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The contribution of public relations to organizational decision making: Insights from the literature

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the contribution of public relations practitioners to organizational decision making and, in particular, how this has been seen in peer-reviewed journals over the last 10 years. After a literature search, 38 articles originating from 26 different journals were further analyzed using thematic analysis. The period investigated ranged from the start of 2002 to October 2012. In the general literature on the roles of public relations practitioners, their participation in decision making was most frequently discussed in relation to its impact on decision making and enhancing managers' understanding of the communicative aspects of decision-making processes. In the specialist literature on corporate social responsibility, the giving of strategic advice, along with ethics, crises and public affairs, was also often addressed. It seems that since 2006, the roles of public relations practitioners in facilitating decision-making processes and in communicating decisions have received more detailed attention. This paper offers a comprehensive picture of the different ways in which public relations practitioners contribute to organizational decision-making processes, showing different combinations of the roles of participator in decision making, and advisor, facilitator and disseminator of organizational decisions. The identification and description of the roles will help practitioners to reflect on their own roles in organizational decision making.

Keywords: Public relations, decision making, organizational communication

1. Introduction

The overall purpose of this paper is to better understand how public relations (PR) contributes to decision making in organizations by bringing together insights from peer-reviewed papers. Specifically, the aim was to identify the roles of PR practitioners in organizational decision making, and discuss the communicative aspects of the decision-making process and how the PR function relates to this. The data were gathered by means of a systematic literature review of peer-reviewed articles published over the past 10 years. After introducing the topic, the method is explained and the findings are presented. Based on these results, conclusions are drawn on the contribution of public relations practitioners to organizational decision making, and current trends in the literature on the topic are discussed.

Organizational decision making is strategic action oriented toward successful problem solving (Habermas, 1998). In the literature on decision making, communication and negotiations with stakeholders are often mentioned. Heath (1998, 2002) advocated corporate public policymaking and balancing interests in society. The social environment forms a complex field of forces, in which organizations depend on many parties each with their own objectives and interests (Vos and Schoemaker, 2011). Organizations aim at acquiring legitimacy for their activities, and therefore need to be willing to participate in dialogue with stakeholders and be held accountable for the decisions made (Vos, Schoemaker and Luoma-aho, 2013). In participative decision making organizations can include many issues and give internal and external stakeholder groups a voice (Miller, 2006). According to the business literature, involvement in decision-making processes can take many forms. Stakeholders can be engaged in decision making in different ways and in various roles: they can recommend (consult with people who provide input and propose directions), agree (hold power of veto), provide input (have a voice and be consulted), decide (participate in the actual decision making) or perform (implement) a decision (Rogers and Blenko, 2006).

Decision making has almost universally been defined as choosing between alternatives (Luthans, 1989), while the process of decision making is understood as comprising the phases of identification, development and selection (Mintzberg, Raisinghani & Théorêt, 1976). In the past, decisions were traditionally taken by the leadership and employees were expected to carry them out, whereas in modern organizations decision making is influenced by employees and stakeholders (Mathis, 2007). Moreover, when the participants possess a broad range of knowledge, ideas, skills, and abilities, this is considered to add to the quality of the information available for the decision-making process (Van Knippenberg, De Dreu and Homan, 2004). Thus, organizational decision making is a social process to determine the best mechanism to solve a problem (Vroom &

Jago, 1974). Active communication continues throughout the decision-making process (Mintzberg et al., 1976). Initially, the emphasis is on collecting information to identify problems and possible ways to solve them, after which co-creation and negotiation take place, followed by dissemination and evaluation.

The involvement of PR practitioners in decision making has been discussed by scholars ever since Dozier (1986; 1992) argued that “if practitioners are to help organizations adapt to changes in the environment, they must participate in the management decision-making process, not simply implement decisions made by others.” Dozier conceptualized the public relations function as one of facilitating communication between management and publics, and so contributing to organizational effectiveness. Since then, PR practitioners have been expected to participate in and influence the organizational decision-making process (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, 2002; White and Dozier, 1992). In practice, a range of positions exists from press agency in the past to determining an organizations strategic position in the future (Heath, 2004). Although different practitioners may hold different positions on this scale, Carroll (2013) states that they are often not yet seen as formal members of the management team in strategic decision making.

