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Structure of the public relations/communication department: Key findings from a global study

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on some of the core findings from a program of research focused on examining the structure of public relations/communication departments. It draws on a recent major global study that was sponsored by the former Research Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). Analyzing the results from interviews with 26 Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) located in each of the five continents and from a survey sample of some 278 CCOs based in organizations headquartered across the globe, the study found quite notable variations in the type of departmental structures. No one dominant structural model emerged. In effect, each organization appeared to adopt a structural design to suit their individual circumstances, although there were nevertheless some reasonably common component functional elements within each department. CCOs identified those variables that they believed most influenced the design of the public relations department structure. While recognizing department structure is situation dependent, the evidence suggests that CCOs create hybrid structures unique to the circumstances. What was perhaps most surprising was that department structure did not appear to be strongly influenced by department size, other than in terms of the vertical structural design. In short, there do not appear to be any common formulas or prescribed solutions for how organizations should or do orchestrate the design of the public relations department structure, rather CCOs appear to be able to exercise a degree of latitude in determining what works best for them.

1. Introduction

1.1. Organization and functional structure

While the past two to three decades have witnessed remarkable growth in the body of literature focused around the role of communication and public relations within and on behalf of organizations, arguably one obvious area where scholarship has remained far from complete is in the development of comprehensive theory to explain management practice and behaviour

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in the public relations/communication departmental context. Comparatively little research has been conducted to explore the structure of the public relations/communication department.[1]

From a public relations perspective, where organizational or functional structure has been examined at all, it has been largely in the context of other mainstream debates such as those about functional relationship between public relations and marketing, or in terms of public relations reporting and access to the dominant coalition and leadership influence or power within organizations (e.g. Berger & Reber, 2013; Gregory, 2008, 2013; Grunig, 1990; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Zerfass & Franke 2012; Zerfass, 2010).

The notion of organizational structure (sometimes referred to as organization architecture) can be seen as a multifaceted concept. Typically, structure comprises on one hand the physical roles and relationships between the component elements of an organization but also delineates the lines of command and control, the framework for distribution of resources and, from a communication perspective, the conduit along which information is both disseminated and collected within the organization. Despite the considerable importance attached to question of structure and structural design amongst management scholars, it is not a topic that has gained much traction within the public relations literature.

1.2. IABC research foundation sponsored study

Recognizing this gap in the body of knowledge, the *International Association of Business Communicators*' (IABC) former Research Foundation (as of 2015 called The Foundation with a non-research mandate) funded an international study of communication department structure (awarded through competition to the authors of this paper),[2] with the aim of providing an in-depth insight into the structure of for-profit sector and not-for-profit sector public relations functions, as well as identifying the factors that influence the choice of department structure. This paper draws on this program of research, offering insights into some of the significant findings from a study of organizations located across all five continents: Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and North America.

2. Literature review

2.1. Management/organizational perspectives

Recognising the need to rely heavily on literature drawn from the management and organizational design fields, we also recognized that little, if any, of that literature referred directly to the structural experience of functions within an organization and specifically to that of the public relations function. Much of the academic literature on organizational structure has inevitably focused on the issue of identifying the most appropriate structural design or form that will enable organizations to perform most effectively. Seminal works by scholars such as Weber (1947), Chandler (1962), Burns (1963), Pfeffer (1982) and subsequently Mintzberg (1979, 1983, 1990) and Robbins (1990) have discussed different forms of organizational structure, exploring how structure may affect or be affected by different variables. Indeed, while there are differing schools of thought about how best to tackle the task of analyzing and prescribing the most effective forms of organizational structure, two principal approaches have generally dominated the literature on structural design: the traditional *dimensional approach* to understanding structure; and the *configuration approach* (McPhee & Poole, 2001). While the 'dimensional approach' involves deconstructing the structure into a set of variables or dimensions for analysis, the 'configuration school' focuses on capturing the interrelationship between different structural dimensions and to define 'organizational types' reflected in structural configurations.

