Ralph Tench – Márta Konczos

MAPPING EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION PRACTITIONERS COMPETENCIES – A REVIEW OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS SKILLS AND INNOVATION PROGRAMME: ECOPSI

This paper aims to share the main results of a Europe wide research project, named European Communication Professionals Skills and Innovation (ECOPSI) Programme (2013) which intended to map and evaluate the current and future communication management skills of practitioners across Europe. This project has been funded with support from the European Commission within the European Communication Professional Skills and Innovative Programme. The research team – lead by Professor Ralph Tench[2] – carried out a depth literature review and extended this to include primary data collected from communication practitioners across Europe. This data has been collected in two forms; (1) quantitative, through an online survey of nearly 2,200 practitioners in 42 countries and (2) qualitatively through a small number of focus groups and 53 individual interviews with communicators from four role groups: chief communications officers, crisis communicators, internal communicators and social media managers, across 6 geographically distinct regions of Europe.

The principle focus of the project was to develop understanding of the competencies held by senior communications practitioners and the contributing knowledge, skills and personal attributes that are relevant to their role and that of future managers in similar roles. The interview schedule and framework for the qualitative research was orientated around the ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix, devised from a synthesised competency list developed as a result of the literature review. The interviews were also an opportunity to probe on specifics about the future competencies of communications practitioners in the areas of new media competency, the development of cross-cultural competencies and understanding of how to support the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills relating to management and business.

The findings from the research suggest and support the *hypothesis* that public relations and communication is a maturing discipline with many shared experiences but little organized life-long learning or evidence of recognized continuous professional development (CPD) pathways. There are on-going gaps and deficiencies in the development of individuals as well as broad variation in how practitioners identify needs and access appropriate interventions. This presents numerous opportunities for deeper and on-going professional training and development to build consistency and support

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good practice in moving away from a hands-on, learning on-the-job approach to more focused knowledge acquisition and development.

Social Media knowledge is an acknowledged weakness that people feel they need to improve in and the industry also needs to look closely at how it can foster intercultural relationships and cross-cultural working by setting up accredited and recognized programs of exchange, secondment and internship. Coaching and mentoring has a significant part to play in the development of communicators, as it potentially offers more formal, organized and supported career development that is both on-the-job and in-situ. This, together with committed involvement in networks and knowledge exchange activity and a review of the current content of more formal training/qualifications may help to bridge on-going and self-acknowledged gaps in the development of communication practitioners.

Introduction

Background to the research: The ECOPSI Programme was a European funded project, which aimed to map and evaluate the current and future communication management skills of practitioners across Europe[3]. The project included partners from the UK, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, Slovenia and Turkey and range between 2011–2014.

The project focused on the communication sector in Europe, which has developed significantly in the last 20 years. This expansion has been influenced by political, economic and cultural shifts which have seen profit and non-profit organisations recognise the significant role played by communication departments in achieving organisational goals. Part of this recognition is of the role played by communication practitioners. The ECOPSI programme is concerned with communication practitioners operating within this growing communication sector and even more specifically in Europe. *A key outcome of this project was to build a European theory of communication management and a framework to support the professionalization and ethical development of communication practitioners.*

The programme started in October 2011 and reported its full findings and outputs at the end of the project in January 2014. This report details the contextual work summarised in the ECOPSI Benchmark paper published in April 2012 (Tench et al., 2012) and extends this to include the primary data collected from communication practitioners across Europe. This data has been collected in two forms; (1) quantitative, through an online survey of nearly 2,200 practitioners in 42 countries and (2) qualitatively through focus groups and interviews. Focus groups were held with four role groups: chief communications officers, crisis communicators, internal communicators and social media managers. Interviews have been held across six

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geographically distinct regions of Europe with a total of 53 communications practitioners at different levels and performing different roles. *The ECOPSI Program examined the four roles of communication practitioners including chief communications officer, crisis communication manager, internal communications manager, and social media manager.*

The aim of the research was to develop understanding of the competencies held by senior communications practitioners and the contributing knowledge, skills and personal attributes that are relevant to their role and that of future managers in a similar role. These findings led to the development of an online self-diagnostic tools and an ECOPSI portal of supporting resources for practitioners.

Literature Review

The first stage of ECOPSI involved country specific literature reviews on public relations. The literature review revealed that public relations research across Europe is dominated by several strands of research. These are: (1) Professionalization, including qualifications, course accreditation and ethical codes; (2) Communication management and "doing" public relations and (3) dissecting the role of the practitioner; identifying skills, knowledge and personal attributes.

Professionalization: qualifications, course accreditation and ethical codes

Although there is a drive towards *professionalization*, it remains inconsistent and the responsibility to professionalise public relations within specific countries is spread across professional bodies, accredited universities and private education institutes, with little coordination. In Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, there are so many courses being offered "often of questionable quality [that] it is impossible to verify their claims and qualifications" (Tench et al., 2012, p. 2). In Germany, "the topics of seminars in the public relations programs at the different universities vary considerably. There is no common curriculum" (Tench et al., 2012, p. 2).

Professionalization is an underlying purpose of all member institutes that cater for public relations professionals (e.g. the Dutch association: Logeion; the UK institute: CIPR; the German Council of Public Relations: DRPR and Global Alliance). These bodies drive the professionalization agenda in-country, yet they do not appear to interact with each other. Each literature review emphasised that there are no active measures to stop people without formal qualifications practising their "versions" of public relations. This is true for all countries/

regions but is particularly highlighted in the Turkish report where there is a high volume of graduate education but limited employment opportunities. In addition in Turkey the practice field is dominated by practitioners without formal public relations education despite the high numbers of qualified graduates (Tench et al., 2012).

