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Title: Clarifying Skills and Competencies in Organisational Decision Making : Perceptions of Finnish Communication Professionals

Year: 2017

Version:

Please cite the original version:

Mykkänen, M., & Vos, M. (2017). Clarifying Skills and Competencies in Organisational Decision Making : Perceptions of Finnish Communication Professionals. In B. V. Ruler, I. Smit, Ø. Ihlen, & S. Romenti (Eds.), *How Strategic Communication Shapes Value and Innovation in Society* (pp. 143-158). Emerald. *Advances in Public Relations and Communication Management*, Volume 2. <https://doi.org/10.1108/s2398-391420170000002007>

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Clarifying Skills and Competencies in Organisational Decision-Making - Perceptions of Finnish Communication Professionals

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Abstract

This paper seeks to better understand the skills and competencies that Public Relations (PR) professionals use in contributing to organisational decision-making processes. The data were collected by interviewing Finnish professionals using thematic semi-structured interviews. Overall, the results highlight a deep understanding of organisation management and decision-making processes. The most important competencies were business understanding and target group oriented thinking. The findings indicate that important skills are related to writing and social media. 'Regarding personal attributes, interaction and tolerance to criticism were acknowledged as most crucial. The conclusions suggest that if professionals analyse and review their skills, competencies and personal attributes related to decision making, this will support organisational performance and strengthen the added value of PR function. A reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of their own traits helps professionals enact their expected role in organisational problem solving and decision-making.

Introduction

Rapid and fundamental changes in communication and decision-making in the twenty-first century have impelled Public Relations (PR) professionals to develop new knowledge, skills and competencies. Organisational decision-making is challenging because of the overwhelming volume of information to take into account, and communication professionals have to operate in a more turbulent environment than ever before. Decision-making and the related communication processes need to be more transparent, quick and flexible.

The decisions made in organisations are assumed to be based on certain preferences and expectations about the outcomes that are associated with different alternatives (March, 1988). They are also seen as

specific commitment to action (Mintzberg, Raisinghani & Théorêt, 1976) and as distributing responsibility or providing legitimacy (Brunsson, 1990). Different interests and perspectives are considered, but decision-making has almost universally been defined as choosing between alternatives (Brunsson, 1982; March, 1988; Luthans, 1989). Decision-making has also been defined as an information-processing activity (Vroom & Jago, 1974), a form of communication (Luhmann, 2000; Jönhill, 2003) or a communicative event which consists of information, utterance and meaning (Luhmann, 2000; Czarniawska, 2013).

It has long been discussed that organisations do not just interact with their environments, but rather, they enact them (Weick, 1979). PR professionals contribute to organisational decision-making and enact with the environment through interaction and meaning creation. The key elements in the enactment, as Gregory (2008) argues, are the competencies and skills of professionals.

To help implement the new demands for organisations and to contribute to decision-making, professionals need to have a more versatile repertoire of skills, competencies and personal attributes than their counterparts ten or twenty years ago. Nowadays, as Anadiou and Claro (2009) and Dede (2010) emphasise, it is not enough to just process and organise the information flow of new and more digitalised environments. The authors argue that making sense, collaborating, working as a team and creating new knowledge for decision-making is crucial for the twenty-first century communication professionals. PR professionals, as Gregory (2004, 55) emphasises, can also make “a valuable contribution to strategy-making by utilising their skills of interpretation and counselling”. PR professionals can have several different roles when contributing to organisational decision-making (Mykkänen, 2016; see also Mykkänen and Vos, 2015).

This article will take a closer look at organisational decision-making and, in particular, at the skills, competencies and personal attributes that enable PR professionals to contribute to organisational decision-making processes. The paper focuses on how the latter is perceived by Finnish PR professionals. The emphasis in this exploratory study is on what kind of skills, competencies and personal attributes the professionals consider that they require to contribute to and support decision-making in their organisations. First, a review discusses how skills, competencies and personal attributes have been studied in literature and PR recently. Then, the method of a qualitative interview study is described. Last, the findings are reported and conclusions drawn.