2.2. Traditional dimensional and configurational approaches

Traditional dimensional analyses of organizational structure have tended to focus on a number of core dimensional variables, the most important of which scholars, such as Pugh (1973) and Robbins (1990), suggest comprise the following: *complexity* (the extent of differentiation, the number of different component parts and the degree to which work is divided up into sets of operational activities/skills); *formalization* (the extent of formalized roles, rules and regulations defining peoples' scope for action); *specialization* (the degree to which work is undertaken by specialist roles); *centralization* (the degree to which power and control over decisions is held within the top management hierarchy); and finally *configuration* (the 'shape' of the organization's hierarchical structure, including chain of command and span of control).

While organizational structures have begun to change more radically in recent decades in response to marked changes in technological, economic and market forces (Fritz, 1996; Scott, 2004; Stanford, 2007), a number of broad structural forms have emerged that have evolved through the history of industrial development. These continue to be relevant in describing the structure of contemporary organizations. Two key variables appear to act as the principal drivers and determinants of structural design, namely, organizational *complexity* and *organizational size* (Mintzberg, 1989).

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[1] Practitioners use the terms 'public relations' and 'communication' almost interchangeably. Here we have tended to use the term 'public relations' throughout the paper other than when stating the formal research questions where we have used a combined term – "public relations/communication".

[2] See Acknowledgements.

From a configuration perspective (e.g. Mintzberg, 1979, 1989), organizational structure is understood in terms of a number of 'organizational types' each comprising a specific combination of structural features. Five key structural models have generally dominated configurational thinking: *Simple Form; Unitary Form (U-Form); Multi-divisional Form (M-Form); Matrix Form; and Virtual Form.* The chief characteristics of each of these models are summarized in Appendix A. Mintzberg (1979, 1989) acknowledged there is also potential and in some cases necessity for overlapping configurations, as well as for configurations to evolve and change over time to reflect changing market and industry conditions as well as internal organizational changes.

2.3. Departmentalization

Turning to what the literature tells us about structure at the departmental level, much of the discussion emphasizes the notion of what has been termed specialization or 'departmentalization', characterized by the division and organizing of labour into specialist groups. At the organizational level, departmentalization is the way in which organizations coordinate activity that has been horizontally differentiated (Robbins, 1990), with departments created on the basis of simple number, function, product/service, geography, client or process. In larger organizations, multiple criteria may be used to divide and segment, such as first by function (finance, manufacturing, sales, human resources), then perhaps by geographic region, or for manufacturing by product category. Thus, in general, the larger and more diverse the organization, the more elaborate the departmentalization is likely to be found, both in terms of vertical and horizontal architecture used to harness, direct and control specialized talent, while in small organizations a simple horizontal structure may suffice.

2.4. Size

The significance of organizational size and its possible influence on organizational level structure is one of most commonly recurring themes found within the organizational management literature (e.g. Child, 1972; Pugh & Hickson, 1997; Pugh, 1973; Robbins, 1990; Stanford, 2007). Child (1972) examined two main strands of causal argument relating size and structure. The first was linking increasing size of an organization with increased specialization, which will often manifest itself in terms of greater structural differentiation. The second focused on the problem of directing a large number of people, which increases the likelihood of the adoption of a centralized system using impersonal mechanisms of control.

2.5. Public relations and structure

As Zerfass and Klewes (2012, p. 1) acknowledged recently: "there is little discussion and almost no empirical knowledge about the organization of communication departments in contemporary organizations" (in public relations literature). Of course, the subject of structure as manifest in the public relations context has not entirely escaped attention by public relations scholars. Most notably the question and significance of structure, particularly at the organization level, has attracted the attention of scholars engaged on the earlier IABC Research Foundation supported 'Excellence' study (Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002) – a study that drew on the earlier work of Grunig (1976), Grunig and Hunt (1984) and Grunig (1985, Grunig, 1989). Beyond the 'Excellence' study, a small body of work has gradually emerged over the past two decades, which to a greater or lesser degree has examined the topic of structure in the public relations department context (e.g. Cornelissen, Locke, & Gardiner, 2001; Gregory, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2002; Korver & van Ruler, 2003; Likely, 1998; Prout, 1991; Spicer, 1991; Koul, 2009; Stokes, 2005; Van Leuven, 1991; Vercic, Zerfass, & Wiesenberg, 2015; Zerfass & Klewes, 2012). Of these works, only Van Leuven (1991) has attempted to explore departmental architecture in any depth, suggesting that horizontal structures for public relations departments tend to be organized primarily on the basis of public or market.