In the UK, professionalization equates to students completing an *accredited* Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) *course*, either through a university or through the CIPR itself. However, job searches for public relations and Communication roles do not ask for potential staff to be members of the CIPR, nor do they insist on a formal qualification in public relations. Universities, however, do ask for CIPR membership of their public relations/communication academics, particularly if their institution hosts an accredited course. This suggests that the drive to professionalise public relations in the UK is limited to the training and education sectors, having yet to penetrate the business sector with any real or lasting impact (Tench et al., 2012).

There is some overlap in the criteria set by public relations associations and what is taught at universities. For example, the Dutch association Logeion outlines the skills and knowledge needed to become a Corporate Communications Director, which is in line with what the UK-based CIPR advocate as necessary to gain a degree in public relations and Communications.

Professionalization is linked strongly with *qualifications* (Rottger, 2010). Whilst there are studies on the academic qualifications of public relations and communication practitioners in Germany (Bentele et al., 2009); (Szyszka et al., 2009), Slovenia (PRSS, 2005), Croatia (HUOJ, 2009) and Serbia (DSOJ, 2010), no recent similar studies exist for the UK, Turkey, Spain, or the Netherlands.

Further afield, the Global Alliance's *Code of Ethics* suggests pursuing professional accreditation only "where available"[4]. They are in a good position as a global umbrella body of public relations institutes to encourage more accreditation options for member countries, yet appear to lack the power to do so.

An overlap in UK and German literature is the use of a code of ethics within the profession. However, there is no evidence of punitive measures of practitioners, such as debarring from the profession if practitioners are caught acting outside of the code of ethics, in a similar way in which lawyers and doctors are debarred from their profession. Both professional bodies, the CIPR) and the DRPR do have sanctions available but there is little evidence of them being applied or used as they can be for other professional associations. This background calls to question the power of a code of ethics, as well as the power of the associations that insist their members adhere to a code of ethics.

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[4]   www.globalalliancepr.org

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Awarding bodies like to categorise students and tailor the content of the course accordingly. For example, in The Netherlands, it is possible to enrol for training in public schools and colleges specialising in vocational education, however, university courses in Communication Science do not offer public relations as a module, only as a 'track' within broader programmes. In the UK, the CIPR offers similarly tailored courses according to student type, for example, Foundation Awards for school-leavers, Advanced Certificates for graduates and Diplomas to develop management skills and "support your progression into a more senior role" (Tench et al., 2012, p. 3).

Businesses in the UK complain that graduates do not have the relevant skills to work in communications and public relations even after they have graduated from accredited courses. This supposes disconnection between more generalised practice and academia. In the US, McCleneghan (2006) describes the concerns expressed in a survey of American public relations executives about the quality of writing skills among college graduates. This view is backed up by Kim and Johnson (2009) and Corner and Cole (2008) whose interviews with members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) revealed that despite 'writing for the news' or 'writing for persuasion' being the most important public relations skill, almost 70 per cent felt that graduates were only a little prepared to write in this way. Hardin and Pompper (2004, p. 358) also observed graduates' lacklustre writing skills in their research. The feedback from businesses on the skills of students highlights the importance of technical skills needed to be a public relations practitioner.

Communication management and 'doing' PR

The reviews highlight the extensive research undertaken throughout the partner countries into the skills, knowledge and some personal attributes needed to be an efficient public relations practitioner. ECOPSI can use these prior researches to inform this study. Much of the research across Europe focuses on either communication management, identifying activities typically undertaken by public relations practitioners, or a combination of both. Broadly, such research is about practitioner roles. In this sense, it is influenced heavily by U.S. theory; for example, practice and academic teaching in the UK is dominated by U.S. literature, namely research into practitioner roles theory (Dozier and Broom, 2006). Indeed, this U.S. research remains the cornerstone of much European research into practitioner roles (Wienand, 2003; Zerfass, 1998).

Research that separates 'management' and 'technical' aspects of public relations often use descriptions of the work, which inevitably end up listing activities that constitute either

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managerial or technical aspects of the practitioner's role. An example of both the management and technical focus of research can be seen in the EBOK project where participants found keys skills to be "listening and writing on the one hand and management skills on the other hand." (Van Ruler et al., 2000, p. 17). More detailed examples of skills include van Ruler's (2000) ten most common tasks of communication professionals, listed as: providing press information, performing internal communication tasks, assessing texts produced by others, performing external policy/company communication activities, performing communication projects, writing press releases, consultancy about the performance of communication activities, editing written communications, providing public information and coordinating press contacts (Van Ruler, 2000, p. 415). Indeed, typical skills identified in other research include writing (writing press releases, persuasive writing, speech writing) and oral communication (pitches, presentations and press conferences). Van Ruler then identified five nuclear tasks of public relations practitioners as the production of texts, managing content and production of websites (internet, intranet, extranet), consultation about means and media of communication, coordination of communication projects and monitoring the quality of communication.

