Mapping communication management competencies for European practitioners: ECOPSI an EU study

Introduction

This paper and its findings suggest there is little organised life-long learning in public relations and communication management in Europe. Consequently senior communication practitioners believe there are major failings in the capabilities related to our profession which if not addressed will serve as significant challenges for European organisations over the next 10 years. Longitudinal research further suggests the role of practitioners is changing and they require many more competencies to be successful in their communication roles (Zerfass et al., 2007- 2013). These are some of the observations and conclusions drawn from and supported by an extensive review of theory and practice emerging from the ECOPSI Programme (European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation), which is the largest European Union funded project of its kind to report into strategic communication until now (Tench et al 2012, 2013a, 2013b). There are on-going gaps and deficiencies in the development of the individuals as well as broad variation in how practitioners identify needs and access appropriate interventions. This presents numerous opportunities for deeper and on-going professional training and development to build consistency and support good practice in moving away from a hands-on, learning on-the-job approach to more focused knowledge acquisition and development.

The ECOPSI programme is a two-year research project exploring the competencies required by communication professionals in Europe. This innovative programme is a partnership of six leading European universities in communication research and education located in Germany, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey and the UK as well as the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD). The two-year programme is led by Leeds Metropolitan University and is the first and largest to be funded by the European Union. The study provides in-depth insights into the competencies needed for four communication roles through the Communication Role Matrix: internal communication, crisis communication, social media and chief communication officer (CCO). The Communication Role Matrix

captures what it is a communication professional does and the requirement necessary to perform the role successfully by identifying the knowledge, skills (hard and soft) and personal attributes for each role (Tench et al 2013a). This paper: (1) analyses the construction and perceptions about the Communication Role Matrix; (2) highlights current contemporary issues faced by the industry; and (3) presents the transference of knowledge from ECOPSI to the professional field through the Portal (for) Advancing Communication Expertise (p4ace) along with a self-diagnostic tool aimed to engage practitioners in continued professional development.

Literature Review

This literature review is divided into five concise sections, which explore previously conceptualised terms about competence and performance in the strategic communication profession focused around: roles, skills, knowledge, personal attributes and competencies.

Role of Practitioners

Dissecting the role of practitioners is critical to understanding the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed to be an effective PR practitioner. The roles of practitioners are defined here as those tasks or responsibilities given to communication practitioners by organisations to be performed on a routine basis or in the event that they are required. This can be pitched at different levels, from fulfilling broad objectives to completing specific small tasks that are the designated specialism of communication professionals (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011).

The practitioner roles theory developed by Dozier and Broom (2006) still remains the cornerstone of much of European research into practitioner roles (Wienand, 2003; Zerfass, 1998). Research that separates 'management' and 'technical' aspects of PR often use descriptions of the work, which inevitably end up listing activities that constitute either managerial or technical aspects of the practitioner's role. An example of both the management and technical focus of research can be seen in the European Body of Knowledge (EBOK) project where participants found keys skills to be "listening and writing on the one hand and management skills on the other hand." (van Ruler, Verčič, Bütschi and Flodin, 2000, p 17). The EBOK project examined the evolution of theory, practice and education of public relations in 36 states in Europe and conceptualized four professional roles: managerial, operational, educational and reflective (Van Ruler & Vercic, 2002, 2004; Vercic, Van Ruler, Jensen, Moss, & White, 2002). In 2000, Van

Ruler identified 5 nuclear tasks of PR practitioners as: (1) the production of texts; (2) managing content and production of internal and external websites; (3) consultation about means and media of communication; (4) coordination of communication projects; and (5) monitoring the quality of communication.

In the Netherlands, in the 1990s Dutch professional association for Public Relations professionals, Logeion, introduced a so-called ABCD model of tasks and job descriptions of PR (BVC, 2002). Currently this ABCD model is being transferred into new profiles for the level of professionalization of a job or task. The new job profile model describes the field of activity and the responsibilities of communication professional in six nuclear roles or tasks: Analysing, Counselling, Creating, Organizing, Guiding/supporting, and Managing. Logeion's (2012) study is useful because the terms are not too specific; they are broad enough to encompass many activities and general enough to be applied to any of the 4 roles that ECOPSI wants to examine: internal communication, crisis communication, social media and chief communication officer (CCO). Using the six nuclear tasks from the ABCD model in ECOPSI to map out the skills and knowledge across Europe is in line with Logeion's call for "a deepening of understanding (more specialisation) and a broadening of the horizon (interaction with other disciplines)" (Tench et al., 2012, p 38).