2.6. The excellence study

Reviewing the treatment of the notion of structure found within the 'Excellence' study (Grunig et al., 2002; Grunig, 1992), which focuses on building a broad framework for defining what constitutes 'excellent communication and public relations management', the emphasis is strongly centred around examining the importance of structure at the *organizational* rather than *departmental* level. Thus, for example, Grunig (1992) explored the concepts of organization structure and its relationship to communication processes and communication effectiveness, recognizing that structure serves to determine the role and scope of the activities that practitioners can perform and hence enhance their influence within organizations. Here their underlying aim was to try to try to identify 'the best' type of structure – the one that best would enable the organization and its various functions (including public relations) to achieve their goals.

Grunig (1992) and previously Grunig (Grunig, 1989; Schneider, 1985) attempted to draw specifically on the work of Hage (1980) and Hull and Hage (1982) and the structural typologies that they had constructed: *tradition/craft; mechanical; organic; and mixed mechanical/organic.* They explored the relationship between these Hage-Hull typologies and the vertical structures of public relations departments and/or the forms/models of public relations practice found within the organizations studied. Notably, however, their research found no significant relationship between the Hage-Hull typologies and the pattern of horizontal structure found in public relations departments.

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In searching for a plausible explanation for the structures observed within public relations departments, the Excellence study team (Grunig, 1992) turned to the work of organizational theorists such as Robbins (1990), who have suggested that variability in structure may be explained by a number of factors, including prevailing strategy, an organization's size, technology and environment, which collectively Robbins (1990) suggested might account for between 50 and 60 per cent of the observed variation in structure. Robbins argued that residual variation might be explained by a 'power-control view' of structure – whereby structures at any time are largely determined by the prevailing dominant coalition within the organization.

Drawing both on further work by organizational theory scholars as well as their own research, Grunig et al., (2002) subsequently went on to advance a composite model of factors influencing organizational and public relations function structure, comprising a mix of environment, culture, power-control, prevailing strategy along with elements of the existing structure and internal communication systems.

2.7. Summary

In this brief review of the organizational and public relations literatures, it only has been possible to touch upon the range of debates about significance of structure and structure-related issues, particularly within the organizational literature. What this review does reflect, however, is the lack of substantive basic research into how structure and structural issues manifest themselves in the public relations context. Essentially this was the gap that this study sought to address.

Drawing on the literature review, seven research questions were identified:

RQ1: Are there specific structures/models for public relations/communication departments?

RQ 2: Is there a relationship between public relations/communication department structure and organisational structure?

RQ 3: What are the most critical factors determining public relations/communication department structure?

RQ 4: Is there a link between the structure of the public relations/communication department and organisational efficacy?

RQ 5: Does the structure of public relations/communication departments remain constant across different geographic regions?

RQ 6: If there are global differences in public relations/communication department structures, what are they?

RQ 7: Is it possible for there to be a universally effective public relations/communication department structure?

3. Methodology

Because of the lack of previous research into public relations functional structures, a two-phase qualitative and quantitative data collection approach was chosen to gather as rich a data set as possible. By engaging in this process of triangulation of data, the research team was following a long established strategy for conducting robust research. Here, 'triangulation' was applied to a number of facets of the research process, namely: data triangulation; investigator triangulation; and methodological triangulation. Such an approach added to the robustness of the research.