Defining Skills and Competencies

To function contributively for organisations and support problem solving, PR professionals need to master changing technologies and make sense of large amounts of available information. The skills and competencies that professionals need in order to meet the expectations have become more diverse and complex including insight in decision-making processes. Many professionals still lack capabilities in e.g. financial management, the strategy-making process, organisational development and change (Cornelissen, 2008).

Jeffrey and Brunton (2010) point out that it is often difficult to precisely identify competencies for a profession or industry and to articulate what skills are needed for competent performance. Moreover, the definitions of skills and competencies in scientific literature are unsettled and drawing a line between the two terms has been problematic. Terminology of European education and training policy (Cedefop, 2008: 47; 164) describes a skill as “the ability to perform tasks and solve problems” and a competence as “the ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal or professional development)”. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines competence as “the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context” (OECD, 2005: 4). The definition also acknowledges that competencies comprise more than just taught knowledge and a competence can be learned within a favourable learning environment. Competencies in business context are regarded as “how knowledge and skills are used in performance, and about how knowledge and skills are applied in the context of some particular set of job requirements” (Bartram, 2006: 5). Jeffrey and Brunton (2010: 202) point out that competence is derived from the interplay between “domain content” and “cognitive processing capacity”.

In the literature of organisational communication and PR, the competencies and skills of professionals have often been discussed from the perspective of the dichotomy of manager and technician roles. Cornelissen (2008) theorises that both these roles need certain sets of skills and competencies. Cornelissen (2008: 159) defines a skill as a “task-specific ability of communication practitioner to effectively perform a certain task”, whereas competence is “a domain of knowledge or specific expertise that an individual needs to possess to properly perform a specific job”. Skills have also been described by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) (The Professional Bond, 2006: 19) as being what professionals should “be able to do” and Gregory (2008: 216) relates competencies to supporting the “attainment of organisational objectives”. Overall, competencies in PR related studies

are considered a broader concept than skills (e.g. Flynn, 2014; Jeffrey and Brunton; 2010; Cernicova, Dragomir, and Palea, 2011).

Skills and Competencies in Profession and Decision-Making Research

How PR professionals perceive their skills and competencies is crucial for the profession and the organisations they work for (Asunta, 2016). Research in the field of PR, as acknowledged in a recent paper by Kiesenbauer and Zerfass (2015), has traditionally focused on communication processes, instruments, strategies and objectives. Now that organisations operate in a rapidly changing and complex environment, their decision-making will also be greatly influenced by the changes and interdependencies in that environment (Meng and Berger, 2013). The application of PR capabilities could be used to arrange communication needed for decision-making processes, help solve organisational problems, improve related interaction with stakeholders and thus, as Grunig (2006) emphasises, support the bridging activity of PR.

The general transition from the role of a technician to a manager role described by Cornelissen (2008; see also Baskin and Aronoff, 1988; Murray and White, 2005), is also relevant in order to be able to contribute to decision-making processes, as deep knowledge and understanding of business and strategy is needed. Cornelissen (2008: 164) acknowledges the problems of professionals' transition from one role to another. If professionals are expected to participate in the decision-making from the managerial perspective, they "do not always meet these requirements of competencies and skills associated with the manager role". He lists that in these kind of cases professionals lack the knowledge and skills especially in financial management and strategy making. Berger and Meng (2010) argue that also personal attributes need to be taken into account, as together with other capabilities they form the basis for an effective practice. Competent performance is the precondition for the effective execution of professionals' roles and tasks in decision-making processes as well (Mykkänen and Vos, 2015; Mykkänen, 2016).

During the past decades, many studies have discussed the PR skillset and competencies for the profession in general. Still, the body of research focusing on the decision-making contribution by PR professionals is limited. Decision-making processes were mentioned in a study on internal communication by Dewhurst and Fitzpatrick (2007). Among the competencies for internal communicators, they found competencies to be strongly linked to solving organisational problems and helping others to

make informed decisions (Dewhurst and Fitzpatrick, 2007). Studies on the PR profession have also briefly touched the topic of decision-making, showing that professionals may have influence on organisational planning and decision-making but with a limited role (e.g. Moreno, Verhoeven, Tench and Zerfass, 2010) and a significant gap of actual impact (Moreno, Zerfass, Tench, Verčič, Verhoeven, 2009). Clarifying the related capabilities may help in developing this further. White and Mazur (1995) emphasise that PR professionals can make a contribution to managerial decision-making, especially in the current situations of high uncertainty in which interdependencies feature, if they have the ability and opportunity to do this.

