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Re-fuelling the talent tank. A qualitative study of key deficiencies, future needs, and life-long learning needs of communication management professionals in Europe

Abstract

This paper originates from the results of the EU financed project, PROJECTNAME, which advanced understanding about the professional competences of European public relations and communication managers. The paper focuses on deficiencies in competences that practitioners identify for themselves and on the needs for the future generation that will perform four professional roles: chief communication officer (CCO), crisis communication, social media, and internal communication. Questions to understand the roles and their future requirements were defined around: means for achievement of current competences to perform the role, competence gaps, specialized competences, and future needs. They were explored with qualitative methodology through 53 in depth interviews. The analysis of data shows that European professionals understand and evaluate their way of performing the practice through a complex framework of competences. The findings provide evidence of synergies in the understanding and interpretation of the four roles and there is common identification of on-going gaps and future needs, suggesting that public relations is a maturing discipline with an accumulated set of standards in Europe. The study also targets the capacity of intervention for advancing the profession to an approach of knowledge acquisition and supporting the previous academic consensus about the necessity of a body of knowledge and specialized skills for professionalization.

Keywords

Competences, roles, professionalism, lifelong learning and education, public relations profession, knowledge, skills, cross-cultural skills, social media

1. Introduction

Today the profession of communication management or public relations has enjoyed an accumulated set of standards to guide its modern practice (Lamme & Russell, 2010), although we are still far from having a standardized practice and field of study (Molleda, Kochhar & Moreno, 2012).

There has been wide consensus about the necessity of a body of knowledge or specialized skills and esoteric knowledge as criteria for professionalism (Ferguson, 1981; Friedson, 1983). The exploratory study of Lages and Simkin (2003), identified the importance of qualifications and the quality of graduates and competition as two of the five main forces for the industry. Molleda, Moreno, Athaydes and Suarez (2010) tested a professionalism index and the item “formally studied in higher-education institution” was evaluated the highest.

The key to the professionalization of communication management and public relations is education. Academics, practitioners, and professional associations have long argued this point; however, despite the collaborative efforts with higher education to satisfy the market demand for competent professionals, in the last two decades it is still an unfulfilled expectation. Entering the 21st century, Kruckeberg underlined this claim in the US for public relations profession: the necessity for professionalization “as a distinct professional occupation requiring a specific professional curriculum of study” (1998: 245). L’Etang concluded also for UK that the attempts to impose a rigorous system of entry by qualification have failed because “experience remains a tradable commodity” (1999: 284) and ensured: “Education had the potential to increase respectability and status which practitioners desired and to provide theoretical knowledge to underpin a specific expertise” (1999: 283). More recent studies emphasise the limited coordination between professional bodies, accredited universities, and private education institutes to provide formal and common qualifications in Europe (Tench et al., 2013; Tench, Verhoeven & Juma, 2015)

Professions and qualifications are often discussed together as essential cornerstones in professionalization. With regard to the development of communication management in the last two decades, this is especially important because the field is not only being deeply affected and transformed by the global changes in the economy, politics, and culture, but at the same time practitioners hold positions as central parties of this change for every kind of organizations whether private, public, government or NGOs.

This paper focuses on building understanding about the shortcomings in competences that practitioners identify today for themselves and on the needs for the future generation.

2. Theoretical framework

There is a strong link between qualifications and professionalization (Rottger, 2010) and between professionalization and higher education (Molleda et al., 2010). From the whole educational process educators, and academic researchers, “have focused most of their attention on outcomes (skills and knowledge (...) need for the practice) and curriculum (packaging of those desired outcomes into courses)” (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999: 56). In this section, we are going to summarize first the studies about the necessities of public relations education to meet the labour market demand and second the research studies about the competences to perform in the profession.

2.1. Education to professionalize public relations

Memorable efforts were made by diverse commissions in the US from the 1970s to understand the adequacy of the curriculum of public relations in higher education. A major research about public relations education was held in 1998 to inform the National Communication Association (NCA) and concluded the top-ranking recruitment issues were

writing skills and understanding of business practices (Stacks, Botan & VanSlyke, 1999). The report of the Commission of Public Relations Education in 2006, identified the needs of public relations education to provide strategic, international, ethical, and research methods training and leadership, and underlined the new information technologies and globalization, and the increasing strategic role of public relations managers as the driving forces generating a change in the practice (DiStaso, Stacks & Botan, 2009).

However, in spite of these old claims for integrating education for public relations practitioners around a core curriculum, diverse studies have shown the existent gap between recommendations and adherence and between educational outcomes and labour market needs (Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Hon, Fitzpatrick & Hall, 2004; Wright & Turk, 2007).