The general roles of PR professionals have been extensively covered in the literature in recent decades (Ruth-McSwain, 2011), often from a normative perspective, such as exploring what constitutes excellent public relations and how this relates to decision power. Some studies have examined the impact of PR practitioners on decision making, bringing insights from research on organizational power and influence (e.g. Berger, 2005; O’Neil, 2003) and clarifying the conditions under which PR practitioners gain access to the decision-making process (Coombs, 1998; Plowman, 1998; Serini, 1993).

However, few studies have sought to describe more precisely how practitioners contribute to organizational decision making. Attention has mostly been focused on the extent to which PR practitioners may have or not have decision power, rather than on different ways of being involved in organizational decision making. The influence on and participation in decision-making circles of PR practitioners merits further exploration, as suggested by Choi and Choi (2009). Public relations professionals serve many roles for organizations, since, according to Simon (1968), decision making in organizations is heavily based on communication, as the decisional premises – the values that guide decisions – are expressed and received through communication (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn and Ganesh, 2004).

To bring together insights on ways in which PR practitioners are involved in organizational decision making, a systematic review of the literature in peer-reviewed journals published 2002–2012 was undertaken. The following research questions guided the literature review. (RQ1:) How, according to the scientific literature in refereed journals, do public relations practitioners contribute to organizational decision making? (RQ2:) What research trends on this topic are revealed in the literature? The first research question relates to the different ways in which PR practitioners are seen to contribute to organizational decision making, whereas the second research question focuses on changes in the academic literature over time.

2. Method

For this study, a computerized search of relevant scientific articles was carried out in October 2012 and a thematic analysis of the main findings and conclusions conducted over the following months. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles from 1 January 2002 to 31 October 2012. Three major databases were selected: EBSCOhost, Web of Science and ProQuest. As a first step, several keywords were tested. The final keyword combination for the search was ["decision making" or "policy making"] and ["organizational communication" or "public relations" or "corporate communicatio*"].

For EBSCO, all the available databases were used, yielding 565 results. Web of Science yielded 76 results and ProQuest 651 results. All the results ($n = 1\,292$) were then transferred to RefWorks. After removing exact and close duplicates, the total number of articles was 1 140. Although the search had included the keywords “organizational communication” or “public relations” or “corporate communication”, the initial impression was that the sample contained more non-relevant items than expected, for example, articles on topics related to political decision making and decision making between patients and doctors that were not discussed in an organizational context.

Therefore, further selection had to be done manually, in three phases. In the first phase, based on the abstract and title, all articles not published in English were excluded, as also were articles that clearly had no organizational context. After initial scanning, 346 articles remained. In the second phase, the abstracts and titles of all these articles were read carefully to check that they were in fact scientific articles that had a connection with the keywords. This procedure resulted in 82 articles, of which 70 were available for download. In the third phase, all 70 papers were read through to determine whether they should be included in the final sample. The inclusion criterion was that the articles had a clear connection with organizational decision making and public relations or organizational/corporate communication. As a result, the final sample consisted of 38 articles.

The articles in the final sample were then read through and a thematic analysis was conducted. The main findings and conclusions of each article were transferred to a data extraction table and additional notes made. In the data-extraction table the journals and paper types were noted.

The 38 articles were from 26 different journals. The highest number of articles (6) came from the *Journal of Communication Management*. The second and third highest numbers came from the *Journal of Business Ethics* (4) and *Journal of Public Relations Research* (3). Two articles came from the *Public Relations Review*. The remaining 19 articles each came from a different journal, e.g. *Communication Research*, *Public Relations Quarterly* and *Corporate Communications*. Of the 38 publications in the sample, 22 were empirical articles. Of these, 18 were based on qualitative research methods and four on quantitative methods. Most of the qualitative data were collected via interviews, while the quantitative data were in all cases collected via surveys.

The data-extraction table also had columns that related to the two research questions. To answer the first research question, each article was given a primary code by the first theme it addressed. An additional code was given when also another theme was addressed. By coding the articles, relevant research themes were identified across the sample of articles. For research question 2, the trends mentioned in the articles were noted, and the developments over time in what the papers addressed when looking at the publication dates of the articles. The themes were deduced from the literature after reading the articles several times, and summarizing the content. The reading focused on identifying different ways in which PR practitioners, according to the articles, contributed to organizational decision making. The thematic analysis yielded the following key themes:

- (1) Participation of PR practitioners in organizational decision making
- (2) Facilitation of organizational decision making processes by PR practitioners
- (3) Internal and external communication on organizational decisions by PR practitioners
- (4) PR practitioners as advisors on ethics, crisis communication, social responsibility and public affairs
- (5) Current trends in the literature on PR and organizational decision making.