In the Netherlands, Logeion (2012) developed the ABCD model of tasks and job descriptions of public relations and communication professionals (BVC, 2002) further into six nuclear roles, which are: Analysing, Counselling, Creating, Organizing, Guiding/supporting, and Managing. Logeion's study is an important springboard for ECOPSI as the nuclear tasks offer useful umbrella terms which ECOPSI could look for during the data analysis. Their terminology is useful because the terms are not too specific; they are broad enough to encompass many activities and general enough to be applied to any of *the four roles that ECOPSI examined (chief communications officer, crisis communication manager, internal communications manager and social media manager)*. It could be argued that because they assume a broad remit, they are managerial in essence. It could also be argued that more technical terms, such as 'writing press releases' tend to isolate the work of the practitioner and are somewhat reductionist in the process. Therefore, technical tasks help define the profession but the managerial tasks help define the more rounded role. The two together give a more rounded view of the contemporary public relations landscape. Furthermore, using the six nuclear tasks in ECOPSI to map out the skills and knowledge across Europe is in line with Logeion's call for "a deepening of understanding (more specialization) and a broadening of the horizon (interaction with other disciplines)" (Tench et al., 2012, p. 38).

Dissecting the role of the practitioner and identifying skills,
knowledge and personal attributes

Dissecting the role of the practitioner into either managerial or technical elements has spawned an infinite number of variables that go towards identifying the makeup of a contemporary public relations practitioner, i.e. a snapshot of the type of practitioner who took part in that particular research at that particular time. These results are specific to industry sectors (such as public or private) or role hierarchies (Logeion, 2012) and the findings are used to generalise about the nature of public relations and communications work. The literature reviews show that there is no consistency of research on the four specific roles that ECOPSI focused on, which highlights a gap in knowledge. For the purposes of this study it was helpful to maintain a distinction between knowledge and skill in order to consider how each may be acquired, though it is worth bearing in mind how the two may overlap.

The European literature review reveals that there are no consistent definitions of roles or of specialisations such as a social media practitioner or internal communications practitioner. There are, however, any number of labels given to types of public relations /communications activities and any number of titles given to people who perform these sets of activities.

In essence, the labels attributed through prior research are something that the ECOPSI project is tried to avoid in designing the research element of the project. The rigidity of 'labels' and 'levels' does not allow practitioners to adapt to changes, nor does it allow the industry to adapt. The nature of public relations /communications work should be looked at as a whole, instead of as a set of components that constitute the whole. The design of the qualitative portion of ECOPSI avoids any pre-determined labels, categories or roles (Tench et al., 2012, p. 3).

Core skills

The Corporate Communications Institute's (CCI) Corporate Communication Practices and Trends 2005 Study (Goodman, 2006, p. 203) lists 23 separate skills that form a "skill set necessary for success as a corporate communicator in a global business environment". Of these, writing was identified by respondents as the core skill with 'thorough knowledge of the company and of business principles' nominated as 'essential'. These two skill and knowledge areas are identified frequently in the literature as very important to communications practitioners (Oughton, 2004; Brown – Fall, 2005; McCleneghan, 2006; Jeffrey – Brunton, 2011 and Sha, 2011).

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Another key skill area identified in the literature is that of critical thinking or its related terms – problem solving, analytical skills or strategic thinking. McCleneghan (2006) ranks critical thinking alongside writing skills as the most important communication skills. DiStaso, Stacks and Botan (2009) put writing skills and critical thinking/problem solving skills as the two most important skills for getting an entry-level job in public relations. Szyszka (1995) offers a fuller explanation of skills, knowledge and personal attributes from a German perspective and differentiates between three categories:

1. *knowledge* in the field of public relations. This includes scientific knowledge about a) communication, society, economics, psychology, technical aspects, law, politics, history, lobbying and b) aspects of strategic communication like analysis of problems, setting objectives, conception, realisation, evaluation;

2. *attributes* like "soft skills", leadership, the ability to work in a team, analytical skills to monitor issues, presentation skills, rhetorical skills, fluency in text and language, self-management, professional experience, fancifulness, creativity, loyalty; and

3. *expertise* in subject matter and general education.

These standards imply knowledge about the field of occupation, target groups, strategies and techniques of public relations, media relations, internal communication, events, product-PR, crises communication, public affairs, corporate identity and legal and ethical questions. Further fields are economy, politics, the media system and psychological and sociological aspects of communication. Practical skills are interpersonal communication, rhetoric and presentations.

Personal attributes

Personal attributes can also be known as 'soft skills' or 'employability skills.' According to Ahles (2004) success in employment depends on having these employability skills. Personal attributes are defined in the literature as separate from competencies but they are important in terms of determining how well a competency is performed. Personal attributes can also be said to be modelled or fostered (Jeffrey ‑ Brunton, 2011, p. 69).

Skills deficit

The most common skills deficit is related to 'commercial nous', which is arguably similar to business knowledge. Other deficits identified were in networking skills, knowledge of legislative framework and social media skills. The last of these ‑ social media skills ‑ was the top area selected by respondents in which they need to improve. The lack of research into social media practices can be seen in all the European literature

reviews, particularly the Turkish review. A German study (News aktuell, 2011) identified a lack of social media skills and points to the importance of developing a greater breadth of social media skills.

There is some research, however, into aspects of social media work. Riedel (2011) outlines the knowledge, skills and mind-sets of social media. *Knowledge* about social media describes knowledge about the complexity of the social web, knowledge about technical aspects, regulatory frameworks, ethical codes, knowledge about one's own company and its products and being "up-to-date". Social media *skills* refer to strategic skills, journalistic skills, project management, knowledge about human nature, readiness of mind, empathy, capacity to accept criticism, networking, creativity, organisation of information, evaluation, relationship management and identity management. *Personal attributes* include pro-activeness, availability through different channels nearly 24/7, commitment, service mentality, acknowledging own mistakes. The Table 1 provides some indication of the range of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that have been mentioned in the literature as being important to work in public relations and communications.