3.1. Qualitative data collection

This phase comprised a set of 26 in-depth interviews conducted with Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) representing a cross section of for-profit and not-for-profit organizations based across the world. The literature review, and the expertise of the original five members of the research team (which totalled about 150 years either in communication practice or research/teaching) contributed to the development of a qualitative interview protocol consisting of 15 primary questions. Conducting all the interviews based on such a protocol ensured that each member of the original five-person team elicited similar data from the interviewees. By their very nature, qualitative interviews are intense conversations and therefore each interviewer had the freedom of asking additional follow-up questions as warranted. Each member of the research team was assigned one or two continents from which to seek out interviews with CCOs. (As per the mandate from the IABC, only CCOs from for-profit corporations and not-for-profit organisations were interviewed and surveyed for this study.) Team members used their personal networks to seek interviews with CCOs in their respective continents/regions. The sample comprised 24 heads of communication, located across five continents: Asia (3), Africa (1), Europe (7), North America (6), and Latin America (7). The interviews also included two heads of regional communication departments (departments separate from the HQs department), to provide an appreciation of communication structure from a regional perspective. These two heads were in Europe. Of the interviewees, seventeen were male and nine female. Nineteen were CCOs working in private sector organizations and seven in non-profit organizations. The CCOs worked in a range of different organizations, including banking, manufacturing, technology, energy, resource extraction, utilities, social responsibility, and humanitarian assistance. Private sector, for-profit organizations ranged in size between 3000 and 155,000 employees, with non-profit sector organisations having between 7 and 17,000 employees.

3.2. Data analysis

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone and lasted between 45 and 60 mins. Each interviewer relied on the recordings or field notes to capture the information divulged during the interviews for each of the questions.

The 26 interview transcripts were then collated and analysed thematically (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silverman, 2011) to identify any patterns emerging from the collective data set (Eisenhardt, 1989). The research team then drew on the results of this first stage qualitative analysis to help design the questionnaire used in a web-administered survey.

3.3. Quantitative data collection and analysis

Whereas the qualitative phase of in-depth interviews was designed to provide richness in data and insight into how the notion of structure was understood and applied (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the subsequent quantitative survey stage of the research was intended to provide a broader range of data about structure that would enable further elaboration and generalization of the findings (Saunders et al., 2009). Because no previous survey research of this nature had been conducted, it was necessary for the research team to construct a new survey questionnaire, which was designed by drawing on both the literature review and the findings from the qualitative stage of the research. The resulting questionnaire contained 39 questions and it was estimated that it would take respondents 15–18 mins. to respond online. Thirty-five questions were close-ended, with four being open-ended. Most of the close-ended were statistically driven, such as for example: the number of employees or the number of horizontal levels. Given the global nature of the study and the desire to gather data from all five continents, it was decided that it would be most efficient to administer the questionnaire over the web. The survey was hosted on the university web server of one of the members of the research team. The Latin American questionnaires were deployed in both the Portuguese and Spanish languages. The structure and intent of the English-language questionnaire was strictly adhered to in both the Spanish and Portuguese versions.

3.4. Sampling & sampling approach

To recruit the study sample, initially e-mail solicitations that described the purpose of this study and provided the url for the web-based questionnaire were distributed to CCOs who were IABC members using the IABC's membership list. Subsequently, using snowball techniques, the same email and url were made available through intermediaries to CCO members drawn from a wide range of professional associations representing communication and public relations professionals based in countries around the world. When the survey closed after a few months, 278 usable responses were received from CCOs located around the world. Considering how difficult it is to solicit cooperation from CCOs, this was a very large data set.

The quantitative data were analyzed using the latest version of SPSS – Predictive Analytics Software Statistics (PASW). Here the analysis sought to identify key trends and patterns within the data responses, as well as key relationships between variables that might help explain why particular structural configurations were favoured over others.