In Europe, there are few studies on the academic qualifications of PR and communication practitioners with some exceptions in Germany (Bentele, Großkurt & Seidenglanz, 2009; Szyszka, Schütte & Urbahn, 2009), Slovenia (GfK Gral Iteo, 2005), Croatia (HUOJ, 2009), Serbia (DSOJ, 2010), and the UK (Tench & Deflagbe, 2008; Tench & Fawkes, 2004). The recent study of Tench et al. (2013) concludes that professional bodies (eg. CIPR, Logeion, Global Alliance) drive the agenda of professionalism in most countries, yet there are overlaps between the criteria of qualification set by PR associations and what is taught at universities, but there are not common standards for quality and shared curriculum between the diversity of courses offered in communication management and public relations through diverse regions in Europe and even in the same countries.

Practitioners in communication and public relations have traditionally complained about the disconnection between practitioner's needs in the labour market and graduate education (Brody, 1985; Cole, Hembroff & Corner, 2009; Todd, 2009). The issue has been discussed both in professional trade publications and scholarly literature.

Two of the main relevant studies have been developed with the support of commissions in the US. The Commission on Public Relations Education (1999) recommended the needs for the 21st Century: research, written and oral communication, problem solving and negotiation, management of information, strategic planning, audience segmentation, issue management, technology and visual literacy, management people and results, and ethics. The research by Toth (1999) for the National Communication Association 1998 Summer Conference resulted in recommendations for more study of ethics, technology, multiculturalism and international issues. One of the most relevant studies was the research to inform the Commission on Public Relations Education in 2006. It concluded that education in public relations had to reinforce the areas of strategic, international, ethical and research methods training, and leadership (DiStaso et al., 2009). A more recent study with PRSA faculty and professional advisors revealed the agreement in both groups on the three main areas that public relations students have to study: public relations ethics knowledge, public relations management knowledge, and new media technologies skills (Todd, 2009).

As stated by DiStaso et al.: "Writing skills continued to be the top ranked outcome required for entry-level hiring but also the first ranked hiring problem" (2009: 269). Writing skills and communication skills are considered to be one of the most, if not the most, important skills that graduating public relations students should hold, both by practitioners, educators and students. Nevertheless, the inappropriate quality of writing skills among graduate students is a recurrent topic in literature and it is considered one of the main deficiencies for the entry-level employment (Lingwall, 2015; Paskin, 2013; Tench, 2001).

Linking with writing competency for practice is the evolution and importance of new technologies for public relations. Literature reveals the necessity of incorporating online technologies into public relations education programmes (Commission of Public Relations Education, 2006; Curtin & Witherspoon, 1999; Gower & Cho, 2001; Institute for the Future, 2011; Kent & Taylor, 2009; Kinsky, Freberg, Kim, Kushin & Ward, 2016; Paskin, 2013; Todd,

2009; Watson, 2015) and to broaden the strategic use of the Internet and social media (Kent & Saffer, 2014; Macnamara, 2010; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Moreno, Navarro, Tench & Zerfass, 2015; Linke & Zerfass, 2013). Nevertheless, there is in Europe a general need on improving digital skills (Moreno et al., 2015; Tench et al., 2013; Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verçiç & Verhoeven, 2013).

Moving away from the entry level, practitioners most commonly defined success in managerial and strategic terms (Berger & Reber, 2005). VanSlyke Turk (1989) found that practitioners listed five skills for becoming public relations manager: organizing, planning, problem solving, prioritizing and goal setting, time management, and ethical and legal issues. Berger and Reber (2005) found that practitioners defined success in public relations as being part of the decision-making, providing business value, and serving as senior counsels. Nevertheless, again the ECM 2012 survey with 2710 practitioners in 43 European countries identified a serious gap regarding management, business, and communication qualifications (Zerfass, Verhoeven, Tench, Moreno, & Verçiç, 2012).

Finally, the area of cross-cultural or inter-cultural knowledge and competence has also been placed at the centre of demands for public relations practitioners in the 21st century (DiStaso et al., 2009; Institute for the Future, 2011; Pratt & Ogbondah, 1996; Toth, 1999). Freitag (2002) underlines the importance of cross-cultural competence in a situation of proliferation of media as broadcast networks, digital transmission, multipoint production, and the increase in information exchange by the World Wide Web, although revealed little preparation of practitioners for international assignments.

In a recent survey with 463 PRSA practitioners and educators, Shen and Toth (2013) revealed that both groups expect that a master's program graduate should understand the globalization of the practice and the global organizational environment.

“Having a global perspective and experience with a variety of cultures are necessary but lacking skills for advanced level practitioners” (DiStaso et al., 2009: 269).