Competencies

What is clear from the studies of skills, knowledge and personal attributes is that they overlap in terminology and that there is a pattern forming about how skills, knowledge and personal attributes lead to broader competencies. Gregory (2008, p. 216) uses the following definition of competencies in a study of senior communication managers in the UK: "behavioural sets or sets of behaviours that support the attainment of organizational objectives. How knowledge and skills are used in performance". This is probably the most appropriate definition for use in this study as it effectively distinguishes competencies from skills, knowledge and personal attributes. Jeffrey and Brunton (2011, p. 60) highlight the advantage of studying competencies over roles as; "roles outline tasks and responsibilities in the job description, in today's dynamic workplace these same roles are likely to change frequently. In contrast, competencies are the underlying foundational abilities that are integral to successfully carrying out the tasks and responsibilities, and thus remain a stable blueprint for practice over time".

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Skills	Writing and oral communication; Project planning and management; Critical thinking; Problem solving; Media skills; Persuasion; Strategic thinking; Mentoring and coaching; Advanced communication skills; IT skills (including new media channels); Crisis management; Research; Reading comprehension; Community relations; Consumer relations; Employee relations; Professional service skills; Social responsibility; PR ethics
Knowledge	Business knowledge / literacy; Current awareness; Theoretical knowledge; Knowledge of PR history; Knowledge of other cultures; Knowledge of communication models; Knowledge of how to apply PR theory
Personal attributes	Handling pressure; Leadership; Integrity / honesty/ethical; Objectivity; Listening; Confidence / ambition; Team player; Energy/ motivation; Discipline; Intelligence; Ability to get on with others/ interpersonal skills; Wide interests; Intellectual curiosity; Creativity; Flexibility; Judgement and decision making; Time management; Respect for hierarchy; Follows organisational 'rules'; Honesty; Adaptability; Integrity; Ambition; Reliable attendance; Willingness to accept assignments; Completes work on time

Table 1 Range of skills, knowledge and personal attributes identified in the European
literature
Source: based on ECOPSI Report 2013: 17

The difficulty in establishing a workable definition of competencies has been discussed in work for the European Centre for the Development of Vocational training (CEDEFOP) which aimed to clarify the concepts of knowledge, skills and competences. This highlights the usefulness of competences as providing a link between education (and skills) and job requirements (roles). For example, there is

1. 'conceptual competence' which refers to knowledge about an entire domain;
2. 'procedural competence' which refers to the application of conceptual competence in a particular situation; and

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3. 'performance competence' which is required to assess problems and select a suitable strategy for solving them (Winterton et al., 2005, p. 15).

In the context of public relations, Oughton (2004) suggests that there is a difficulty with defining competency because it can refer either to the ability to perform a task or how people should behave in order to carry out the role. Szyszka (1995) identifies two categories of competencies for public relations practitioners: (1) specific qualifications – those qualifications which are directly connected to the topic of public relations; and (2) unspecific qualifications – those qualifications, like leadership, which can be seen as a core competence for public relations practitioners. Both, specific and unspecific qualifications are seen as valuable to practitioners when it comes to factors that "help to earn a higher-than average-salary" (News aktuell / Faktenkontor, 2011).

On-going research on competencies

Jeffrey and Brunton's (2011) combined approach of focus groups and a needs assessment questionnaire conducted with practitioners and academics in New Zealand identified the competencies that are required to achieve their two superordinate goals of *strategically managing the communication process* and *managing relationships*. This study continues[5] and they are using critical incidents as the focus for competencies. The ECOPSI programme has focused on mapping competencies across the European countries for this study rather than with critical incidents at this stage. However, as Jeffrey and Brunton (2011, p. 72) suggest, a competency framework for communications practice should reflect the influences of different cultures and settings and, therefore, more research is required to enhance our understanding of communications practice. ECOPSI responds to this call for reflecting on cultural influences, for example, the EBOK project conceptualised practitioner roles as technical, managerial, educational and reflective. However, each needs its own set of competencies, but this was not further studied in the EBOK project. Studies of competencies have produced useful frameworks for ECOPSI to build upon, such as Gregory's (2008) study of the competencies of senior communication managers in the UK, which used the Universal Competency Framework and resulted in the competencies, each attributed to private and public sector professionals' competencies.

How the literature review guided ECOPSI

Although research focused on the skills, knowledge and personal attributes of practitioners, there was no definitive research that brings these elements together in a Europe-wide study.

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[5]   http://icp.quickendev.co.nz/

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Given the focus on roles and labelling practitioners according to the tasks they undertake, or where they are in the organisational hierarchy, specialisms were difficult to define. What was also clear from the literature reviews are that there is a lack of research on social media practice within the public relations sector and the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed to fulfil this role efficiently.

ECOPSI took the broad labels provided by prior research and used them to examine four roles: chief communications officers, crisis managers, internal communications managers and social media managers. This filled a gap in knowledge about how the roles are enacted across Europe and the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed for these roles which subsequently contribute to competencies needed by practitioners to fulfil these roles efficiently (Figure 1).

Figure 1 How ECOPSI views skills, knowledge and personal attributes
Source: ECOPSI Report 2013: 19.

The European literature review reveals that although skills, knowledge and personal attributes are dominant areas of research within public relations, "there is no research that takes competences and the underlying constructs as a starting point" (Tench et al., 2012, p. 16).

The aims of the research were therefore to
- identify which competencies are needed for chief communication officer roles, crisis communication roles, internal communication roles and social media roles; and

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- identify the skills, knowledge and personal attributes that are perceived to be important for competencies in each of the four roles.