Skills and competencies of PR personnel

At the start of the century Van Ruler, Verčič, Bütschi, and Flodin (2000) found listening, writing and management skills to be the key skills for the PR profession. Goodman (2006) listed 23 different skills as the necessary general skillset of a PR professional. Jeffrey and Brunton (2010) found that the most important skill of PR professionals was adaptability, which indicates flexibility and willingness to learn. The second was leadership which was described to be important for a professional in order to be able to think strategically. Flynn (2014) found that, in literature, ethics are emphasised as being a crucial competence for PR professionals. Watson and Sreedhan (2010) proposed that in the future communication professionals' most needed competence is strategising, which was also acknowledged earlier by Brønn (2001). Writing skills and critical thinking were identified as "the most important communication skills" by McCleneghan (2006) and DiStaso, Stacks and Botan (2009).

The skillset of PR professionals has greatly changed over the years. Broom (2009) reminds that in the early days the skills of professionals were mostly derived from the studies on journalism. Today, as Broom (2009) lists, professionals have to have a versatile repertoire of different skills, e.g. knowledge of media and management, problem-solving abilities and intellectual curiosity. Professionals are also expected to possess skills to understand the specific industry, have the ability to relate to people and have knowledge of current events in organisational environment. Still, as Bowen (2009) notes, the top management of organisations, responsible for the strategic decisions, is not likely to understand the contribution of PR function.

Sha (2011), in her analysis, indicates that PR practice is centred on general business skills, media relations and theoretical knowledge. The general business skill included e.g. management skills, decision-making

abilities, problem-solving skills, leadership and organisational skills. Media relations included crisis communication management and use of information technology and new media channels. Theoretical knowledge included the application of historical knowledge of the field of PR and the application of communication models and theories (Sha, 2011).

Meng and Berger (2013) argue that the scope of communication knowledge is more important than the technical skills, such as writing or speaking. They emphasise “the power of research, converting knowledge into plans of action and strategies, applying knowledge to diverse media channels, and evaluating communication programmes, that will eventually support the organisation performance and manifest the value of Public Relations to the organisation” (Meng and Berger, 2013: 150).

In order to contribute to organisational goals, as White and Mazur (1995) argue, PR practitioners need to develop a strategic perspective to make their contribution more valuable. According to White and Mazur (1995), this needs one to systematically analyse one’s own skills and competencies.

It has been argued (Todd, 2014) that many PR curricula are not fully representing the needed skills of today’s industry. Flynn (2014) emphasises that skills and competencies are a critical foundation for building a practical and theoretical body of knowledge and demonstrating the value of PR. The working environments of professionals have certainly changed. Finegold and Notabartolo (2010) argue that the growth in knowledge work and service occupations has increased the demand of broad competencies. Possessing a general competence could become a prerequisite for securing employment (Finegold and Notabartolo, 2010). Tench and Moreno (2015) argue that, in practice, there are still relevant gaps and deficiencies in the development of the skills and competencies of individual PR professionals.

Recently, in the Finnish context, the PR profession has been studied actively. For example, in 2015 a study involving 300 leading communicators (Procom, 2015) looked into the PR managers’ perceptions of their work, and the position and significance of communication in their organisations. The results indicate, among other things, that the entrance requirements for young communication practitioners include, in addition to skills and competence, willingness to learn and enthusiastic work attitude, which clearly indicates the relevance of personal attributes. Other Finnish studies (e.g. Procom 2014) found that in the near future communications professionals wish to focus on further developing their social media skills, but also their expertise in strategic communications and communications management capabilities. Nevertheless, more should be done in Finnish context to

study professionals' skills and competencies in decision-making as well. The European Communication Monitor 2015 survey (Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno and Tench) has demonstrated that skills related to compiling, interpreting and analysing data and information are regarded as very important among European professionals.