Themes 1-4 relate to the first research question, while theme 5 relates to the second research question. In section 3 we take a closer look at how many of the articles in the sample discussed each theme, and how they described the added value of PR for organizational decision making.

3. Findings

In this section, the main results derived from the sample of articles are presented by the five themes described above.

3.1 Participation in organizational decision making

In the general literature on the roles of public relations professionals, decision making was alluded to. In the sample, 14 articles addressed this topic, with more than half (8) reporting empirical research. The articles discussed the general role of public relations professionals and the impact they may have on organizational decision making, depending on the particular roles taken. The role of the PR professional is often identified as one of a technician or manager (Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Benn, Todd and Pendleton, 2010; Desanto and Moss, 2005; Bronn, 2010). A technician traditionally generates communication products that implement policy decisions by others by framing messages (Reber and Berger, 2006) and “materializing” the outcomes of decisions (Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren 2009). A manager in turn is considered to belong to the dominant coalition within the organization and as such performs a two-way function when communicating stakeholder views to senior managers and vice versa. The term facilitator is also mentioned as the role of a PR professional (Khanfar, 2007), who is seen as connecting the organization as a whole with public groups.

Impact on decision-making processes

A study by Desanto and Moss (2005) examined what PR managers do in organizations and what managerial behavior in the public relations context entails. Their findings, based on empirical data, suggest that from a PR perspective the key elements of the manager’s role are to make communication policy decisions and act as a catalyst for management decisions. They also argue that the value of the work of PR practitioners is increasingly being recognized by top management, although this does not necessarily mean that PR practitioners get behind the doors where organizational decisions and policies are made. They conclude that some PR practitioners participate in organizational decision making while most continue to have little actual involvement in the process of organizational decision making.

In an interview study, Reber and Berger (2006) also showed that public relations practitioners often lack influence in strategic decision making and struggle to exert influence in situations where vision and strategy come into play. They argue that practitioners must be ready to make use of opportunities to earn respect and the right to participate in the decision making process. Meng, Berger, Gower and Heyman (2012: 33) suggest various influence-related resources and tactics that could increase practitioners' influence on decision making and conclude "as an effective public relations leader, one should have a unique understanding of the communication process both inside the organization and with its publics. To be able to connect the organization to people and society reflects a leader's efforts in communication effectiveness."

Bronn (2010) adopts a normative perspective and argues, in a review of earlier studies, that practitioners should aim at establishing themselves as a participant in strategy formulation, as communication managers are expected to contribute to achieving organizational goals and objectives. This, according to her, includes being involved in executing key strategies. Bronn (2010: 322) also states that the role of PR practitioners includes giving input for organizational decision making: "They are to communicate to other managers the consequences of decisions based on their knowledge of how various stakeholder groups react to certain issues". She refers to a special boundary-spanning role between organization and environment and addresses the problem that practitioners are often harnessed simply to implement decisions made by others.

Enhancing understanding of the communicative aspects of decisions

Khanfar (2007), in a theoretical article with normative elements, argues that PR practitioners have a role in keeping the organization from entropy, adding richness to information, and increasing trust and transparency. Because of the turbulence and the unpredictability of business environments, managers are unable to control the implementation of strategies and plans, which is why he argues that PR practitioners need to enhance mutual understanding by transferring meanings from publics to the organization as a whole and vice-versa in an atmosphere of trust. This also relates to environmental monitoring, following issues and trends.

Public relations is also needed to ensure that the decision makers understand the communicative nature of the decision making process (Jabs, 2005). Her empirical article points out that, although for the decision makers the communicative rules of organizations are usually hidden, these rules nevertheless influence communicative behavior and the choices made. Therefore, they may have unintended consequences for organizational decision-making processes and outcomes. Ashcraft et al. (2009) theorize that organizations are understood to exist by virtue of communication.

3.2 Facilitation of organizational decision making processes

Seven articles in the sample addressed this topic and discussed how public relations and its practitioners facilitate organizational decision making.