Methodology

The ECOPSI project was designed with a research methodology which included data collection from three instruments using both qualitative and quantitative methods i.e. a quantitative survey, qualitative focus groups and qualitative interviews. The section below details the initial findings and discussions from the quantitative survey which feeds into the focus groups and interviews.

Quantitative survey

An online survey was developed by the research team with questions focused on hypotheses for the ECOPSI project about the education, skills and competencies of communication practitioners. The online survey was then distributed via professional networks to communications practitioners from 42 countries across Europe. The questionnaire used for the survey covered 19 sections and 30 questions covering issues on practice trends as well as the questions focused around the aims of the ECOPSI project. The English language survey was distributed online in March 2012 for four weeks. 4,107 respondents started the survey. In order to fulfil the highest empirical standards, only 2,185 fully completed replies by participants, who were clearly identified as part of the profession, were evaluated and analysed using SPSS and a variety of statistical tests like Pearson's chi-square, Spearman's and Kendall's rank correlation, ANOVE/Scheffé post-hoc and T-tests.

As heads of communication, unit leaders or agency CEOs, 71.7 per cent of the respondents work on the first or second level of the communication hierarchy. The average age was 41.5 years and nearly 68 per cent have worked in communications for more than ten years. Based on this, it can be claimed that the results are founded on statements of those who take responsibility for the profession today and who will shape its future in Europe. The distribution of gender (57.6 per cent female, 42.4 per cent male) and the regions (29.6 per cent Northern Europe, 30.5 per cent Western Europe, 10.7 per cent Eastern Europe, 29.2 per cent Southern Europe) reflects the diversity of the profession.

Qualitative focus groups

The focus groups were used to test findings from the quantitative survey, benchmarking and literature review work with senior specialists. The aim was to develop deeper understanding

Competency		Knowledge	Skills		Personal attributes
			Hard	Soft	
Counselling (build relation-ships, consult-ing, coaching)	S	Languages Intercultural theory and issues	Diversity Consulting Consensus building Negotiation	Team building Conflict reso-lution	Empathy, Trust-worthiness Team minded (worker), Negotia-tion, Sympathetic Political intuition, Participative, Sociable Authority, Calmness Self-criticism, Responsiveness
	F G	Learning curves of co-workers Personality profiles	-	Persuasive communica-tion Motivation	Authenticity, Integrity Self-awareness, Humour
	I	-	-	-	Patience/ tolerance

Table 2 ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix: Counselling
Source: based on ECOPSI Report 2013: 25-26.

Competency		Knowledge	Skills		Personal attributes
			Hard	Soft	
Organising/ executing (planning, making it happen)	S	Corporate strategy Financial systems Planning systems	Writing Strategy Planning Project-management Time managem. Admin.	Strategic thinking Planning Decision mak-ing	Composure, Energy Competitive, Leadership Enthusiasm, Self-reliance Multi-tasking, Proactivity Agility/ Flexibility
	F G	Project man-agem.	Organisational skills	-	Results orientation
	I	-	Creativity with budgets	-	Perseverance/ resilience

Table 3 ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix: Organising/executing
Source: based on ECOPSI Report 2013: 25-26.

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Competency		Knowledge	Skills		Personal attributes
			Hard	**Soft**	
Managing (cross functional awareness, business focus)	S	Managem. Economics Branding Law Knowledge about own organisation Business systems General knowledge Risk managem. Stakeholder managem.	Mapping (organisational network systems) Leadership	Negotiation Influencing	Confidence Global and strategic vision Diplomacy Experience
	F G	Public affairs/ political dynamics	-	Delegating	Courage Daring/Risk Taking (and being willing to fail and learn from this)
	I	Change managem. Language of the Board Understanding of own business model	-	Managing people Sense of timing	Stress resistance Adaptability

Table 4 ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix: Managing
Source: based on ECOPSI Report 2013: 25-26.

of four roles in conversation with senior specialists from the EACD (European Association of Communication Directors). The focus groups were held with practitioners from each of the four roles where the facilitators 'tested' the role competences (ECOPSI Matrix).

Each focus group used the following structure:

- Discuss the 'communication role matrix' for each role specifically looking at: Competencies and related Skills; Competencies and related Knowledge; Competencies and related Personal Attributes
- The next generation - future development of your role.

Competency		Knowledge	Skills		Personal attributes
			Hard	**Soft**	
Performing and creating (craft e.g. writing, design, presentation)	S	New technologies Comm. processes Web 2.0 tools and effects on organisational comm. Media systems and structures	Writing Editing Design skills Computer writing skills	Communication Presentation Creative problem solving	Communicative Entrepreneurial Polyvalence/ supporting diverse and differing perceptions Initiative Lifelong learner Innovative and creative Enquiring Openness
	F G	Intercultural aspects of communication messages and products Global media environment	Multi-media skills Visioning	Story telling	-
	I	-	Verbal coherence / concision	-	Pioneering

Table 5 ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix: Performing and creating
Source: based on ECOPSI Report 2013: 25-26.

From the focus groups the practitioner roles were explored more deeply to refine and develop the qualitative interview framework and template.