However, most of the previous studies do not focus on organisational decision-making processes but rather on broader PR skills and competencies. The purpose of this paper is to concentrate on filling that gap and to offer new knowledge about skills, competencies and personal attributes from the perspective of professionals. The methodology of this study is presented in the next chapter.

Method

This empirical study aims to gain understanding of the skills, competencies and personal attributes of public relations professionals in order for them to contribute to organisational decision-making. In this paper the separation of skills and competencies follows the skills and competence dichotomy of Cornelissen (2008). Personal attributes were added, following Berger and Meng (2010). The three components of PR, i.e. skills, competencies and personal attributes are thus described as follows:

Skill	A task-specific ability to effectively perform a certain task.
Competence	A domain of knowledge or specific expertise that an individual needs to possess to properly perform a specific job.
Personal attribute	A characteristic or quality of a person.

Table 1: The description of skill, competence and personal attribute in this study (based on Cornelissen 2008; Berger and Meng (2010)).

A qualitative method was chosen, because a rich description of the phenomena based on the interviewees' perceptions and experience was sought. When the information is based on people's subjective points of view and experiences, interviews give the best information (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). As Keyton (2006) argues, in interviews it is easier to understand the concept of past and present from the interviewees' perspectives and new phenomena may be revealed.

Research Question

The research question for this study is the following: What skills, competencies and personal attributes enable Finnish PR professionals to contribute to organisational decision-making?

The focus was on clarifying the interviewees' perceptions concerning the kinds of skills, competencies and personal attributes with which they contribute to organisational decision-making processes and what they would need to develop further in order to fulfil this role.

Data and Analysis

The research data for the study were collected by interviewing 12 public relations professionals during the time period from December 2013 to May 2014. Overall 19 participants mainly from the central and southern parts of the country were asked to participate in thematic semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was critically reviewed by one independent PR professional and one experienced scholar.

The participants mostly worked in the role of a communication manager or director, as 9 managers out of 13 expressed their willingness to participate. 6 practical level press officers were asked to participate, but only 3 expressed their availability for the study. Overall, 12 interviews, 8 with females and 4 with males, were conducted. All the participants represented different organisations and the industry of the organisations varied from city and educational organisations to international companies.

Participation in the interview was based on availability and willingness. Anonymity and confidentiality was promised and ensured to all the participants. The criteria for the participants were that the organisation should have a distinguished PR function and employ at least two communication professionals. The interviews were conducted with manager or senior-level PR professionals. Only one interviewee per organisation were invited for an interview.

The interviews were conducted in person by the author and lasted up to 70 minutes. The topic was how the PR professionals contributed to organisational decision-making. The data on the capabilities of the PR professionals regarding decision-making processes are reported in this paper. Altogether, this resulted into / the study data consists of over 90 pages of transcript material. During the interview the questions were asked according to a prepared protocol, but unprepared specifying questions were asked to gain deeper knowledge from the interviewee. The interviewees were allowed to discuss the questions freely and add new knowledge to the questions that had already been answered if they wanted to do so. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed

for further analysis. The level of transcription was basic. The contents of the conversations were transcribed, but the different tones of voices, pauses and filler words were left out.

After the transcription, the interviews were transferred to Atlas.ti, qualitative analysis software for extensive content analysis. The contents were analysed based on the topics discussed, e.g. where a later remark was added to a topic discussed earlier, it was included in the analysis of that topic. The interviewees' quotations were coded according to the main topics of the questionnaire. Every quotation inside the relevant family code was also given a more descriptive hyponym based on the contents of the quotation. All the codes were then printed separately and the quotations were analysed.

Every mentioned skill, competence or personal attribute was recorded. Then each of them was assigned to the corresponding categories according to the contents of the quotation. The categorisation was based on the descriptions provided earlier in the method section of this paper. For each skill, competence or personal attribute, it was marked how many times it was mentioned and the number of occurrence was coded to the interviewees' quotations.