Arranging the communication process

Organizational leaders create message strategies concerning the outcomes of organizational goals so as to reach strategically important publics (Werder and Holtzhausen, 2009). Communication management is seen as part of organizational decision making and provides support for organizational decision-making processes (Raupp and Hoffjann, 2012; Verhoeven and Zerfass, 2010). This also relates to consulting and coproducing with stakeholders, including business partners. Communication is considered a critical factor in a corporation's value chain, especially in decision-making situations in which several action alternatives are evaluated (Raupp and Hoffjann, 2012). Verhoeven and Zerfass (2010) emphasize a principle regarding communication management: "it is about maximizing, optimizing, or satisfying the process of meaning creation in order to solve managerial problems." They identify four models of communication management: informational, persuasive, relational and discursive.

Steering the internal and external dialogue

PR practitioners are included in decision making to arrange dialogue between the organization and its employees (Saini and Plowman, 2008) and other stakeholders (Schwarzkopf, 2006). This includes participative decision making. Through such dialogue, these groups can become involved in decision making, e.g. by being invited to express their views, which both motivates them and makes them feel acknowledged. Tourish and Robson (2006) state that PR should ensure that one group's view of reality should not be privileged above that of another group. Schwarzkopf (2006) adds, in his empirical article, that management is often called on to explain how stakeholders' concerns were treated in the decisions made, which calls for managerial and communicative effort. How were the stakeholders' views taken into account and were the stakeholders involved in the decision-making by being invited to join negotiations, having a voice, providing input or being informed?

3.3 Internal and external communication on organizational decisions

Four articles addressed the internal and external communication of decisions by PR practitioners. According to these articles they act either as a disseminator or interpreter of decisions.

Accountable disseminators of decisions

Huebner, Varey and Wood (2008) note that PR practitioners are often asked to inform company members and other stakeholders about the outcomes of decision making. They may, according to the empirical article by Rice and Bartlett (2006), broadcast information about decisions and organizational activities via the media and use media coverage as a measure of legitimacy and stakeholder opinions about the organization. Mayr and Siri (2010, 14) acknowledge that organizational decisions need accountable disseminators: “decisions need to be reconstructed, redefined and rearranged in the communication of all organizational units.” Mayr and Siri (2010) suggest that decisions need personalizing and staging, both of which are organizational practices that supply organizations with visible decisions.

The analysis by Huebner et al. (2008) shows that the communication processes related to decision making are only partly addressed in the orthodox communication theories. According to the authors, PR practitioners support decision making by acting as the voice of decisions; because an organization itself cannot speak, it needs speakers. As Huebner et al. (2008) argue, such a voice is needed to turn strategic issues into action. In this way, PR is considered a strategic practice of giving a voice to those who have the “license to operate”, while ensuring that the speaker’s voice is legitimized by the other members of the organization.

Interpreters of decisions

Huebner et al. (2008) also acknowledge that organizational rules and decisions must undergo a process of interpretation. PR practitioners can provide platforms suitable for giving speakers a voice and communicating decisions, and linking organizational decisions and actions together. This includes (1) clarifying the actual (rational or irrational) processes of decision making, (2) facilitating the legitimization of decisions through networking, and (3) describing decisions in the company media (Huebner et al., 2008: 216).

According to Raupp and Hoffjann (2012) the most valuable contribution of PR is to develop and provide an interpretation of decisions and strategies which can be offered to internal and external stakeholders. Outcomes of these interpretations can take the form of self-descriptions (e.g. traditional press releases), dialogue options and recommendations to the management.

3.4 Advising on corporate social responsibility, ethics, crises and public affairs

In the literature on social responsibility and similar topics, eleven articles addressed the giving of advice related to decision making. This concerned the topics of social responsibility, ethical decision making, crisis communication and public affairs.

Counselor on corporate social responsibility

The role of public relations for the theme of corporate social responsibility (CSR), also termed corporate citizenship or sustainability, was mentioned as one of an information collector and exchanger, or counselor of management. According to Mathis (2007), public relations is needed in CSR to exchange and collect information. In his empirical paper, he suggests that practitioners create a kind of wide-screen radar for an organization, enabling them to recognize potential upcoming issues, thereby improving relations with all stakeholders through more intensive contacts and more transparent information exchange.