Qualitative interviews

Following the survey and focus groups, the final data collection for the ECOPSI project was the in depth interviews with practitioners. The intention was to test and further develop the detailed understanding of the input elements to these competencies. The interview schedule and framework was devised from the synthesised competency list which was developed from the literature and from the survey. This schedule aimed to evaluate the input components of knowledge, skills (hard and soft) and personal attributes that go to make up the competencies

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Competency		Knowledge	Skills		Personal attributes
			Hard	Soft	
Analysing / interpreting (research, listening)	S	Research and analysis methods Prediction/forecasting Monitoring tools Web monitoring tools	Critical thinking Reading comprehension Research	Forecasting	Curiosity Questioning
	F G	HR policies and links to communication Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies Recognising trends	-	Listening	-
	I	-	Social environmental analysis	-	Good judgement Strong instincts

Table 6 ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix: Analysing /interpreting
Source: based on ECOPSI Report 2013: 25-26.

Competency		Knowledge	Skills		Personal attributes
			Hard	Soft	
Supporting/ guiding (vision and standards, ethics, developing others)	S	Corporate governance Ethics / ethical frameworks Legal issues	-	Visioning	Ethical and socially responsible, Authority Integrity, Honesty Influence, Reputation, Sincerity
	F G	-	-	-	Objectivity Sensitivity/humanity
	I	-	-	-	-

Table 7 ECOPSI Communication Role Matrix: Supporting / guiding
Source: based on ECOPSI Report 2013: 25-26.

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for the four defined communication roles. They are defined in the Matrix as follows, (under the acronym COMPAS): **C**ounselling; **O**rganising/executing; **M**anaging; **P**erforming and creating; **A**nalysing/interpreting; **S**upporting/guiding.

Tables 2-3-4-5-6-7 show the **initial findings** and discussions from the quantitative survey(S) which feeds into the focus groups (FG) and interviews (I) as a matrix.

Findings

The findings have been broken down into two sections: quantitative findings (survey) and qualitative (interviews) findings.

Quantitative findings

The findings have been broken down into five sections for analysis and discussion: (1) Types of professional training and development in Europe; (2) Professionalization and accreditation; (3) Understanding and responding to competency needs in Europe; (4) Role evolution and specialist competence – social media; (5) The future – young professionals, their recruitment and development.

Types of professional training and development in Europe

Communication professionals align their development with academic learning. But besides initial university education, communicators in Europe rely on professional associations and commercial training providers for further professional development. Moreover, current levels of knowledge and needs for further developments are mostly evaluated through informal self-assessments: comparing oneself with colleagues and peers in other organisations is the most important method across all sectors (65%). Breaking out of this fallacious circle by consulting academic knowledge or using formal self-evaluation systems by organisations is only valued by 27% and 17% respectively

The most important training providers in Europe are national professional associations and training organisations run by them, followed by further education institutions specialised in public relation and communication (Chart 4). Companies use universities and colleges significantly more often (42%) than governmental (32%) and non-governmental organisations (31%).

Professionalization and accreditation

One of the ongoing issues in communication management is the further professionalization of the practice. Research has identified manifold drivers which foster or hinder achievements in

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the field. A large majority of the respondents state that a lack of understanding of communication practice within the top management (84%) and difficulties of the profession itself to prove the impact of communication activities on organizational goals (75%) are the main barriers for further professionalization of the practice. So the key challenges for European communication professionals are to explain the communication function to top management and to prove the value of communication for organizations. Other barriers are, in decreasing order, a shortage of up-to-date communication training (54%), a poor reputation of professional communication and public relations in society (52%), the phenomenon that experience is valued more highly than formal qualifications in communication or public relations (52%), the status of public relations and communication associations and professional bodies (40%).

Understanding and responding to competency needs in Europe

The survey revealed significant gaps between the development needs of communication professionals in Europe and the training opportunities currently offered by their organizations (Table 8). The only field in which supply meets demand is traditional communication skills, i.e. written, oral and message production.

Skills and knowledge	…need to be developed	…training offered / facilitated in own organization	Gap btw need and offering
Management skills	45.8 %	23.7 %	-22.1%
Management knowledge	42.2 %	11.7 %	-30.6%
Business knowledge	38.5 %	16.2 %	-22.3%
Business skills	32.8 %	17 %	-15.8%
Communication knowledge	27.4 %	10.6 %	-16.7%
Communication skills	18.6 %	19.4 %	+1.4%

Table 8 Relevance of competency fields for communication practitioners
Source: based on ECOPSI Report 2013: 39.

The largest gap (almost 31%) is in *management knowledge* (current affairs, social and political trends, legal, ethical). This is particularly important as this is exactly the type of knowledge delivered at universities. However, according to the respondents, learning on the job is the most effective way for gaining management capabilities relevant for communication professionals (86%), followed by attending in-house or external business/management courses (67%). Communicators and their employers use the least the university education for their development (Figure 2).

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Effectiveness of measures to acquire business and management capatibilities

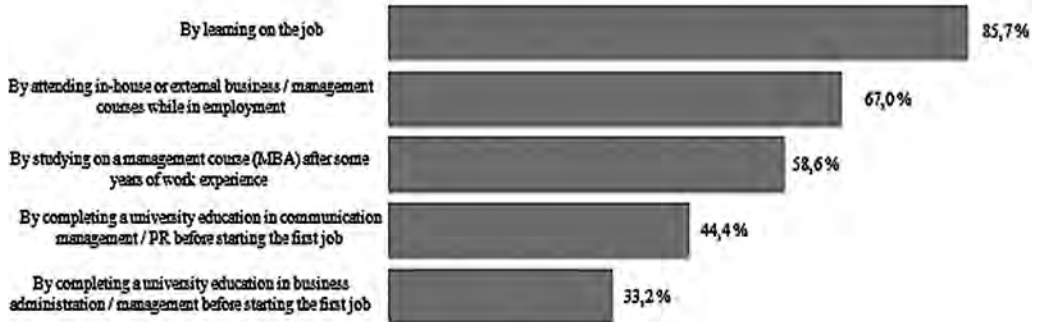|	
By learning on the job	85,7%
By attending in-house or external business / management courses while in employment	67,0%
By studying on a management course (MBA) after some years of work experience	58,6%
By completing a university education in communication management / PR before starting the first job	44,4%
By completing a university education in business administration / management before starting the first job	33,2%

Figure 2 Training and development measures for enhancing management capabilities
Source: ECOPSI Report 2013: 42.