2.2. Competences for communication and public relations

Today, as professional communicators are moving from mostly operational to more managerial, educational, and reflective levels, building competencies and skills is the next big challenge both for individuals and organizations (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011; Tench & Konczos, 2015; Tench & Moreno, 2015).

Literature about the outcomes needed to perform the profession of communication management has focused mainly on roles (Van Ruler & Verçiç, 2004; tasks (BVC, 2002; Logeion, 2012; Van Ruler, 2000) and skills (DiStaso et al., 2009; Goodman, 2006), but it has scarcely addressed a complex framework of competences, that recognizes the interaction between knowledge, skills, and personal attributes for an effective performance of the professional roles. The European Centre for the Development of Vocational training (Winterton, Delamare-Le Deist & Stringfellow, 2005) highlights the usefulness of competences as providing a link between education (and skills) and job requirements (roles).

Oughton (2004) conceives competences from a double perspective: the ability to perform a task and also the prescriptive behaviour to carry out a role. Jeffrey and Brunton (2011) highlight the advantage of studying competences over roles, because while roles outlines tasks and responsibilities that can change frequently in dynamic workplaces, competences remain stable. Gregory defines competences as “behavioural sets or sets of behaviours that support the attainment of organizational objectives. How knowledge and skills are used in performance” (2008: 216). Tench et al. (2013) conceptualized competences as “the combination of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that leads to superior performance for practitioners” (Tench et al., 2013: 19).

Regarding ad hoc research on competences for communication and public relations professionals, Szyszka (1995) identified two categories of competencies for PR practitioners: specific qualifications – directly connected to the topic public relations – and unspecific qualifications – specific and unspecific qualifications seen as valuable to practitioners when it comes to factors that help to earn a higher salary.

Gregory (2008) studied the competencies of senior communication managers in the UK. From the approach of the Universal Competency Framework she founded ten competencies, each attributed to private and public sector professional competencies. In New Zealand, Jeffrey and Brunton (2011) conducted a research with both qualitative and quantitative methods about the competencies required to achieve two superordinate goals for communication managers: strategically managing the communication process and managing relationships. They suggest that a competency framework for communications practice should reflect the influences of different cultures and setting and more research is required to advance the understanding on communication practice.

The ECOPSI focused on mapping competencies across European countries. Based on the six nuclear roles identified by Logeion (2012) –Analysing, Counselling, Creating, Organizing, Guiding/supporting, and Managing– a communication role matrix of competences was built. The ECOPSI identified the principal knowledge, skills, and attributes for four professional roles: Chief communication officers (CCO), Crisis communication manager, Internal communication manager, and Social media managers (Tench et al., 2013). (See Table 1).

This paper goes into more depth on the perceptions of what practitioners lack and how to meet these demands for professionals that will perform four professional roles: CCO, crisis communication, social media, and internal communication

These objectives have being defined in four hypotheses:

H1. European communication management practitioners recognized diverse means for had been achieved their current competences to perform their roles and experience is highly valuated.

H2. Communication management professionals in Europe recognized common shortcomings in the competences they need to perform his/her role, yet diversely evaluate different ways of life-long learning to fulfilling their (or colleague's) shortcomings.

H3. Communication management professionals in Europe identify common competences to face the technological and intercultural changes.

H4. Current practitioners identify common needs for the future generation who will perform their professional roles.

3. Method

“Public relations as a professional specialization is ideological. ... It is the professionals, themselves, who are in the best position to know who they are and how they can serve both their clients and society in a professional capacity” (Kruckeberg, 1998: 243).

This paper presents results from the EU financed project, ECOPSI.

A ECOPSI communication role matrix (Tench et al., 2013: 25-26) was developed from the literature review and secondary research and primary research into the targeted regions in Europe for each professional role. The ECOPSI Matrix identified knowledge, skills, and competences necessary for the successful professional development of the profession of management communication today. This first matrix was tested with four focus groups and 53 in-depth interviews to validate its applicability (Tench et al., 2013; Tench & Moreno, 2015).

The interviews were also an opportunity to probe on specifics about the means of education to perform four identified roles (Chief Communication Officer (CCO), Crisis

Communication, Internal Communication, and Social Media). This involved identifying the current gaps in knowledge and skills and exploration of the future competencies of communications practitioners specifically in the areas of: a) new media competency; and how to respond to environmental and role changes; b) development of cross-cultural competencies as identified as a core future employment skill; and c) understanding of how to support communications practitioners in the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills relating to management and business. This paper focuses on the results about these topics.

3.1. Sample

When selecting participants, a strategy of purposeful sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) was employed. We wanted to assure that all interviewees were active professionals working in strategic communication in departments of companies in Europe in the six regions targeted for the study: Germany, Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, and the UK.