3.5. Limitations

The research team recognized the potential dangers inherent in the analysis and the problems of possible bias associated with the data collection methods (e.g., Nisbett & Ross, 1980), all of which could lead to spurious interpretation of the findings. For the qualitative phase of the research, measures were taken to combat such potential errors, particularly in terms of the obtaining additional documentary evidence from the CCOs included in the study (e.g., annual reports, corporate charts, etc) to help corroborate the accuracy of the information supplied. In this way, the research team sought to test both the reliability and validity of the qualitative analysis in particular, in terms of the consistency of the thematic categories assigned to the data (Kirk & Miller, 1986) as well as the truthfulness, plausibility, and credibility of interpretation of the data presented (Hammersley, 1992). Given the need to employ snowball techniques, the survey became a purposive, non-probability survey. Because of this approach, and the type of statistical data gathered (i.e. number of employees; number of department strata; etc.) it was not possible to apply standard tests of validity. That said, the research team acknowledges the inability to extrapolate findings to the population of CCOs as a whole.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Sample profile

The composition and profile of the sample of 26 CCOs interviewed in phase one of the study displayed the follow characteristics:

- Geographic scope of employing organizations: global (16); continental (3); national (5); regional/local (2).
- Gender: 17 male; 9 female CCOs.
- Sectors: 19 for-profit; 7 not-for-profit
- Industries represented amongst the sample: finance; technology; manufacturing; consumer goods; energy; and pharmaceuticals.
- Organizational structures represented by these 26 CCOs: 5 working in simple form structures; 9 in unitary (U) form; 8 in multidivisional (M) form; and 4 in matrix form of organizations (see Appendix A for structural models outlines).

Number of Employees	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Below 1000	77	27.7	28.1	28.1
1001-5000	80	28.8	29.2	57.3
5001-25,000	49	17.6	17.9	75.2
25,000-100,000	44	15.8	16.1	91.2
Above 100,000	24	8.6	8.8	100.0
Total	274	98.6	100.0	
Missing System	4	1.4		
Total	278	100.0		

Fig. 1. Number of employees in the organization.

Number of Employees	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0-10	145	52.2	58.0	58.0
11-25	49	17.6	19.6	77.6
26-50	24	8.6	9.6	87.2
51-100	17	6.1	6.8	94.0
101 & above	15	5.4	6.0	100.0
Total	250	89.9	100.0	
Missing System	28	10.1		
Total	278	100.0		

Fig. 2. Number of employees in public relations/communication.

The profile of the 278 valid survey responses received displayed the following characteristics:

- Geographic scope of employing organizations: 66.6% operating in more than one country; 33.3% operating purely domestic basis (either locally, regionally or nationally).
- Sectors: 79.9% working in for-profit organizations; 20.3% working in non-profits.
- HQ location for CCOs: 41.5% located in North America; 25.9% in Latin America; 18.1% in Europe; 6.3% in Australia/New Zealand; 5.6% in Asia; 2.6% in Africa.
- For-profit representation amongst the sample: financial services, technology, manufacturing, consumer goods, energy, pharmaceuticals and wholesale distribution.
- Not-for-profit representation included; charities; education development; professional associations; and grant-making bodies.

In terms of organization size, which the literature review had shown to be a key factor affecting an organization's structure; the vast majority of organizations represented in the study employed fewer than 100,000 people. While just over 8% employed over 100,000, 27.7% employed fewer than 1000, with 57.3% had fewer than 5000 employees. A breakdown of the size distribution of the sample of organizations is shown in Fig. 1. To put these figures in context, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) tend to make up at least 90% – and depending on the continent or country upwards of 96–98% – of all for-profit organizations worldwide. Our sample, therefore, does not accurately display the predominance of SMEs across the world.

In the majority of cases, the public relations functions studied employed fewer than 10 people and in over 75% of cases fewer than 25 people (Fig. 2). The obvious question to emerge from this finding relating to function size is that with such smaller sized functions prevailing in most cases would structure and structural configurations be recognized as an issue that might impact on day-to day-operations and management.

Turning to the geographical scope of responsibilities, it was notable that a third of the organizations operated in only one country, either locally/regionally or nationally while the remaining two-thirds operated continentally or globally. The operational reach of organizations is outlined in Fig. 3. On the other hand, almost 60% of CCOs in the sample claimed to have responsibilities for communication that only extended to the local, regional or national level – with the remaining 41.9% having international responsibilities at the continental or global levels- see Fig. 4.