Role evolution and specialist competence – social media

The survey reveals a large gap between the perceived importance of social media tools for communication and the actual rate of implementation in European organizations (Figure 3).
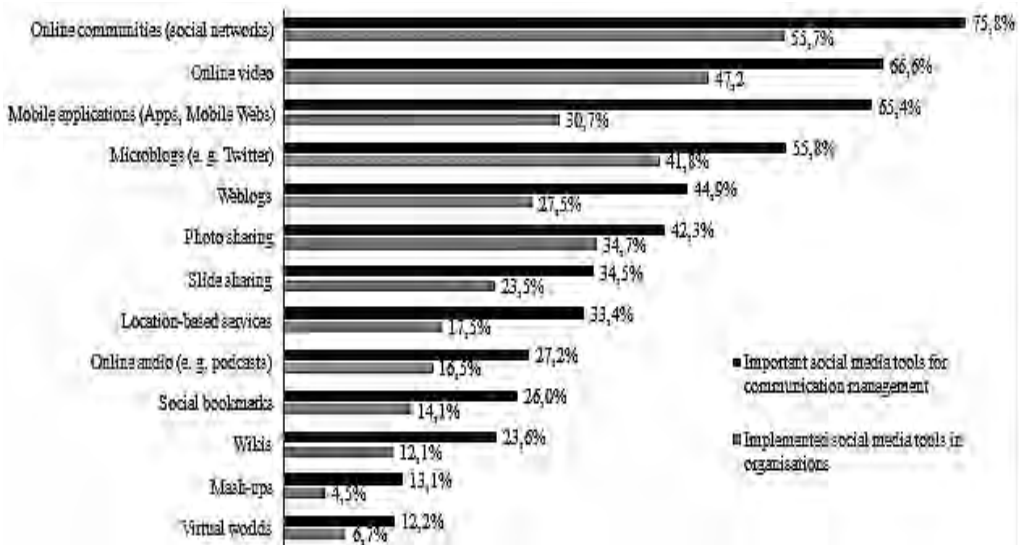
	Important	Implemented
Online communities (social networks)	75,8%	55,7%
Online video	66,6%	47,2
Mobile applications (Apps, Mobile Webs)	65,4%	30,7%
Microblogs (e. g. Twitter)	55,8%	41,8%
Weblogs	44,9%	27,5%
Photo sharing	42,3%	34,7%
Slide sharing	34,5%	23,5%
Location-based services	33,4%	17,5%
Online audio (e. g. podcasts)	27,2%	16,5%
Social bookmarks	26,0%	14,1%
Wikis	23,6%	12,1%
Mash-ups	13,1%	4,5%
Virtual worlds	12,2%	6,7%

■ Important social media tools for communication management
▨ Implemented social media tools in organisations

Figure 3 Social media tools in communication management: importance and implementation in European organizations
Source: ECOPSI Report 2013: 44.

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European communication professionals consider online communities or social networks as by far the most important social media tools available (75%). However, less than 56% of the communication departments actually use online communities in their communication, a gap of more than 20% compared to the importance this tool is given by the practitioners. The biggest difference between importance (65%) and implementation (31%) is found for mobile applications, a gap of almost 35%.

All communication manager reports rather moderate skills for using digital technologies for internal and external communication, regardless of their gender. Younger professionals report higher personal skills in using online and similar technology than their older colleagues. Informal approaches to enhance those skills are clearly favored. Eight out of ten European professionals think that the best way to learn about online tools is to use them as part of the regular work as well as privately.

The future – young professionals, their recruitment and development

Strategic communication is a professionalizing occupation. For example, university level education in communication management or public relations has become the most important qualification (59%) when organizations recruit early career professionals. It is followed by knowledge of the English language (52%), internships or on the job training (45%), professional qualification in public relations or communication as trained by associations and training institutes (43%), university education in any or another subject (29%) and international experience (28%). Less sought for are business and management qualifications, extra languages and a university education in business administration. University education in communication management is the most important in governmental organizations and non-profit organizations, while consultancies rate internships a bit more highly and companies consider fluent English as important as studying communication management.

In general, it can be concluded that academic education and expectations of communication professionals regarding management, business and communication qualifications are not matched and that this is a serious problem for both sides to address: i.e. for academia to (re)claim relevance and professionals to get access to the type of knowledge they need. Quite logically, digital skills increase when the age of the professionals questioned decreases. Younger professionals report higher personal skills in using online and similar technology than their older colleagues. Reported digital skills also differ according to the area professionals are working in.

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Qualitative findings - Interviews

Devised from the synthesised competency list, developed from the literature and detailing the components of knowledge, skills (hard and soft) and personal attributes that go to make up the competencies for the four defined communication roles that are the focus of the study. Interviewees were asked for their thoughts on the matrix. There were few suggestions for new additional knowledge areas within the matrix than there were for both, new skills or new personal attributes (Table 9).