The European literature review reveals that there are no consistent definitions of roles or of specialisations such as a social media practitioner or internal communication practitioner. There are, however, any number of labels given to types of PR/communication activities and any number of titles given to people who perform these sets of activities (Goodman, 2006; Beurer-Zuelli et al, 2009; Liu et al, 2010; Sha, 2011). In essence, the labels attributed through prior research are something that the ECOPSI project researchers utilised flexibly in designing the methodology. The rigidity of 'labels' and 'levels' does not allow practitioners to adapt to changes, nor does it allow the industry to adapt. The nature of PR/communication work should be looked at as a whole, instead of as a set of components that constitute the whole. The design of the qualitative portion of ECOPSI worked with and across pre-determined labels, categories or roles. (Tench et al, 2012, p 3).

Skills

Skills are the things practitioners are able to do to perform their job/role effectively (Katz, 1974, Goodman, 2006, Commission on Public Relations Education 1999; 2006 and Gregory, 2008). Identifying

skills is a complex process because similar to roles of practitioners, there are synonyms for the same or similar skill or there is a sub-category of skills. Examples include 'training' and coaching' as well as writing which includes speech writing, persuasive writing etc. (Tench et al, 2012).

The Corporate Communication Institute's Corporate Communication Practices and Trends 2005 Study, (Goodman, 2006) lists 23 separate skills that form a "skill set necessary for success as a corporate communicator in a global business environment". Of these, respondents identified writing as the core skill with 'thorough knowledge of the company and of business principles' nominated as 'essential' (p.203). These two skills and knowledge areas are identified frequently in the literature as very important to communication practitioners (Oughton, 2004; Brown and Fall, 2005; McCleneghan, 2006; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011 and Sha, 2011). Another key skill area identified in the literature is that of critical thinking or its related terms – problem solving, analytical skills or strategic thinking. McCleneghan (2006) ranks critical thinking alongside writing skills as the most important communication skills. DiStaso, Stacks and Botan (2009) put writing skills and critical thinking/problem solving skills as the two most important skills for getting an entry-level job in public relations. The most common skill deficit is related to 'commercial nous', which is arguably similar to business knowledge. Other deficits identified were in networking skills, knowledge of legislative framework and social media skills (Zerfass et al., 2012).

Knowledge

Knowledge is defined as what practitioners are required to know in order to do their job/role effectively (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999; 2006 and Gregory, 2008). The question of knowledge has been debated in other research about public relations education and the discussion about a curriculum for both undergraduate and graduate higher education (Stacks, Botan and VanSlyke, 1999; Aldoory and Toth, 2000; Coombs, 2001; DiStaso, Stacks and Botan, 2009; Taylor, 2011). There is little information on the different knowledge areas required by European practitioners in order to be successful in their role. From a German perspective Szyszka (1995) describes knowledge in the field of PR as including scientific knowledge about a) communication, society, economics, psychology, technical aspects, law, politics, history, lobbying and b) aspects of strategic communication like analysis of problems, setting objectives, conception, realisation and evaluation.

There is a lack of clarity in determining and defining what knowledge for communication roles means and this study attempts to fill this gap in the literature.

Personal Attributes

Personal attributes can also be known as 'soft skills' or 'employability skills' (Tench et al, 2012). According to Ahles (2004) success in employment depends on having these employability skills. Personal attributes are defined in the literature as separate from competencies, but they are important in terms of determining how well a competency is performed (Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011). For example Szyszka (1995) describes communication attributes such as "soft skills", leadership, the ability to work in a team, analytical skills to monitor issues, presentation skills, rhetorical skills, fluency in text and language, self-management, professional experience, fancifulness, creativity, loyalty; and expertise in subject matter and general education. Figure 1 provides some additional indication of the range of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that are mentioned in the literature as being important to work in public relations or communication.