In addition, the sample had to include individuals differing in terms of their professional specialization or expertise area, considering the four specialized professionals roles focused in this study: Chief communication Officers, Crisis communication, Internal communication, and Social Media. These were selected and identified to obtain breadth and diversity on communication roles. To ensure all these roles were represented in the different regions, participants were selected using a purposive combination of regions and roles. Maximum variation sampling was provided by these two basic variables and collecting professionals with diverse ages, gender, years of experience, and position. A total of 53 management communication professionals were engaged in in-depth interviews, which were approximately 90 minutes on average.

The recruiting strategy resulted in a pool of 53 participants. 14 were considered CCOs (n=4 from Netherlands; n=4 from UK; n=3 from Spain and n=3 from Germany 14 specialists in the roles of crisis communication (n=4 from Netherlands; n=4 from Turkey, n=3 from Slovenia and n=3 from Spain); 12 specialist in social media (n= 4 from Turkey; n=3 from Spain; n=3 from Germany and n=2 from UK) and 13 specialist in internal communication (n=4 from Netherlands n=3 from Germany; n=3 from Slovenia and n=3 from UK). From the sample of 53 communication managers, most were male (n=29), but a similar proportion were females (n = 24). The age of participants balanced between 25-29 years (n= 2), 30-35 years (n=3), 35-39 years (n=9), 40-44 years (n=8), 45-49 years (n=9), 50-54 years (n=10), 55-59 years (n=4). Some participants did not provide their age (n= 7). The youngest and least experienced population was linked to the speciality of social media. The position most commonly cited by participants is Manager or Head of Corporate Communication (n=17) or Communication or PR Manager (n=5).

3.2. Data collection: Interview materials, structure and context

Participants were provided with diverse materials or documents before and during the interview: Personal Invitation, Interview Briefing Note, Consent Form, Communication Role Matrix (containing the knowledge, skills and attributes to perform each role), and a document with definitions of main concepts (competence, knowledge, hard and soft skills, and attributes). Interviewers were all provided with an Instructions guide and a Schedule of participants and were a team of researchers to enrich the practices (Lahire, 2012).

Interviews were conducted in six languages representing the regions and to encourage the free verbal expression of participants in their native language. Through this focus, the team of researchers felt that all the interviewees had a comfortable and open conversation. The researchers digitally recorded the interviews. In addition, each researcher took detailed notes to accompany the recorded interviews.

The interviewer team respected the specific circumstances of each interviewee and adapted the time management and style of each personal discourse. As argued by Lahire:

The researchers are not eyes and ears over the ground. If they have understood what they are looking for, they will have the practice intelligence for contacting the person again after a question which 'did not provided' anything or for changing the strategy of questioning when he saw that the questions put problems in some case (2012: 25).

The interview schedule was designed to collate data from participants in six key areas. The results for this paper focus on four of them: the means of education to perform their current role; the lack of competences to practice; their thoughts on specialized competences; and the future development of the role. A semi-structured questionnaire including open-ended questions to permit flexibility was used as guide for interviewers (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

3.3. Data analysis

Interviews "resemble other everyday speech events that call forth narratives of experience, reflections on problems, or explanations for action" (Goldsmith & Domann-Scholz, 2013: 9).

All the interviews were transcribed fully by the research team into the original language used during the conversations. This resulted in 53 documents of analysable text. Verbatim transcriptions and translations into English were carried out by the research team. Pseudonyms based on the participants' first name, country where they were based and their company sector were assigned.

As proposed by Campbell, Quinci, Osserman and Pedersen (2012) transcriptions were analysed to identify passages related to the Competences matrix (Table 2) and the diverse sections of the semi-structure questionnaire, including the topics analysed in this paper.

The need for knowledgeable coders is especially important when working with in-depth semi-structured interviews. Coding this type of data often involves interpreting what respondents mean in their answers to questions. A correct codification requires that coders have sufficient background knowledge in the subject matter of the interviews. Because of this, the own research team worked on the analysis of the transcriptions and as previously with the focus groups we identified co-occurring terms and semantic relationships among terms and related them with the preliminary taxonomy of knowledge, skills and attributes referred to the Competences matrix.

Semi-structured interviews tend to elicit more open-ended, rambling responses that often require several codes simultaneously. When the transcriptions were made the codes and categories emerged were noted and discussed by the research team to construct common patterns (Campbell et al, 2012). These were synthesized in three data extraction tables: an interview by interview analysis, an analysis of each role and an analysis of the region. These tables were structured to build a summary of relevant factors –role, country, key facets of the role now, key facets of the role in the future, means for knowledge, and skills predominantly learnt/developed for this role; collective sense of skills gaps/areas for development; means for facing gap areas; generally organised/structured communications roles in a region; significant political/economic/social factors affecting communication roles or the skills and knowledge development necessary for these roles and emerging trends and development of the profession in the future– to answer the research questions. These analysis forms were included verbatim and translated into English.

