review and this study's core findings, the *Five-Step PR Career Progression Model* was developed. In the past the PR function has been compared to 'semi-professions', which often lack strong professional role expectations (Dozier, 1992). While the *Model* does not set out to imply that tasks, responsibilities and pay scale for all practitioners working at the same level are identical, it may act as a useful starting point for further research into career advancement factors and the move towards a widely accepted set of career progression benchmarks for the public relations industry. This research provides a snapshot of the current situation for the UK industry. Further research will be necessary to confirm these alternative factors and advancement trends discovered during this project. Repetitive studies will be crucial to investigate change of attitudes, changing career expectations and increased competition, as well as characteristics specific for the Australian PRlandscape.

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Career Advancement Questionnaire

Dear Practitioner - This survey is part of a MA Public Relations dissertation, examining influences on career advancement in the Public Relations Industry. I would be grateful if you could spare 5-10 minutes of your time and answer the following questions. Please return the completed questionnaire by ███████████████; either by mail addressed to: Katharina Wolf, ████████, Manchester, ██████; or via e-mail: ███████████. If you should have any further questions regarding this research project, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Current Job Title:

Workplace: ☐ Consultancy ☐ In-house department

Gender: ☐ male ☐ female

Ethnic Origin (please state):

Age: ☐ <20 ☐ 20-24 ☐ 25-29 ☐ 30-34 ☐ 35-39 ☐ 40-44 ☐ 45-49 ☐ 50-54 ☐ 55+

Amount of years working in Public Relations:
☐ Self-employed ☐ Other, please define:

I. Please rate as how important you perceive the following factors to be for Career Advancement in the PR Industry:

	Very important	quite important	neutral	not very important	not important at all
Membership in PR Association	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Involvement in PR Industry events	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Networking with colleagues	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Networking with journalists	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Networking with peers	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Networking with clients	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Professional Mentor	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Continuous Personal Development (private interests)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Visiting seminars & workshops	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Structured Company Training Programme	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Changing companies frequently	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	Very important	quite important	neutral	not very important	not important at all
Relevant Marketing or PR qualification	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Good relationship to top management	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Personal interest in core business areas	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Hard work & out of office hours	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Strong Personality & Enthusiasm	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Years of experience	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Gender	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

II. Please state the importance of each of the following factors, when considering a job change:

	Very important	quite important	neutral	not very important	not important at all
Financial advantages	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Personal development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Promotion	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Company culture	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Relationship to top management	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends & colleagues	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Company training & career support	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Clients/Accounts	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Job security	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Other considerations:					

III. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement below:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Women have to work harder than men for professional success	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The small size of my department restricts my career development	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am working towards a specific career goal	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My Personal Development is more important than financial gain	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

IV. Can you please briefly outline the development of your own career by stating job title and years in each position:

title	in Years

For example:

Junior Account Executive:	1 year
Account Executive	2.5 years
Senior Account Executive	1.5 years
Account Manager	3 years
Account Director	.....

V. Please feel free to make any additional comments or remarks regarding factors influencing PR Career advancement:

Thank you very much for your help and opinion. Good luck with your career!