Take in Table 1

Table 1: Range of Skills, Knowledge and Personal Attributes Identified in the European Literature (Tench et al 2013a)

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Competencies

What is clear from the studies of skills, knowledge and personal attributes is that they overlap in terminology and that there is a pattern forming about how skills, knowledge and personal attributes lead to broader competencies. Gregory (2008) uses the following definition of competencies in a study of senior communication managers in the UK: "behavioral sets or sets of behaviors that support the attainment of organizational objectives. How knowledge and skills are used in performance" (p216). This is probably the most appropriate definition for use in this study as it effectively distinguishes competencies from skills, knowledge and personal attributes. Jeffrey and Brunton (2011) highlight the advantage of studying competencies over roles as; "roles outline tasks and responsibilities in the job description (and) in today's dynamic workplace these same roles are likely to change frequently. In contrast, competencies are the underlying foundational abilities that are integral to successfully carrying out the tasks and responsibilities, and thus remain a stable blueprint for practice over time" (p. 60).

A comprehensive definition is also provided by the Theory of Public Relations Competence of Hazleton (2009) that brings to the field the Theory of Interpersonal Communication Competence of Spitzberg & Cupach (1984). Hazleton defines competence as a synonym for quality (p. 199) and knowledge, skills and motivation are described as primary factors influencing performance and competence judgments. Hazleton's theory also includes two other other factors: context and outcomes. Context is seen both as general – variables that interplay in the relations between publics and communicators are likely to be generalizable across a broad variety of contexts – and specific – context as crisis responsibility, employee relations, etc. requires specific contextual knowledge and skills. Diverse areas of public relations may have preferences for different outcomes (p. 207). Hazleton used this theory to predict the technician and managerial role identification of practitioners with knowledge, skills and motivations and hypotheses were upheld for the technician role, but not entirely for the managerial role, "because items used to measure managerial knowledge (…) did not adequately capture the concept" (p. 213). A second study was conducted extending the instruments and a factor analysis was applied to the data. Two interesting results with regard to the insights of the ECOPSI project emerge from Hazleton's work. First, the result of the factor analysis was on 6 factors, the stronger of them grouping both Professional Skill & Knowledge. Second, the fourth factor is Organizational Skill & Knowledge with eight items that "come from the managerial domain and tended to reflect knowledge and skills acquired through experience

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in the organization (…) not likely to be generalizable from organization to organization" (p. 217).

This paper refers to competencies as the mix of skills and knowledge held by a practitioner, which combine with personal attributes to produce effective professional behaviours.

Although research focuses on the skills, knowledge and personal attributes of practitioners, there is no research that brings these elements together in a Europe-wide study. Given the focus on roles and labelling practitioners according to the tasks they undertake, or where they are in the organisational hierarchy, communication specialist roles are difficult to define. This is particularly relevant when approaching new trends, practices and dynamics in the field. What is also clear from the literature reviews is that there is a lack of research on social media practice within the PR sector and the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed to fulfil this role effectively. ECOPSI takes the broad labels provided by prior research and uses them to examine 4 roles: chief communication officers, crisis managers, internal communication managers and social media managers. This fills a gap about how the roles are enacted across Europe and the skills, knowledge and personal attributes which subsequently contribute to competencies needed by practitioners to fulfil these roles effectively.

Methodology

The ECOPSI project was a two-year project employing multiple methodologies including primary and secondary research comprised of both qualitative and quantitative methods outlined in Figure 1. While this was a sequential research project with a survey, focus groups and 53 qualitative interviews, the paper will focus on the two qualitative components to provide insight. Through the qualitative data the project focused on gaining deeper understanding on four defined roles: (1) chief communication officer, (2) crisis communication manager, (3) internal communication manager, and (4) social media manager. These are diverse, differentiated labels with specific contexts in the professional field. These selections are deliberate to emphasise diversity and are not intended to encompass the professional practice set, but to test a range of knowledge, skills and attributes through diverse areas in the profession.

Take in Figure 1
Figure 1: Research Process

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Quantitative Survey

An online survey was developed with questions for the ECOPSI project about the education, skills and competencies of communication practitioners. The online survey was then distributed via professional networks to communication practitioners from 42 countries across Europe. The English language survey was distributed online in March 2012 for four weeks. 4,107 respondents started the survey but only 2,185 fully completed replies by participants, who were clearly identified as part of the profession, were evaluated and analysed.

The demographics show that 71.7 per cent of the respondents work in the first or second level of the communication hierarchy as heads of communication, unit leaders or agency CEOs. The average age is 41.5 years and nearly 68 per cent have worked in communication for more than ten years. The distribution of gender (57.6 per cent female, 42.4 per cent male) and the regions (29.6 per cent Northern Europe, 30.5 per cent Western Europe, 10.7 per cent Eastern Europe, 29.2 per cent Southern Europe) reflects the diversity of the profession.