Findings

The findings derived from the interviews are presented in this chapter. The interviews revealed that discussing capabilities relevant to contributing to organisational decision-making was rather novel to many of the interviewed professionals. The interviewees acknowledged that as PR professionals they used particular capabilities to contribute to organisational decision-making, but specifying these in detail took an effort. Still, many respondents precisely described several related skills and competencies while some only described a few. In the category of desired capabilities, the results revealed that only some interviewees emphasised technical skills whereas many described desired competencies. Overall, the interviews showed that competencies were valued more than skills and personal attributes.

Current Skills, Competencies and Personal Attributes

The semi-structured interview aimed at clarifying professionals' perceptions of their skills in organisational decision-making processes. The first question was: What capabilities do you currently use in contributing to decision-making processes in your organisation? The interviewees were asked to describe the skills as thoroughly as possible.

They were also encouraged to freely discuss their skills. During the interview, they mentioned various skills, competencies and personal attributes. In total 73 quotations were coded with 36 different codes. Based on the quotations, the mentioned skills were categorised either as a skill, a competence or a personal attribute and summarised in Table 2.

Skills	Competencies	Personal attributes
Text writing and content creation (6)	Business understanding (6)	Being focused on interaction (6)
Use of social media and web communication (6)	Target group and stakeholder oriented thinking (4)	Tolerance to criticism (2)
Planning	Understanding the key points and seeing the big picture (4)	Critical thinking (2)
Brainstorming	Understanding media and publicity (4)	Leadership
Consulting	Understanding of technology (3)	Diplomacy
Basic communication skills	Understanding information processes and networks (3)	Listening attitude
Oral communication	Understanding of decision-making processes (2)	Logical thinking
Mediation	Communication management and professionalism (2)	Sales orientation
Information processing	Crisis communication	Problem solving attitude
Language skills	Human resource management	Pressure tolerance
	Strategic thinking	Neutrality
	Understanding production	Visuality
	Marketing communication	
	Legal affairs	
Overall 20	Overall 34	Overall 19

Table 2: Summary of the skills, competencies and personal attributes used in contributing to organisational decision-making.

Among the currently used skills, text writing and content creation were described to be important for the operative work related to decision-making. The professionals expressed that they have to be able e.g. to prepare texts concerning the decision-making process and its outcomes. They also have to be able to crystallise the information into key points relevant to the organisation and stakeholders. The use of social media and web communications were emphasised as an important two-way channel to gather and analyse information to support decision-making, as well as a fast way to connect with stakeholders to answer questions concerning on-going decision-making processes.

Among the competencies used in decision-making, business understanding was emphasised. It was considered to be related to thorough knowledge on how the organisation works and creates its income, and on what the critical business factors and the characteristics are regarding the environment the organisation operates in. PR professionals should also know their roles and responsibilities in decision-making and how they can influence the process. Target group and stakeholder oriented thinking was mentioned, so that PR professionals would be able to anticipate the possible effects the decisions have on stakeholder groups and to include these effects as part of the decision-making process. The competence of finding the key points and seeing the big picture to put forward when communicating about a decision process or outcome was described as an important ability in every phase of the decision-making process. Understanding media and publicity were described to be related to understanding what the media are thinking of and expecting from the outcomes of the decision-making process.

Among the personal attributes, being focused on interaction included being easily approachable from within and from the outside of the organisation, connecting different points of view, and bridging differences between parties with different envisaged decision outcomes. Tolerance to criticism was underlined because the PR professionals often have to deal with negative reactions and handle critical opinions on decision outcomes. Critical thinking was highlighted in relation to internal judgement of ideas and evaluation of information.

Further Development

The second question in the interview aimed at clarifying what skills would need to be developed to reach a more effective contribution to organisational decision-making. The question was: What capabilities would you like to further develop to strongly contribute to decision-making processes in your organisation? Once again, the interviewees

were asked to provide as detailed a description as possible. In total 34 quotations were coded with 21 different codes. Based on the quotations, the capabilities mentioned were categorised in three groups in the same way as described earlier, and summarised in Table 3.