As argued by Fontana and Frey: "Interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results" (2000: 646).

4. Results

4.1. Means for achieving competences to perform their roles

Most participants stated that they had acquired the most important knowledge areas for their role by learning or doing on-the-job, in either their current or previous roles. A senior communication specialist in crisis communication from the Netherlands summarized this position: "Though the foundations are acquired through education, the experience is vital".

However, this knowledge was not 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. Involvement in cross team projects and working with younger colleagues, particularly those more Internet savvy, were acknowledged.

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. "You need an academic basis. Nowadays a MBA helps to systematize the information of the environment", explained the Manager of Communication and Corporate Responsibility in a Spanish company.

Some companies had extensive internal training programmes or Internal Academies that some interviewees had clearly valued and utilised; others did not have access to these training resources and highlighted the role of self-study. Social media managers particularly emphasized 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. The practitioners who perform a social media role have been incorporated more recently to their positions and hold less managerial responsibilities, which underlines the newness of the role itself. For those that pointed to the contribution of previous roles (through the four roles) to their acquisition of knowledge, previous agency and consultancy experience was perceived as being particularly valuable.

The acquisition and development of the skills most important for role holders was achieved in a number of different ways and through a variety of different channels. University and high school were more frequently credited with attribution 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. "I believe these skills may be improved by having diverse experiences and through different human relations. Reading related publications and case studies are more useful than one-to-one training", said a Corporate Brand Manager at a top Turkish industrial conglomerate.

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 Spanish Manager of Communication and Corporate Responsibility supported: "you have the opportunity to progress in your career by covering your gaps. The most important work mentors do is to identify your weakness for being corrected".

A number of interviewees also mentioned their family as influential in their development of certain skills necessary for their role (negotiation, motivation), but internal and external courses were less frequently mentioned than in the area of knowledge development.

Opinions also 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 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. A Senior Communication Advisor from the Netherlands described the relevance of mentors and coaches:

“A lot of attributes can be developed or improved, but it also important to just have the right person at the right place. Metaphorically speaking, you do not necessarily want to turn your centre forward into a good defender. Whether or not something can be improved is also context dependent”.

4.2. Missing competences to perform their role

A significant number of interviewees expressed that there were knowledge areas that they felt weak in or that they would like to develop. The most prevalent were the areas of new technology, social media, and Web 2.0. For CCOs this knowledge was about the strategic application of such media channels and finding out more about the return on investment that might be realised from their implementation. As a Head of Marketing and Communication from the Netherlands stated, “Social media are becoming a top priority for the communication department and therefore it is important to be able to give relevant direction”.

When asked what would be the best ways of improving knowledge in these areas there were also some interesting variations according to job role. CCOs and a number of crisis managers felt that the best way to develop their knowledge was to talk to peers or (younger) members of their own team already working in this area as well as by hiring new people (or in one instance a team of people) with this specialist knowledge. For social media managers, this could take the form of self-study using the Internet or perhaps attending specialist short courses and learning more about these areas meant studying different platforms or learning new codes. A broad concept of innovation as a root for the practice emerges from the conversations with this role specialist.

“You don’t have to acquire completely new knowledge, but you need a permanent update, and a permanent attitude of looking for the next platform, the next social media, and the next tendency in users [...]. They are layers that are built over the previous”, said a Spanish Director of Innovation and Communication specialized in social media.

Other areas of weakness included finance, economics, human resource management, legal issues, as well as risk management, political affairs, psychology, and the management of others. These responses confirmed in advance the existence of a potential gap for communication professionals between the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills relating to management and business, which was the next question in the discussion schedule. A crisis communication specialist in Slovenia emphasized this idea by saying that “if you are a public relations professional with managerial and strategic knowledge, nobody questions your existence”.

Nearly all interviewees agreed that there was a gap, although some qualified that this did not relate to them (or to their colleagues) but to professionals working at a lower level.

“Looking at the role of the CCO I think this [weakness] is not true, at least not within my network. Just by networking and benchmarking you can do a lot in this respect”, said a practitioner holding his position of Communication Director in Netherlands.

Mentorship was seen as an important way of knowledge transfer that had the advantage of being both on-the-job and set within the context of the business. Participation in cross team projects could also help. Internal and external courses were felt to be useful

with a number of interviewees having recently completed 'finance for non-financial managers' courses. It was also pointed out how job rotation, secondment and sharing knowledge within professional networks might also build up and develop this knowledge. In this regard, a Director of Communications and Corporate Affairs from UK believed that "One of the solutions could be allowing people to rotate roles and go on secondments in different organizations, particularly from the public to the private sector and vice versa".