The key questions in the survey were about: professionalisation and accreditation for communication practitioners; professional training and development for communicators; management, business and communication qualifications; and recruitment and expectations of new entrants to the profession. Results from this part of the study show that from the sample's perception there are challenges to the structure and organisation of education and training provision in public relations and communication management in Europe. Besides initial university education, communicators in Europe rely on professional associations and commercial training providers for further professional development. Moreover, current levels of knowledge and needs for further development are mostly evaluated through informal self-assessments.

The survey revealed significant gaps between the development needs of communication professionals in Europe and the training opportunities currently offered by their organisations. The largest gaps are in management knowledge (current affairs, social and political trends, legal, ethical), business knowledge (markets, products, competitors) and management skills (decision making, planning, organising, leading). Interestingly, these are also the three areas where most participants report a need for personal development. The areas are consistently top rated even among practitioners with more than ten years of experience on the job – which indicates that on-the-job training is simply not enough. Moreover, it is the kind of knowledge that universities can provide.

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When considering the challenges and changes of the present and the future, all communication managers report rather moderate skill level(s) for using digital technologies, but despite the unsatisfactory level, only every second respondent (50%) thinks that training is useful and informal approaches to enhance those skills are clearly preferred. The informal mechanisms cited are 'learning on the job' and through 'experience'. This suggests that roughly half of the respondents value training for developing new skills and knowledge whilst a similar proportion are content to learn through doing and from personal experience.

Most practitioners recognised as barriers for professionalisation both the shortage of up-to-date communication training and the phenomenon that experience is valued more highly than formal qualifications. In general, it can be concluded that academic education and expectations of communication professionals regarding management, business and communication qualifications are not matched and that this is a serious problem for both sides to address: i.e. for academia to (re)claim relevance and professionals to get access to the type of knowledge they need.

Focus Groups

The focus groups were used to corroborate findings from the quantitative survey, benchmarking and literature review work with senior specialists. The focus groups were held with EACD members at the annual Communication Summit in Brussels on the 5th and 6th July 2012. The aim was to develop deeper understanding of the four roles in conversation with senior specialists from the EACD. The focus groups were held with practitioners from each of the four roles where the facilitators 'tested' the role competences (ECOPSI Matrix) to inform the research team in advance of further data collection during interviews with regional practitioners in the autumn of 2012. Each focus group was conducted around a structure in two sections:

1. Discussion about the 'communication role matrix' for each role specifically looking at:
   a. Competencies and related Skills
   b. Competencies and related Knowledge
   c. Competencies and related Personal Attributes

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2. Perceptions about the knowledge, skills and personal attributes for the next generation and future development of each role.

Results from the focus groups demonstrated that the Communication Role Matrix was understood and supported by participants working in the four studied roles: internal communication, crisis communication, social media and CCO. Participants also underlined the importance of two specialised competences – technological and cross-cultural – for future generations and the current development of their roles. The focus group findings provided the basis for the in-depth personal interviews, discussed below.

Interviews

Following the survey and focus groups, the final data collection for the ECOPSI project was the in-depth interviews with practitioners, which is the focus of this paper. The interview schedule and framework were created from the synthesised competency list, which was developed from the literature (see table 1). This schedule aimed to evaluate the input components of knowledge, skills (hard and soft) and personal attributes that make up the competencies for the four defined communication roles in the Communication Role Matrix. The competences are defined in the matrix under the acronym COMPAS: Counselling, Organising, Managing, Performing, Analysing and Supporting (Figure 2). See also Table 3.

Take in Figure 2

Figure 2: Competency Classification for ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix (Tench et al 2013b)

The interviews were also an opportunity to probe on details about the future competencies of communication practitioners, specifically in the areas of: new media competency and how to respond to environmental and role changes (Institute for the Future, 2011); development of cross-cultural competencies as identified as a core future employment skill (Institute for the Future, 2011); and understanding of how to support communication practitioners in the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills relating to management and business in general (Zerfass et al., 2012). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the six participating partner countries of the UK, Germany (including

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Austria), Spain, Slovenia, the Netherlands and Turkey (see Table 2). An interview schedule was designed and data collected from participants in six key areas including; their current role, the matrix, the most important knowledge, skills and personal attributes necessary to perform their role and thoughts on the future development of the role.