This inconsistency may be due to vagaries in the interpretation of the terminology used or there may be two other possible reasons. It could be that the international communication responsibilities for many organizations with continental or global scope did not reside within the public relations function. Possibly as well, it could be that there are separate public relations departments located in these other countries and that these departments are not under the authority of the headquarters department CCO.

Number of countries	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
1	92	33.0	33.0	33.0
2-10	58	21.0	21.0	54.0
11-25	26	9.4	9.4	63.3
26-50	31	11.2	11.2	74.5
51-75	13	4.7	4.7	79.1
76-100	8	2.9	2.9	82.0
101-150	50	18.0	18.0	100.0
Total	278	100.0	100.0	

Fig. 3. Number of countries in which respondent organizations operate.

Responsibilities	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Global Level	84	30.2	30.3	30.3
Continental Level	32	11.5	11.6	41.9
National Level	118	42.4	42.6	84.5
Local/Regional	43	15.5	15.5	100.0
Total	277	99.6	100.0	
Missing System	1	0.4		
Total	278	100.0		

Fig. 4. Scope of CCO responsibilities.

4.2. Responses to the key research questions

Having examined the broad profile and characteristics of the interview and survey sample, the remaining sections of this paper offer some broad insights into the findings drawn from both the in-depth interviews and the survey responses in relation to each research question.

RQ1: are there specific structures/models for public relations/communication departments?

It was clear from analysis of the interview data in particular that no single dominant model of communication departmental structure emerged. Rather, there appeared to be a range of alternative structures in place that were very 'situational'. There was no common pattern in the way public relations employees and specific sub-functions were organized within each public relations department, regardless of such variables as the size of the department and the range of responsibilities it had been charged to perform.

To help corroborate the interview findings, responses to a number of the survey questions were also analysed. Here, for example, the scope of the responsibilities assigned to the department was examined (core activities included: external communication-86.7%; internal communication-74.1%; issues/crisis management-76.6%; media relations-82.0%; and web based activity-71.2%). When CCOs were quizzed to determine whether there was a single, integrated public relations department in their organization, nearly 60% confirmed this to be the case. They also confirmed the number of vertical strata within their department (including the CCO as a separate strata) were predominantly between one and three additional levels (one level-42%; two levels-43%; three levels-10.4%; four levels-1.7%; five levels-1.7%). CCOs were asked to indicate their primary organizational strategy for how the various sub-functions were organized horizontally into units within the department. Organizing by activities was most common, followed by organizing by stakeholders (by communication activities/services-48.9%; by stakeholders-36.0%; by internal client-25.9%; by communication process-22.7%; by geography/region-21.2%; by technology-9.0%). Since the percentages total over 100%, the obvious inference is that the 'primary' method of horizontal specialization may include selecting more than one organizing strategy.

The analysis also examined the CCOs responses about their organization's corporate structure, with 41.1% claiming to work in centralized U-form, 37.4% in matrix structured organization, 19.1% in decentralized and divisional M-form and 2.4% in hollow/virtual organizations. When collating and synthesizing both qualitative and quantitative data, it was evident that no single dominant structural model could be identified that could be applied to even the majority of departments. Indeed, even where some models were identified, there also appeared to be a considerable amount of hybridization within each of them – sometimes even partial integration of one or more models or approaches. Here the size of the department appeared to serve as a determining factor, affecting the scope the CCO had to shape or reconfigure the department's vertical structure and from that its horizontal structure. As indicated earlier, in this study, close on 60% of public relations departments employed less than 10 people and only around 15% employed more than 50 people. Clearly, where such relatively small numbers are involved, it would be unrealistic for a CCO to consider the full range of available hierarchical or vertical structural models beyond models with two or perhaps three strata.

RQ 2: is there a relationship between public relations/communication department structure and organizational structure?