Knowledge	Skills		Personal Attributes
	Hard	**Soft**	
Change management	Creativity with budgets	Managing people	Pioneering
Language of the board	Verbal coherence/ concision	Sense of timing	Perseverance/ resilience
Understanding of own company business model	Social environmental analysis		Patience / tolerance
	Sense of timing		Good judgment
			Stress resistance
			Adaptability
			Strong instincts

Table 9 Missing from the matrix - additional knowledge, skills and personal attributes suggested by interviewees

Interviewees were asked to identify from the matrix (or to add to it) the **three most important knowledge** areas for their role (Table 10). The most frequently cited across all four roles were "Knowledge about organisation", "Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies" and "Corporate strategy". (Table 10)

A significant number of interviewees expressed that there were knowledge areas that they felt weak in or that they would like to develop. The most prevalent were the areas of new technology, social media and Web 2.0.

Responses to the request to select from (or add to) the matrix to identify the **three most important skills** for their role reflect a wealth of diversity both across and within roles. The most agreement was found within the role of Crisis Managers (ranked in order of the most frequently cited): "Leadership", "Critical thinking", "Organisational skills", and "Strategic thinking".

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Chief Communications Officer	Crisis Communication Manager	Internal Communication Manager	Social Media Manager
Knowledge about organisation	Knowledge about organisation	Knowledge about organisation	Knowledge about organisation
Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies	Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies	Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies	Listening, understanding and interpreting trends, linking them to business strategies
Project management	Corporate strategy	Corporate strategy	Corporate strategy
Communication processes	Project management	Human Resource (HR) policies and links to communication	Web 2.0 tools and effects on organisational communication
	Web 2.0 tools and effects on organisational communication		Web monitoring tools

Table 10 The most important knowledge areas via role

A significant number of interviewees expressed that there were knowledge areas that they felt weak in or that they would like to develop. Skills in Social media were far less frequently mentioned than *knowledge* of Social media, perhaps representing a distinction between the majority of role holders needing to understand *why* and *when* to use social media rather than *how* to use specific social media technology or platforms.

Interviewees were asked to identify the **three most important personal attributes** for their role. Opinion varied among respondents (Table 11).

Chief Communications Officer	Crisis Communication Manager	Internal Communication Manager	Social Media Manager
Integrity	Trustworthiness	Empathy	Curiosity
Daring/ Risk Taking	Empathy	Courage	Empathy
	Multi-tasking	Curiosity	Daring/ Risk Taking

Table 11 The most important personal attributes via role (ranked in order of the most frequently cited)

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Cross-cultural competence: Interviewees were asked if they agreed with research that suggests **Cross-cultural competence** is an increasingly important skill for communication practitioners. The majority agreed that it was. The importance of localising a global message in order to reach certain markets and audiences, while remaining true to the authenticity and heritage of the organisation was one way in which the need for this skill was said to be emerging. In order to develop/improve skills in this area a number of ways were suggested. A popular means was through a prolonged stay of working abroad to gain international experience, perhaps through an exchange or secondment programme, in order to gain hands-on practical knowledge and skills from working in another country and context.

The future – young professionals and their development: Interviewees were asked if they felt that successors to their role would need to develop new skills or learn new areas of knowledge. The most popular related to the area of social media and in particular the increased need to monitor and analyse, as well as, contribute to communications through this channel.

Working with new media forms: It should be noted that a number of interviewees touched upon themes such as the need to critically assess and filter information as well as to develop content using new media in the question relating to the skills and knowledge requirements for future successors. Most interviewees were agreed that this is an important area for the future and an area to develop greater understanding.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The ECOPSI project aimed to develop insight into the current competencies of communications specialists in Europe, as well as understanding of their future development needs.

From the findings a number of headline discussion points emerge namely: There is little organized life-long learning or evidence of recognized continuous professional development (CPD) pathways and the value of formal undergraduate and postgraduate education are questioned. The profession needs to challenge both what Communication and public relations education currently consists of and how it is delivered.

Social Media knowledge may be an acknowledged weakness that people feel they need to improve in, but this does not mean that most practitioners want or need practical skills or training in this area. What the majority feel they need is greater understanding of its strategic application. There was significant evidence of intergenerational team working with valued contribution from younger members deemed more technology savvy.

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The industry needs to look closely at *how it can foster intercultural relationships and cross-cultural working* by setting up accredited and recognized programs of exchange/secondment/internship with different companies in different countries.

Models of coaching and mentoring within the sector need to be devised and shared in an attempt to offer more formal, organized and supported career development that is on-the-job and in-situ. This could involve internal and external schemes, which again could be certified or accredited by a professional association or body.

The value of observing others and learning from them is noted. Networks and Forums are a recognized support for practitioners at senior and lower levels but there may well be a gap in the middle ranks where professionals are more guarded of sharing knowledge, experience and weaknesses.

There is evidence of an emerging future need to be a 'generalist communications specialist'.

These findings suggest and support the hypothesis that public relations and communication is a maturing discipline in the European context with many shared experiences. Despite this development for the practice there are on-going gaps and deficiencies in the development of the individuals as well as broad variation in how practitioners identify needs and access appropriate interventions. The ECOPSI Programme clearly suggests that there are numerous opportunities for deeper and on-going professional training and development to build this consistency and support the practice in moving away from a hands-on, learning on-the-job approach to knowledge acquisition and development.

These findings feed into the second half of the ECOPSI programme which included the development of diagnostic tools and an ECOPSI portal[6].

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[6]   at www.ecopsi.org.uk

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