Benn, Todd and Pendleton (2010) see the role of the public relations practitioner in CSR as that of a counselor whose task is to develop the communicative aspects of the organization's activities and not just design external communication activities. They emphasize the importance of guiding and developing the communicative capabilities of employees. Although their data show that PR practitioners are often seen as messengers of the organization and are not expected to contribute to organizational performance, Benn et al. (2010: 420) also conclude that "the professional communicator can play a role in developing the dynamic interaction between senior management and employees across the organization."

Advocates of ethical decision making and communication

PR practitioners may act as ethical advocates or counselors on ethical matters (Place, 2010; Bowen, 2004a; 2004b; Kang, Berger and Shin, 2012). According to Place (2010), the importance of public relations lies in its possibility to strengthen the ethical quality of decision making. She argues that professionals are able to identify the informational needs and interests of those with whom they communicate, and therefore they are expected to consider the possible harm that may result from communication. The inherent role of the PR practitioner as a counselor or advocate often calls for practitioners to make ethical decisions as members of teams, executive counsels, or client-consultant pairs rather than as isolated decision makers.

Bowen (2004a; 2004b) argues that the communicator has a responsibility to represent the interests of stakeholders within the organization. Stakeholders evaluate organizational decisions from their various vantage points in society. The task of public relations is to expand the boundaries of the organization and incorporate the views of groups outside the organization (Bowen, 2004a; 2004b).

According to Kang et al. (2012), the current research literature fails to clearly address how PR practitioners shape an organization's ethical decisions and actions. Although PR practitioners are generally considered to be bridge builders who bring publics' voices into the internal organizational decision-making process, they are instead often called upon to defend the reputation of their organization. Their data (Kang et al., 2012) suggest that if this bridging role is not taken up, dissent actions are more likely.

Supporting crisis management and public affairs

In crisis communication, PR practitioners were seen as having the role of information managers and advisors supporting crisis management. French and Holden (2012: 210) state that, in the case of bad news and crises, "effective communication skills are essential to creating positive, renewing opportunities at these turning points." The ability of decision makers to cognitively process complex organizational crises is directly affected by whether they frame the crisis as a threat or also see it as a source of opportunities. French and Holden (2012) argue that organizations that focus on appreciating and cultivating positive organizational traits, such as hope, resiliency, and optimism, prior to a crisis may be more successful in garnering employee support during and after a crisis. Streifel, Beebe, Veil and Sellnow (2006) state, that in crises PR practitioners aid organizations by disseminating information as fully and accurately as possible.

The role of PR practitioners also includes decision making related to public affairs. As theorized by Dyer (2003), they engage in information management to influence public opinion about the organization. Fleisher (2002) in turn concludes that PR practitioners use several analytical methods, models or techniques for dealing with public affairs, taking into account that "the most critical public policy positioning intelligence will come from dialogues, conversations and discussions" (Fleisher, 2002: 170).

3.5 Current trends in the literature on PR and organizational decision making

Two articles explicitly discussed trends in the research. Based on Delphi studies, they pointed out that the role of public relations in contributing to organizational decision making is an important topic for future research. According to Watson (2008), the contribution of public relations to the strategic decision making, strategy development and

efficient operation of organizations has become the most important research priority amongst academics, practitioners and senior executives of professional and industry bodies.

The other Delphi study, by Wehmeier (2009), studied the views of international public-relations experts, scholars and practitioners on the relationship between theory and practice. The results showed that the field of public relations is heading towards a more managerial approach and that scholars argue that public relations managers need to take part in organizational decision making (Wehmeier, 2009).

We scrutinized the frequency with which the different research themes were addressed over the years. In the sample, participation in decision making, particularly the debate on the impact of PR managers on decision making, and the importance of environmental monitoring and enhancing understanding of communicative aspects in interaction with decision makers, received most attention in the literature on the general roles of PR practitioners (theme 1). In the specialist literature on corporate social responsibility, ethics, crises and public affairs, strategic advice by PR practitioners was also often discussed (theme 4). Moreover, since 2006, studies addressing PR practitioners' role in facilitating decision making processes (theme 2) and communicating decisions (theme 3) have also appeared. A recent trend in the literature seems to be an increase in the scrutiny directed at the roles of facilitator and accountable disseminator. Over the 10 years observed in this study, it seems that, initially, debating the level of impact that PR practitioners have on organizational decision making received the most attention, while later studies have looked in more detail into the different ways in which PR contributes to decision-making processes.