Take in Table 2

Table 2: Breakdown of Interviews via Country

Findings

The findings from the research are presented and the theoretical and practical implications for communicators are then discussed before finally drawing conclusions from the ECOPSI project.

ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix

Using the COMPAS classification, the Matrix outlines the necessary skills, knowledge and personal attributes for each category (Table 3). The majority of interviewees felt the matrix was useful in helping to capture what it is that communication practitioners actually do and the requirements that are necessary to perform in the role. A large proportion of them evaluated the matrix as complete, exhaustive or comprehensive and they had nothing else to add. There was, however, some criticism from a minority regarding the comprehensiveness of the matrix, with some interviewees feeling that this reduced its value to that of an exhaustive and repetitive list, too general to pick up the particular nuances of their specific role.

Take in Table 3

Table 3: ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix (Tench et al 2013b)

Interviewees felt that the matrix was useful in a number of ways and to a variety of different audiences. Uppermost in interviewees' thoughts was the practical application of the matrix in helping to understand and recruit for the role as well as in the design of job descriptions, advertisements and performance, evaluation and development materials. In some instances this usefulness related directly to its application by the role holder. Others viewed the matrix as beneficial for Human Resources departments to use in recruitment and selection, and in the training and development of communication professionals as well as to facilitate discussions with coaches and mentors. A small number of

interviewees referred to alternative competency frameworks that they were aware of, have used in the past or use in their current role. These included those created by Logeion, ENGAGE (used by the public sector in the UK) and two designed by the particular companies of the interviewees (Philips and Shell). The interviewee from Shell felt it important to note that their company matrix separates leadership and management competencies from more specific communication orientated activities.. This was particularly true of Social Media Managers. A small number of Crisis Communication Managers felt strongly that the matrix was too generic to capture the dynamic of Crisis Communication, either because it did not encapsulate the different phases of a crisis or the unpredictable nature of working in this area meant that there was not a blueprint you could follow. Internal Communication Managers and CCOs were the most likely to identify additional knowledge, skills and personal attributes necessary for their role that they felt were missing from the matrix.

In a number of cases these apparent 'omissions' actually represented different interpretations of certain concepts already present in the matrix (e.g. visioning as being understood as how to effectively utilise the efforts of others when organizing/executing, or stakeholder management being more about managing relationships than actual individuals) resulting in interviewees wanting to re-position to which competency the particular skill or knowledge belonged (e.g. wanting to move visioning from Supporting/guiding to Organising/executing and viewing stakeholder management as a Counselling, rather than a Managing competency). It might also be argued that another addition that was suggested - 'knowledge of company products' - might also be at least partly assumed in knowledge areas already included in the matrix (namely, *Knowledge about own organisation*).

Knowledge

The three most important knowledge areas across the four defined roles are outlined in Table 4. When cross referencing the top three knowledge areas for the four roles against the COMPAS classifications (Table 3), the items fall into the categories of organizing/executing; managing; and analysing/interpreting. The most frequently cited items for Crisis Communication Managers, Internal Communication Managers and Social Media Managers were: (1) *Knowledge about organisation*; (2) *Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies;* and (3) *Corporate strategy.* For CCOs *Corporate strategy* was not in the top 3 as it was for the other roles and was instead

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replaced as the third most frequently cited knowledge area by *Project management*. Crisis Managers also saw *Project management* and *Web 2.0 tools and effects on organisational communication* as important knowledge areas and for some Internal Communication Managers, *Human Resource (HR) policies* and links to communication were seen as one of the most important areas. Social Media Managers mentioned the importance of *Web 2.0 tools and effects on organisational communication* and *Web monitoring tool*s (Table 4).

Take in Table 4
Table 4: The Most Important Knowledge Areas by Role

Most interviewees stated that they had acquired the most important knowledge areas for their role on-the-job, in either their current or previous roles. This would appear to be logical given the company specific nature of the three most important knowledge areas. Learning by doing (the job) was perceived as very important and for some the only true way to gain and develop applied knowledge. This knowledge was not, however, acquired in isolation. The support of colleagues, role models, bosses and formal and informal mentors whilst on-the-job was also acknowledged and, to a lesser extent, the importance of belonging to relevant networks and forums. Both senior and younger colleagues were recognised for their knowledge, particularly those that were perceived as more Internet savvy, suggesting age doesn't matter for supporting new technology. Involvement in cross team projects was another way in which knowledge had been acquired.