The data collected from both the interview and survey research provided relatively little conclusive evidence of a direct causal relationship between the overall organizational structure and that of the public relations department per se, but equally, no evidence emerged of overall organizational and department structures taking distinctively different forms. In short, the overall organizational structural model did not appear to be a significant variable in the choice of departmental structure. However, where the logic of this mirroring of overall and function structure may unwind is where, as is often the case, public relations departments lack the size to warrant taking on, for example, the type M-Form structure of large parent organization.

Again, given that the underlying purpose of any organizational or functional structure is to facilitate the allocation of resources and the operational management and control of activities, the size/scale of those resources and the range and complexity of the activities to be performed are likely to be the key considerations in the type of departmental structure chosen, rather than blindly attempting to replicate some overall organizational structural model. It is also important to note that the data did identify a set of core activities common to the majority of public relations departments. The top core activities identified were: external communication-86.7%; media relations-82.0%; issues/crisis management-76.6%; internal communication-74.1%; and web based activity-71.2%. Regardless of the size of the department, CCOs have responsibility for a similar set of core activities. Attempting to provide all these common activities – and the specializations required – may be considerably more difficult for a CCO of a smaller sized department.

RQ 3: what are the most critical factors determining public relations/communication department structure?

Most CCOs stated that they had taken responsibility for the decision on the current structural alignment. For the majority of those who made this decision, changes were brought about relatively soon after they had assumed the position of CCO. For the rest, the current structure was the result of changes enacted by the CCO over time as the incumbent in the position. CCOs suggested that they reviewed and/or conducted organizational design change at least every three years. If the CCO was not responsible for the functional structure, then generally the current structure was a reflection of the CEO's and/or executive team's desires or simply the CEO's personal choice. When respondents were asked about which factors contributed most to making a public relations department structure effective, a range of factors emerged. The most frequently cited being those relating to the '*leadership competencies and management capabilities*' of those heading and running the department. A second set of factors were also uncovered relating to what might best be described as '*the culture and working environment of the department*'. This included CCOs citing the importance of having the 'right mix' of staff employed, particularly in terms of the mix of specialist or generalist skill sets. A third, and far less frequently cited set of factors related to what might be seen as '*structural* issues', such as length of chain of command and the span of control of communication managers.

The findings point to the recognition by most if not all CCOs that public relations departments need to adapt and evolve structurally, holding reviews and reorganizations on a reasonably regular basis – with the data suggesting at least every three years. Indeed, a universally effective structure seemed to be one that is constantly adapting to both internal and external pressures.

RQ 4: is there a link between the structure of the public relations/communication department and organizational efficacy?

It was recognized that establishing any definitive answer to this research question was always likely to prove challenging. Our analysis of the evidence collected was somewhat ambiguous on the question of whether a causal link could be identified between communication department structure and *overall* organizational efficacy. However, while acknowledging such potential uncertainty and variability, some more general indicators of what might constitute characteristics of effective departmental structure did emerge in terms of structures that facilitate:

- A more efficient and flexible distribution of resources;
- A better ability to support corporate functions and business lines;
- The maintenance of high-level communication competencies through regular information exchanges, coordinated training, the sharing of best practices and common hiring standards;
- A clear control over communication roles, responsibilities and accountabilities;
- The standardization of management and professional practices; and
- The ability to overcome a corporate organizational structure that is in itself not integrated, one that works in silos.

RQ 5: does the structure of public relations/communication departments remain constant across different geographic regions?

Here the aim was to explore whether those organizations operating globally need to change or adapt their departmental structures to reflect differences in the operating environment in individual countries or continental regions. Examining the approach to managing their international communication by the 186 organizations with international operations revealed:

- Over 50 percent have a HQs public relations department with international responsibilities;
- Of the 50%, almost 90 percent have regional departments or units based in other countries;
- Just over 30 percent of these regional departments report directly to the HQs CCO and thus are part of the HQs public relations department, with slightly over 50 percent reporting functionally to the HQs CCO and the remaining 20 percent reporting neither directly nor functionally and therefore appearing to operate independently.