4. Conclusion and discussion

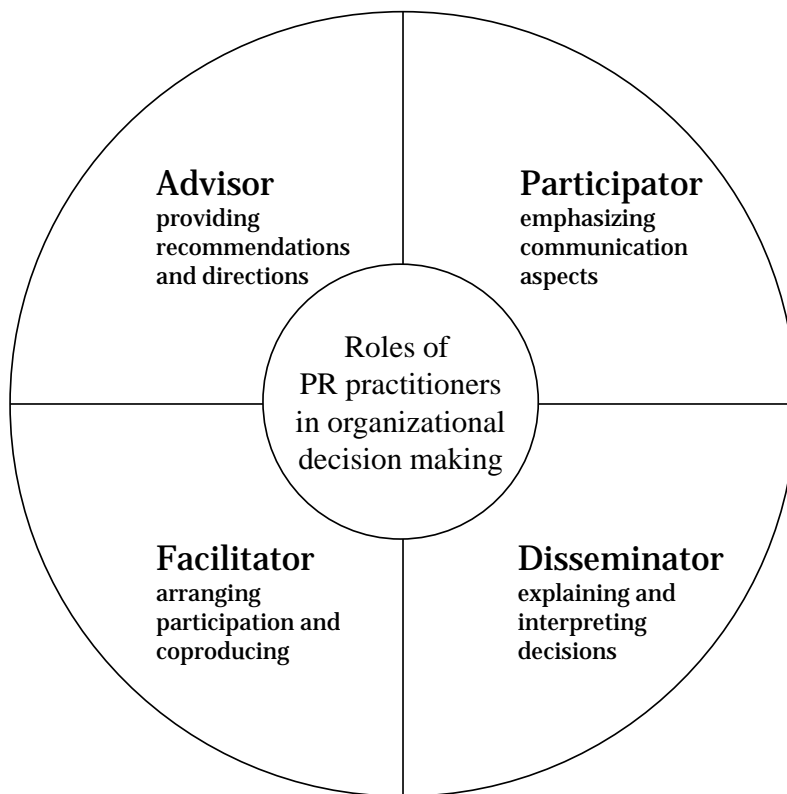
By bringing together insights from scientific articles, we were able to specify further in what ways and roles public relations practitioners are involved in organizational decision making. This answered the first research question, as we will further discuss in this chapter. Related to the second research question, we noted developments over time in how the topic was addressed in the literature. Over the 10-year study period, determining the impact that PR practitioners have on decisions seems to have been the main concern during the earlier years, whereas later studies have more closely investigated the different ways in which PR contributes to decision-making processes.

Practitioners are expected to impact decision making and enhance understanding of the communicative aspects of decision-making processes. Moreover, they advise on and manage the communication process, and arrange dialogue between the organization and its internal and external stakeholders. In communicating decisions, they serve as accountable disseminators and add richness to the information, materializing the outcomes of decisions for internal and external publics. Furthermore, they provide advice on corporate ethics, crisis communication, social responsibility and public affairs.

How do the activities of PR practitioners relate to the various decision-making roles, as described by Rogers and Blenko (2006)? In the literature on information technology (IT), for example, the roles of facilitator and analyst have been emphasized, next to participating in decision making (Belton and Hodgkin, 1999). What roles have been reflected on in the public relations literature? Among the roles related to decisionmaking, in the literature most attention has been given to *participating* in decision making, though the precise impact of PR practitioners has been much debated, and the impact of PR geared towards underlining the importance of environmental monitoring and educating decision-makers on communicative aspects of decision making. Another much addressed role in the literature is *recommending* (consulting and proposing directions), related to corporate social responsibility, ethics, crises and public affairs. Next to this, *providing input* has been widely discussed although not, as Rogers and Blenko (2006) see this role, giving input as a stakeholder, but rather facilitating the consultation and coproduction process with all of the stakeholders. The latter concerns arranging forms of interaction for participative decision making, also advocated by Gregory, McDaniels and Fields (2001) as 'decision aid', directly involving stakeholders in sense-making and negotiations by value-focused thinking. The role of *agreeing* to decisions made, having veto power, was not mentioned in the literature found for this review. The role of *performing* decisions relates here to implementing public relations activities and, in particular, being an accountable disseminator of organizational decisions by interpreting decisions and explaining them to stakeholders.