For those that listed other knowledge areas as the most important (such as *Project management* or *Communication processes*), the contribution of in-house and external training was highlighted, along with more formal education such as undergraduate and postgraduate/MBA programmes. Some companies had extensive internal training programmes or Internal Academies that some interviewees had clearly valued and utilised; others had not had access to these training resources and highlighted the role of self-study. Social Media Managers emphasised that they had developed their Web 2.0 or Web monitoring knowledge largely through self-study using the Internet and Blogs because this was the most up-to-date source of knowledge. Self-study in other knowledge areas was through more tradition channels such as books and publications.

Skills

The most agreement for the top three skill areas as represented by the frequency of interviewees mentioning the same skills was found within the role of Crisis Managers with *Leadership, Critical thinking* and *Organisational skills* all being the most consistently selected. Due to the wealth of diversity both across and within the roles, there was much less consensus in the frequency of responses in the other roles; however, for CCOs *Strategic thinking* was by far the most popular response. For Internal Communication Managers *Listening* was the most agreed upon skill and for Social Media Managers, *Planning* and *Multi-media skills* were viewed as important. The majority of interviewees said they had had to learn new skills for their role with the most frequently mentioned being *Negotiation* and *Delegation*. This is perhaps reflective of a change in status from worker to manager/leader. There were a significant minority who said that they had not had to learn any specific skills and a couple of CCOs qualified this by saying that you do not get to the position of CCO without already having the skills necessary to do the job.

The acquisition and development of the skills most important for interviewees was achieved in a number of different ways and through a variety of different channels. Perhaps of some surprise was that university and high school (pre-university school or college) were more frequently credited with personal attributes developments than they were in the accumulation of knowledge. On-the-job experience in current and previous roles and self-study using books and online resources was also seen by many as key ways to develop skills. Mentors, role models, previous and current bosses (either through their observation of handling certain situations or through more formal or informal coaching activity) and exchange with colleagues and membership of professional associations (such as Melcrum) were also valued. A number of interviewees also mentioned their family as influential in their development of certain skills necessary for their role (negotiation, motivation). Internal and external courses were less frequently mentioned than in the area of knowledge development but several interviewees acknowledged the value of *Management* or *Leadership* training to help develop their skills in this area.

A large number of interviewees expressed that they felt weak in or that they would like to develop *knowledge* (versus skills) of Social media, perhaps representing a distinction between the majority of interviewees needing to understand *why* and *when* to use social media rather than *how* to use specific social media technology or platforms.

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Personal Attributes

The responses for the top three personal attributes for their role reflected the diversity of those included in the matrix, as well as a number of additions (Table 5). CCOs demonstrate greater diversity in their answers, so much so that only *Integrity* and *Daring/Risk* taking featured more than twice across all 14 interviews. Crisis Communication Managers responses showed the most consensus with *Trustworthiness* being mentioned by nearly half of all those interviewed.

Take in Table 5
Table 5: Top Three Personal Attributes Across Roles

Opinion varied among respondents as to whether personal attributes are something that training and development can help to improve. Most were of the opinion that some of them can be developed and improved but that others are inherent in a person's character, intuitive or instilled into them through upbringing. If respondents did feel that personal attributes could be improved or developed there was an understanding that this can take hard work and concerted effort. Personal motivation to change, learn and develop was said to be important, as was the ability for self-reflection and to know your own weaknesses. *Mentorship* and *Coaching* were thought to be particularly effective ways of improving certain personal attributes, as was *Experience*. Development through training was a less common response.

Specialist Competence

The interviews focused on some specific areas of specialisation for communication practitioners and particularly on what the researchers call 'specialist competencies'. In this context two were emphasised for discussion, both of which emerged from the quantitative survey and the focus groups, 'cross cultural competence' and 'working with new media focus'.

Cross-Cultural Competence

The majority of interviewees agreed that cross-cultural competence is an increasingly important skill for communication practitioners although a small number added that this has always been an important skill. Interviewees commonly interpreted this question to mean that roles were becoming more internationally or globally focused. However,

a minority of interviewees were keen to add that in their current role this skill was not important because the concentration of their particular organisation is based wholly on the domestic market. The importance of localising a global message in order to reach certain markets and audiences, while remaining true to the authenticity and heritage of the organisation was one way in which the need for this skill was said to be emerging; another was through the desire for diversity within and across teams in order to make them more reflective, effective and motivated. The ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to respond to new contexts was also explained, (particularly by Internal Communication Managers), through the need to adapt to and interpret increasing rates of organisational and cultural change as well as wider sector or societal change.