For others, the gap was perceived to stem from failures in the formal education of communication professionals to incorporate this area into current undergraduate PR and communication qualifications, or because significant numbers of employees come to the communications profession from a wide variety of non-business backgrounds such as journalism (Spain) or the social sciences (Germany). "I understood that I had to work with business organizations and that I needed improve my financial education. I realized about my gaps and obtained the required education to perform my job", stated a Director of Communication Corporate, Identity and CSR from Spain.

Some felt that this gap could be filled effectively by studying at post-graduate level for an MA or MBA qualification, although there was also criticism of the suitability of such courses for working professionals.

A significant number of interviewees expressed that there were skills areas that they felt weak in or that they would like to develop. Skills in social media were far less frequently mentioned than *knowledge* of social media, perhaps representing a distinction between the majority of role holders needing to understand *why* and *when* to use social media rather than *how* to use specific social media technology or platforms. "I think we should be constantly up to date, seeing what's new and understanding how it works. You don't need to be an expert, but avoid to be sold a pig in a poke. You should know what you are talking about", explained the Director of Communication and Marketing at a Spanish company.

Writing (press releases and good headlines) and storytelling were also one named in several interviews, emerging as a renewed demand for social media too.

Time management, financial management, and negotiation, particularly with senior staff, were the most commonly acknowledged weaknesses. Visual design and organizational skills were also mentioned as areas for improvement. A German Executive Vice President of Corporate Communications and Responsibility highlighted the relevance of 'creating dialogue': "Dealing with time pressure and complex situations, do not impose your own view on people but create a communication dialogue that allows other people to come up with own solutions".

4.3. Specialist competences to face the intercultural and technological changes

The vast majority of interviewees agreed cross-cultural competence is an increasingly important skill for communication practitioners. Interviewees commonly interpreted this question to mean that roles were becoming more internationally or globally focused. Only a minority of interviewees added that this has always been important or that was not important in their current role because the concentration of their particular organization on the domestic market.

The necessity of cross-cultural competence is more highly recognized in companies operating in diverse countries and regions. Others recognized also the 'domestic' dimension of cross-cultural. This is underlined in Turkey, described as a multicultural structure, made up with many sub-identities, according to a Head of Corporate Communication: "Due to Turks' Ottoman heritage and the fact that everyone comes from a different place (...). The more people you meet, the more culture you know about and the more you flourish. You can flourish if you try to understand", stated a Turkish Head of Corporate Communication.

Other participants from the diverse regions and roles, more currently in the role of internal communication, consider culture in a broad sense including age, rural versus urban, subcultures or network society, ethnicity or even knowledge disciplines.

The need for this skill was said to be emerging in two main directions: the importance of localizing a global message, while remaining true to the authenticity and heritage of the organization and the desire for diversity within and across teams in order to make them more reflective, effective, and motivated. A Head of Group Internal Communications in the UK commented: “Companies should not lose their identity as this is important and you need to celebrate where you have come from and what makes you unique – it’s about getting a balance.”

The ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to respond to new contexts was also explained, (particularly by internal communications managers), through the need to adapt to and interpret increasing rates of organizational and cultural change as well as wider sector or societal change. In the words of a Communication Director in the Netherlands: “Diversity is very important, you need to have seen different organizations, different organizational cultures, but also being able to adapt to changes in society. This is becoming increasingly important as changes will follow each other more rapidly”.

In order to develop or improve skills in this area a number of ways were suggested. A popular means was through a prolonged stay of working abroad, 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 they 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.

With regard to the incorporation of new technologies to team building, interviewees were also asked for their thoughts on working as a member of a virtual team. There were a number of respondents who confirmed that they were already working in this way. This type of working, either across teams, departments or across the organization was actually implemented by a significant number of role holders yet bringing about both opportunities and threats. “Leadership is about personal presence”, stated a Head of Corporate Communication specialized in internal communication in Slovenia. Although virtual working may improve efficiencies and allow workers who sit remotely to work collectively, there was a fear that it can erode interpersonal skills and that technology should not be seen as a replacement for 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 and adapted to every culture, “Some countries are only really comfortable with face-to-face communication and web technologies are not a good channel for communication”, said a Senior Advisor of Web and Social Media in the UK. Improvements in both the capacity and guidance in the strategic application of such platforms, programmes and equipment might be implemented. Internal training, mentorship and working in project teams would also help to strengthen skills and knowledge in this area.

4.4. Needs for the future generation to perform the professional roles

Interviewees were asked if they felt that successors to their role would need to develop new skills or learn new areas of knowledge. “(The) Einstein generation is collaborative, they are used to do and play collaboratively”, commented a Director of Innovation and Communication at a multinational Spanish bank. Very few respondents across the four roles and six regions felt that the role requirements would stay the same. Participants underlined the capacity to deal with a more complex society and markets and insisted again on the cross-cultural and technological competences.