The various roles found in the systematic literature review are brought together in a new overview. Figure 1 shows the four clusters identified: advisor (making recommendations and proposing directions), participant (emphasizing communicative aspects of decision making and environmental monitoring), facilitator (arranging participation and coproducing with stakeholders) and disseminator (being accountable when explaining and empathetic when interpreting decisions).

Figure 1. Wheel model of the roles of public relations practitioners in organizational decision making based on the findings.



The four clusters identified each have a very different focus. However, we would like to emphasize that they are not exclusive and not static. Practitioners may use different combinations of roles, which also evolve over time. In any case, the roles mentioned in the wheel model represent important resources for organizational legitimacy, addressing stakeholder views, increasing understanding of communicative aspects of decision making, supporting a balance of interests, and explaining decisions that have been made.

In this paper we gave an overview of the ways in which PR practitioners contribute to organizational decision making, as these emerged from a search of the literature. The roles emphasized by the authors of the articles selected for this study differed. For example, some stressed the impact of PR practitioners on decisions, while others focused on their role in facilitating participative decision-making processes. Altogether, four different roles were identified in the structured literature review: participator, advisor, facilitator and accountable disseminator. Decision power can be seen to exist in an evolving combination of roles depending on personal competences and situational factors.

The range of impact, as well as the combination of different roles, will differ among practitioners. Therefore, we conclude that the findings could give practitioners cause to reflect on their own roles in organizational decision making. Some practitioners may only occupy a limited number of roles and could consider developing other roles as well. By bringing together the roles found in the literature, a more comprehensive picture has been created to show how PR practitioners contribute to organizational decision making. As a single decision may require multiple roles this calls for a broad range of PR skills and abilities. Familiarity with decision-making roles enhances a better understanding of the process as a whole. In this way, PR practitioners are able to contribute to an open and efficient decision making and communication process.

On the meta-level impact of PR on decision making, tentative suggestions can be made on the basis of this review. Possibilities to further develop the impact of PR on decision making may be found, in particular, in the advisor and participant roles, where PR practitioners can work towards creating a better understanding of upcoming issues and conflicting interests, and, building on their boundary-spanning role, support problem-solving that extends involvement to a broader range of stakeholders. These are relatively new challenges for organizations in a rapidly changing environment that are difficult to meet without a strong contribution of communication to the organizational decision-making process.

The systematic search method used in this paper was time-consuming. Although different sets of keywords were tested, it was not possible in the databases to narrow the search down to solely include research on decision or policy making related to public relations or organizational/corporate communication. Consequently, the computerized search provided many results from other areas than those targeted, such as political decision making or medical decision making between the healthcare unit and patients. This had to be corrected by scanning the articles one by one. It also demonstrated that there are no clear or logical boundaries to decision or policy making. However, the systematic search method, even though including hand work, enabled a perusal of the literature with respect to peer-reviewed articles over the last 10 years.

The analysis of the literature reveals that PR as a function of organizations is viewed as an important part of organizational decision making. By drawing the various studies together, a more complete picture is gained of the different ways in which PR contributes to organizational decision making. However, as much of the literature tends to focus on the general role of PR practitioners in organizations and the extent to which they hold decision power, often from a normative point of view, the precise tasks related to decision making processes sometimes remain obscure. For example, the current research literature does not clearly address how PR practitioners actually contribute to an organization's ethical decisions and actions (Kang et al., 2012).

It seems that since 2006, scholars have begun to pay more attention to the different ways in which PR contributes to decision-making processes, in particular, studies on the facilitation of organizational decision making and communication of decisions. Although some authors have recognized the need for investigation in this area, the results motivate researchers to probe more precisely and concretely into the different and evolving ways in which PR actually contributes to organizational decision making. Further scrutiny would reveal the potential benefits of PR in greater detail.

By scrutinizing how the peer-reviewed literature addresses the different ways in which PR contributes to organizational decision making, four different roles were identified: participator, advisor, facilitator and accountable disseminator. The identification and description of the roles found can help practitioners reflect on their own roles in organizational decision making. Further consideration of these roles may also facilitate a better understanding of what kinds of education, experience, temperament, management orientation and job design can help make PR practitioners respected participants in the dominant coalition of actors within their organizations, and thereby contribute to the quality of the decision-making processes of organizations in their social environment. By contributing more to the organizational decision making processes, PR practitioners will solidify their strategic position. This study also opens possibilities to further explore the tasks related to organizational decision making and the skills needed in contributing to such processes.

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