In order to develop/improve skills in this area a number of ways were suggested. A popular means was through a prolonged stay of working abroad to gain international experience, perhaps through an exchange or secondment programme, in order to gain hands-on practical knowledge and skills from working in another country and context. The existing Student Erasmus Exchange Programme was held in particularly high regard by a number of interviewees. *Observing others* and *Mentorship* would also be helpful in strengthening skills in this area. A number of the interviewees had, in current or previous roles, undertaken in-house training in cross-cultural issues that found to be helpful. Others felt that training for this skill should be incorporated into formal undergraduate and postgraduate PR and communication as well as MBA qualifications because they did not feel that this was adequately covered in the current curriculum.

Working with New Media Forms

There were a number of interviewees who confirmed that through technology they were already working as a member of a virtual team, either across teams, departments or across the organisation. This type of working brings about both opportunities and threats. There was a fear that although virtual working may improve efficiencies and allow workers who sit remotely to work collectively, it can erode interpersonal skills and that technology should not be seen as a replacement of face-to-face interaction. The capacity of social media to create online networks and communities of practice was welcomed by a number of respondents but it was acknowledged that current technology to facilitate virtual teams was not always up to the job. Improvements in both the capacity and guidance in the strategic application of such platforms, programmes and equipment would be helpful in supporting

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virtual teams in the future. *Internal training*, *Mentorship* and *Working in project teams* would also help to strengthen skills and knowledge in this area.

Analysis of the interviews does not show relevant regionally specific differences across the roles but there are differences in the backgrounds of practitioners and possibly subtle differences in the styles of communication professionals use from different regions. What is more important than region, in terms of differences, is the nature of the organisation in which the communication professional works. This can clearly affect the knowledge and skills necessary to perform in the role, especially given the importance of knowing about the organisation.

Discussion

The Communication Role Matrix was largely viewed as positive in helping to capture what it is that a communication professional does and the requirements that are necessary to perform in the role. It is clear that there are a number of audiences, such as HR, potential students of PR and Communication, new recruits to the profession, practitioners themselves and other areas of the business that can potentially benefit from the transference of knowledge of the ECOSPI project findings. The dynamic and cooperative construction of the Communication Role Matrix provides the opportunity to develop a collection of applied tools for both academic and professional community application.

According to the results from interviews, mentorship and coaching may be seen as an important method of knowledge transfer as it has both the advantage of being on-the-job and set within the context of the business. This takes on renewed significance given that *Knowledge about own organisation* was the most important knowledge area for communication practitioners across all four roles, (followed by *Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies*), in that much of this knowledge can arguably only be learnt on-the-job.

The development of cross-cultural competencies as identified as a core future employment skill (Institute for the Future, 2011) was rated as important by some communication professionals but not by all. These individuals acknowledged that within their own organisations the focus was on the home market and there was little or no demand for skills in this area. This questions the potential worth of incorporating this skill into formal or informal training programmes but reiterates the possible importance of incorporating in-situ learning such as a prolonged stay of working abroad through an organised exchange or secondment

programme in order to gain valuable hands-on practical knowledge and skills from working in another country and context.

Knowledge of new media was an area in which many communication practitioners felt weak or that they would like to develop. With the exception of Social Media Managers, learning more about this area was more about the strategic application of such media channels than particular technologies or platforms. It was clear that this is something that many are leaving to younger or more specialist members of the team sometimes qualifying that they do not need to know how to use the technology but that they would benefit from greater understanding of how it can be used and what can be achieved. This explains why practitioners felt they had less weakness in Social media *skills* than in their *knowledge* of Social media.

The importance of knowing about the organisation emerged also as a key factor in two international studies, Hazleton's in the US (Hazleton, 2009) and in Bronn's (2014) quantitative study of Norwegian business leaders. The context and situation of the organisation will in turn have a direct influence on the need for cross-cultural competence, business and management knowledge and knowledge of social media. These findings are drawn from qualitative methodology and therefore these differences cannot be extended to a broader population of practitioners in Europe. More quantitative research about these organisational factors could be a future extension of this research.