The most popular needs for the future were related to the area of social media and in particular the increased need to monitor and analyse, as well as, contribute to communications through this channel. The need to target and reach individuals rather than groups, (with tailored messages) through the use of new technologies was also a view that was expressed by a number of role holders. It was also seen as important to be able to capitalize on visual mediums in order to relay impactful communications. It should be noted that a number of interviewees touched upon themes such as the need to analyse, critically assess and filter information as well as to develop content using new media in the question relating to the skills and knowledge requirements for future successors. Most interviewees were agreed that this is an important area for the future. As a result, checking facts, analysis, monitoring, being quick to read and respond, and knowing where and when not to act were all seen as important skills. It was also felt that general commercial acumen along with good foundation in communications is relevant. Some interviewees felt that there might need to be amendments and additions to the current curriculum of formal taught PR and communication courses to make sure that these skills needs were met. “Strategy is becoming something that is increasingly more difficult to control. Everybody is a journalist, you need be able to respond quickly and this requires skills. But changing circumstances also include changes in the profession in term of accountability; find ways in which you can make efforts and issues in society accountable. These developments are ideally supported both from an academic perspective as well as from a practitioners’ perspective”, explained a CCO in the Netherlands.

Being able to understand and converse using business language and to have an overview of the different departments within business was also seen as important. Separately, interviewees expressed the need for future incumbents to have a good foundation in communications theory, intercultural knowledge, insight, writing, and public affairs as well as possessing personal attributes such as empathy – emphasized in Turkey – and loyalty – in Germany, which some interviewees felt were currently lacking in some of their younger colleagues.

The importance of on-the-job experience was again reiterated as well as the view that communications professionals will need to continue to work hard with the business to help organizations to acknowledge and realise the benefits of the communications function.

5. Discussion

Bringing to communication management and public relations the theoretical consensus about the necessity of a body of knowledge and specialized skills for professionalization (Ferguson, 1981; Lages & Simkin, 2003; Molleda et al., 2010; 2012;), the academic and professional fields of public relations and communication management are currently engaged in works on the development of standards of education to advance the profession in such a way. Nevertheless, the link between qualifications and higher education to support a professionalization has remained an unfulfilled demand from academic, practitioner and educational bodies (Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Hon et al., 2004; Kruckeberg, 1998; Molleda et al., 2010; Tench et al., 2013; Tench, Verhoeven & Juma, 2015; Wright & Turk, 2007).

The results of this study show that this esoteric knowledge must be understood within the broader concept of competences to perform the profession and that the discussion must not be confined to higher education, yet to a wider approach of life-long learning and developing career paths. From this extended conception, practitioners don't focus just on knowledge areas and formal education, but they identify diverse ways that can be used to achieve the body of knowledge, specialized skills and attributes to meet the required competences for performing their roles.

As proposed by in the first hypothesis findings show that European communication management practitioners recognized diverse means for how they have achieved their current competences to perform their roles. Results reaffirm L'Etang's (1998) statement from nearly two decades ago about the over-reliance on experience as the system to acquire the competences to perform in the profession. Surprisingly university and high school were more frequently credited for the acquisition of personal attributes, than they were in the accumulation of knowledge. Nevertheless, experience was not acquired in isolation: the support of formal and informal ways of mentorship and coaching whilst on-the job emerge as the most acknowledged means to acquire knowledge, skills, and competences.

Previous research has underlined the unsuccessful collaboration between higher education and labour market demands (Aldoory & Toth, 2000; Brody, 1985; Cole et al, 2009; Hon et al., 2004; L'Etang, 1999; Tench et al., 2013; Tood, 2009; Wright & Turk, 2007). Practitioners and academics have broadly focused on these claims, but research has failed to provide a common identification of the precise gaps in professional competences to perform diverse roles and how can they fill these shortcomings. Results support H2, because communication management professionals in Europe recognized common failures in the competences they need to perform their roles.

Evidence from the interviews largely confirms the existence of the business and management knowledge and skills gap in European communication practitioners (Zerfass et al., 2012). Bridging this gap raises several challenges given the phenomenon that experience is valued more highly than formal qualifications. Respondents refer to diverse means by which they had successfully filled the gap, from formal education to self-study. Again to this end mentorship and coaching may be seen as an important method of knowledge transfer in this area as it has both the advantage of being on-the-job and set within the context of the business.