Skills	Competencies	Personal attributes
Advanced use of social media (2)	Business understanding (4)	Listening to understand different points of view (2)
Information processing (2)	Understanding what is most essential in communication concerning decision-making (3)	Visuality
Presentation skills	Understanding management (2)	Interaction
Business skills	Understanding decision-making (2)	Influencing
Negotiation skills	Understanding stakeholder interests (2)	Networking
Organising skills	Knowledge of PR and future role of communication (2)	
Use of communication channels	Understanding of technology and new media (2)	
	Market understanding	
	Decision implementation and change communication	
Overall 9	Overall 19	Overall 6

Table 3: Desired skills, competencies and personal attributes in contribution to organisational decision-making to be further developed.

Among the desired skills, advanced use of social media was mentioned, referring to how to formulate and explain decision-making processes and outcomes in a way appropriate for the channel, for example, in cases of reorganisation. Information processing was deemed crucial in order to recognise and be sure that current information is still relevant for decision-making.

Among the desired competencies, business understanding was highlighted as the most important. Understanding what is most essential to communicate concerning decision-making was also seen as an important competency to develop further. Among the personal attributes, a skill to listen in order to understand different points of view was emphasised, as PR is more exposed to the discussion and to being present where decision-making is concerned. Overall, personal attributes gathered a wide range of responses related to negotiation and leadership characteristics.

The desired capabilities showed a stronger emphasis on change processes and future development, but largely followed the same lines as the current capabilities described earlier. Figure 1 describes the capabilities deemed the most important in contributing to decision-making.

Skills	Competencies	Personal attributes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Text writing and content creation • Advanced use of social media and web communication • Information processing related to decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business understanding • Target group and stakeholder oriented thinking • Understanding the key points and seeing the big picture • Understanding media and publicity • Understanding what is most essential to communicate concerning decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being focused on interaction • Tolerance to criticism • Critical thinking • Listening to understand different points of view

Figure 1: The most mentioned elements of skills, competencies and personal attributes that enable contributing to organisational decision-making.

Figure 1 opens up the black box of PR capabilities used to contribute to organisational decision-making. Skills related to decision-making form a basis for PR professionals' work. Competencies emphasise broad knowledge and understanding of the business and organisational environment. In addition, a deeper understanding of communication expectations and the communicative contents of complex processes is emphasised. In decision making processes, personal attributes are

related to being easily approachable, but also capable of analysing critically.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper sought to clarify the skills, competencies and personal attributes of PR professionals in organisational decision-making contribution. The results show that, in contributing to decision-making processes, PR professionals underline competencies more than skills and personal attributes. The study also indicates that the expertise of PR professionals is in part also built on personal attributes such as being focused on interaction and being tolerant for criticism, and that these add to the skills and competencies specific for PR. Business understanding was acknowledged to be the most important competence, whereas the understanding of organisational environments as well as communication processes and contents were also underlined. A deep understanding of business and management is essential for PR professionals when working with organisational plans, actions and strategies, and eventually to increasing the value of the PR function for an organisation.

With a focus on decision-making, the findings of this study support the conclusion of White and Mazur (1995) that PR professionals need to develop a perspective on what makes their contribution valuable. The findings also uphold the conclusions of Finegold and Notabartolo (2010) that professionals should be open to implementing new competencies, such as financial literacy and other specialised business insights. Professionals should also look at how the design of their organisations and jobs impacts their performance and competence requirements.

As White and Mazur (1995) state, if PR professionals are able to interpret and make sense of the environment, they will become more influential. Being more than an executor of operative communication in decision-making will earn the respect of management. This would, as Cornelissen (2008) concludes, also benefit the status of PR as a profession.

This qualitative study had a limited number of interviews, but in relation to earlier survey results on the PR profession it added a focus on the contribution of Finnish PR professionals to decision-making processes. The results help practitioners reflect on their skills, competencies and personal attributes and increase their role in the crucial area of organisational decision-making. Acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of their own capabilities could help the PR professionals to adjust the perspective of their professionalism and more effectively enact the expected role.

On the basis of the exploratory findings presented in this paper, the next stage of research could be to validate the results by studying skills and competencies in decision-making processes by conducting quantitative research. It would also be beneficial to study which categories of skills, competencies and personal attributes are dominant in sense making, collaborating, working as a team and creating new knowledge for organisational decision-making.

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