Van Ruler (2013) acknowledges the ECOPSI project as an important project that provides further insights into what practitioners do, but she states that we need to be cautious to see the outcomes as representative. She notes that business and management are the top two important knowledge and skill areas. Knowing how communication works and how to communicate effectively is proven not to be important. Van Ruler (2013) questions whether this 'is what CEOs/Clients really want from communication professionals'. This raises a further question that has also been expressed in academic feedback to conference papers and reports on the ECOPSI project, that there is an assumption that communication practitioners are competent at all communication related skills and therefore focus their attention on developing general skills and knowledge areas. Extensions of the ECOPSI project could approach these questions extending the sample and instruments of measurement: participants for the interviews, who held high-level managerial positions, were asked about their current role, not about the 'ports of entry' for the profession.

In this paper the authors acknowledge a limitation of the study regarding the selection of the four studied professional roles. ECOPSI

has proven a common understanding of these four studied roles in Europe, but further research on the competencies of diverse roles performed in the profession would need to be explored for a more comprehensive appreciation of the full spectrum of public relations and strategic communication practice.

Conclusion

The ECOPSI project captures 24 months of desk and empirical work by the research team in three core phases: (1) the benchmarking report based on literature reviews in each country region; (2) quantitative data collection from 2,185 communication practitioners in 42 countries across Europe; (3) qualitative data from four focus groups and 53 interviews across four senior practitioner roles in the 6 countries of the study's focus. From this breadth of primary and secondary data the team has been able to expand the knowledge and understanding on the key questions for the ECOPSI project which are to develop insight into the current competencies of communication specialists in Europe, as well as understanding of their future development needs. From the findings it is evident there are synergies in the understanding and interpretation of the four roles studied within the 53 interviews carried out across the six countries, despite an emerging future need to be a 'generalist communication specialist'. This suggests and supports the hypothesis that public relations and communication is a maturing discipline in the European context with many shared experiences. Despite this development for the practice there are on-going gaps and deficiencies in the development of the individuals as well as broad variation in how practitioners identify needs and access appropriate interventions.

The research clearly suggests there are numerous opportunities for deeper and on-going professional training and development to build this consistency and support the practice in moving away from a hands-on, learning on-the-job approach to knowledge acquisition and development. Formal in-house coaching and mentoring and recognised training for both internal and external coaches may have a significant part to play, together with committed involvement in networks for communication professionals and knowledge exchange activity.

After evaluating the situation of communication professional competences through four different roles in Europe and the educational gaps, the ECOPSI project has moved the professionalism and

communication competency agenda forward through knowledge transfer explicitly through three main routes:

- Availability of results from ECOPSI research including the cooperative constructed Communication Role Matrix.
- Self-diagnosis tool for diagnosing role competencies available through a customised portal of activity for the project (www.p4ace.eu)
- Providing support for continuing professional development including directions of where to go learn, study and further understand the skills, knowledge and attributes that make up the competencies for various communication roles.

Take in Figure 3

Figure 3: Visual Representation of Results on P4ACE Diagnostic Tool

All these routes merge at the design of a practical support tool, the Portal (for) Advancing Communication Expertise (p4ace, available at www.p4ace.eu). Within the Portal, there is a unique self-diagnostic tool (see www.p4ace./quiz.eu) that supports the continuing development of individual practitioners and was pretested at the European Association of Communication Directors (EACD) Summit in Brussels 27-28 June, 2013. This comprehensive tool uses the findings of communication practitioner roles across Europe to develop the tool which enables practitioners to evaluate first their perception of the role against their peers on a range of attributes and then to self evaluate their own capabilities on each measurement (Figure 3). This allows the individual then to benchmark themselves against their peers and see how they can further develop their abilities.

This convergence of academic research into practical tools for the professional field reaffirms the contribution to the research field. The self-diagnosis tool enables the auditing of practitioners' competences to obtain valuable and unprecedented data about European communication practitioners' competences.

This paper and the ECOPSI project opens up new opportunities for the academic field both in research and education. A conceptual framework and methodological tools and future lines of research have been provided about communication professional competences. Educational bodies can also use the results to design appropriate means of intervention for reducing current knowledge, skills and attribute gaps for practitioners.

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Mapping communication management competencies for European practitioners: ECOPSI an EU study

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