The lack of social media knowledge and skills is an issue for the profession that has emerged in the last few years (Institute for the Future, 2011; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Linke & Zerfass, 2013; Kent & Saffer, 2014; Moreno, Navarro, Tench & Zerfass, 2015). The results from this study support these recent emerging shortcomings, not only in skills. Practitioners felt they had less weakness in social media *skills* than in their *knowledge* of social media, referring to the strategic application of such media channels than particular technologies or platforms. This insight supports also the quantitative results from the ECM (Zerfass et al., 2012) in regard to a need for better qualifications for younger professionals and social media specialist. Regarding the means to overcome the gaps, it is one of the few aspects where role and age differences were probed: for social media managers, the youngest specialist in the sample, self-study is the preferred means, while other role holders acknowledged the benefits of interaction with younger colleagues.

Although some participants mentioned writing skills - and this does seem to be a demand for the newer social media roles - this was not broadly identified as a main deficiency as it has been in previous literature (DiStaso et al., 2009; Kuehn and Lingwall, 2015; Paskin, 2013; Tench, 2001). This comparison brings us to a deeper discussion. Out of the social media area, obviously there is a need to update because of its intrinsic novelty; practitioners identify as demands mainly the knowledge areas of business and management. Does this mean that they already hold the full set of competences related to communication

itself? In other words, are European practitioners fully competent in all aspects of communication? The answer is yes and is rooted in the interview sample of this study. In this study we have approached communication managers and for this reason the results are obviously diverse from other studies, as for instance Todd (2009), focused on the knowledge or skills for entry-level practitioners, but supported the idea that success for communication managers is rooted in managerial and strategic terms (Berger & Reber, 2005; VaSlyke Turk, 1989; Zerfass et al., 2012). As one female respondent summarized in Spain, 'you cannot arrive to the managerial positions if you miss these basic competences'.

Results also support H₃ that communication management professionals in Europe identify common competences to face the technological and intercultural changes. There was a broad consensus about the needed competences for working in a virtual team, without replacing face-to-face interaction, and also wide agreement to support previous literature on the importance of cross-cultural competence for public relations practitioners in our current global world (DiStaso et al., 2009; Freitag, 2002; Institute for the Future, 2011; Pratt & Ogbondah, 1996; Shen and Toth, 2013; Toth, 1999, 2013;). 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 organized exchange or secondment programme.

As stated by Wang (2004) an important objective of public relations education is not just to meet the current demand, but also to conduct the profession to a higher-level for the next generation. Most respondents across the four roles and six regions predict changes for their roles in futures generations. Participants underline the capacity to handle the more complex society and markets and insisted again on the cross-cultural and technological competences, giving importance to the social media area. Perhaps the most interesting aspect that emerges in this new area is the radical relevance that listening, a traditional skill of public relations, acquires through monitoring, analysing, critically assessing and filtering information.

From the interviews there are no perceived differences via region or gender. Generational differences were mentioned with regard to social media competences. Nevertheless, the nature of the organization that the communications professional is working for can clearly affect the knowledge and skills necessary to perform in the role, especially given the importance of knowing about the organization. The context and situation of the organization will, in turn, have direct influence on business and cross-cultural competence.

6. Conclusion

There is a broad consensus about the unavoidable need of a body of knowledge and specialized skills as a criterion for professionalism. Research has mainly focused on the curriculum at higher education institutions and on the tasks, roles, and skills to perform the profession. This paper empirically tests how the concept of competence is a more integral concept, which can provide links between education and role requirements (Winterton et al., 2005). Following previous literature in public relations (Gregory, 2008; Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011; Winterton et al., 2005) competences have been conceptualized as the combination of skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that lead to superior performance for practitioners. The qualitative analysis of data in this paper shows that European professionals understand and evaluate their way of performing the practice in this more complex framework of competences. From the perspective of professionals themselves this study significantly expands the understanding more explicitly of the exact competences that practitioners need to perform their diverse managerial roles and what are the gaps they recognize, and how can they fill their gaps today and in the future.

Findings provide evidence of synergies in the understanding and interpretation of the four roles studied within the 53 interviews carried out across the six regions. There is consistency in identifying the common on-going gaps and future needs, along with a broad variation in how practitioners identify these needs and access appropriate interventions. This suggests that public relations and communication management is a maturing discipline with an accumulated set of standards (Lamme & Russell, 2010) with many shared experiences in the European context.

The study also targets the capacity of intervention, through diverse means, for advancing the profession from a career development, which is based on an on-the-job approach as an alternative approach to knowledge acquisition.

The building of a competence framework is a key issue for the professional development and scientific research of public relations and communication management. This profession as any other is in a state of on-going and continuous evolution and is transformed by global changes, but at the same time, the expansion of the profession in recent years put practitioners at the core of this change, acting as intercultural interpreters (Verčič, 2013) in every kind of organization in society.

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