Most of the global organizations reported that their global communication strategy was set either by the HQ's communications department solely or in conjunction with their regional offices. The data revealed a somewhat varied picture in terms of how these organizations sought to structure their public relations departments across the international communication 'landscape'. Here some organizations adopted a relatively consistent structure for their department, whereas others allowed more regional autonomy to locally based CCOs to determine the local organizational structures. The complexity of the HQs and the regional communication operations appeared to be a key consideration in structural configuration decisions. While organizational size affected the number and scale of regional public relations departments, it did not appear to influence the reporting arrangements for regional departments or the loci for setting a global communication strategy.

RQ 6: if there are global differences in public relations/communication department structures, what are they?

No single dominant structural model could be identified that would satisfactorily explain the needs of all organizations operating on an international/global scale. Most of the CCOs with international responsibilities appeared to work in organizations where U-form or M-form structures where generally the most common found, but with matrix structures dominating the larger, more complex organizations. While these appear to be the dominant models, no correlation emerged between these structures and any specific geographical location for the headquarters for the public relations department. More importantly, no correlation emerged between department structural form and any particular business or industry sector. Organizational size also does not seem to emerge as one of the key influences on structural choice options for organizations with international or global reach. Of course, as acknowledged elsewhere, even where you have larger size, more complex organizations operating internationally, it does not necessarily mean that such organisations are likely to have larger individual public relations departments.

RQ 7: is it possible for there to be a universally effective public relations/communication department structure?

This last RQ served as a counterpoint to RQ6, which explored global differences in public relations structures, whereas here the focus is on determining whether a single universally effective structure could be identified. While the evidence gathered from the CCO interviews and survey did not allow us to identify a single universally effective public relations department structure, this may be because no single structure could be fully effective in all circumstances and contexts given the diversity of organizations and, importantly, the diversity in organizational structures *per se*. Moreover, to expect to identify a single universal structure ignores the essential dynamic of organizational life that dictates the need for constant renewal and change, albeit that in the short-term, structure per se may remain relatively constant.

5. Conclusions

Our findings suggest that any attempt to prescribe a universally effective structural solution that might apply to all or even the majority of organizations maybe something of a futile exercise. The data suggest that we recognize the importance of the need to reflect the diversity and even uniqueness of each organization's situation in terms of how it might configure and manage its public relations function effectively.

It likely that each department will comprise a hybrid structure – a conclusion that is similar to that found by other researchers (e.g. Korver & van Ruler, 2003). The fact that our findings were derived from a global sample perhaps suggest that a 'hybrid' approach maybe a universal way for CCOs to approach the question of identifying the optimal structural configuration, but we recognise there maybe multiple variables at play. Any given CCO may chose to emphasize some considerations over others, dependent on the given situation within the organization. Throughout this study, the issue of organization and department size has continued to raise its head and influence thinking about the significance and configuration of public relations departmental structure. Indeed, the predominantly small size of most departments raised fundamental questions about the relevance of structure – given that the typical department comprised 10 or fewer people. What this study has revealed, however, is that, even with such small sized departments, how responsibilities are organized, allocated and managed and how decision-making takes place amongst the team – which are essentially structural questions – are just as relevant and important in small teams as they are in very large departments.

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Appendix A.

Key structural models

Simple structure

Basic hierarchical and linear command and control structure, typical of small-scale organizations/departments.

Unitary, U-form

Centralised, functional and specialist organizational structure which relies on tight hierarchical control of employees and activities. Favoured in small to medium sized organizations.

Multi-divisional form, M-form

Refers to an organizational structure where the organization is separated into several semi-autonomous units that are controlled and managed by central management function. Generally found in larger more complex organizations.

Matrix structure

More complex organizations where employees and resources may be organized by both function and product, with dual lines of reporting. This structure can combine the best of both separate structures.

Virtual organization (also known as digital or, network organization)

Where the organization may comprise a set of geographically detached or disseminated entities that are connected and coordinated using information technology to deliver the complete product or services to customers and thus appear to others to be a single, unified organization.

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