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Role enactment, employer type, and pursuit of APR

Timothy S. Penning^{a,*}, Kaye D. Sweetser^b^a Grand Valley State University, School of Communications, 1 Campus Drive, 290 LSH, Allendale, MI 49401, United States^b School of Journalism and Media Studies, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how PR practitioner role enactment and the type of employer where they work affect practitioner motivation to pursue Accreditation in Public Relations (APR). Analysis reveals that there is variance in the motivation to seek APR based on age, gender, years of practice in public relations, enacting a manager vs. technician role, and employer type. Practical implications for practitioners, scholars, and professional associations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) is a professional designation or mark of distinction for professionals who practice public relations. While the program began as a Public Relations Society of America initiative to certify excellent and ethical practitioners (Wright, 1981; Brody, 1984) the program is now overseen by the Universal Accreditation Board. As a more inclusive program, today members of professional participating organizations such as the Agricultural Relations Council, the Florida Public Relations Association, the Maine Public Relations Council, the National School Public Relations Association, the Public Relations Society of America, the Religion Communicators Council, the Southern Public Relations Federation, and Asociación de Relacionistas Profesionales de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rico Public Relations Association) are able to pursue accreditation (www.praccreditation.org).

However, as of 2012, only 18% of PRSA members had earned the credential, down slightly from 25% in 1994. A survey commissioned by PRSA ("Accredited in Public Relations (APR): Does it serve its purpose?", 2013) revealed that the APR credential is seen as "moderately favorable" by non-accredited practitioners (42%) and employers (38%), while 34% of employers viewed the APR as "extremely favorable." In spite of that mostly positive view of the APR credential, 63% of employers indicated a professional's possession of the APR had no influence on hiring decisions. This is a striking statistic compared to the 20% who said the same for similar professional designations of other professions. The little value placed on the APR, as well as lack of time, the cost of achieving and maintaining the credential, and the perception that it would not advance a career were the main reasons practitioners gave in this recent study for not seeking the APR.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 616 331 3478.

E-mail addresses: penningt@gvsu.edu (T.S. Penning), Ksweetser@mail.sdsu.edu (K.D. Sweetser).

This study extends prior research (Sha, 2011b; Sha 2011c) by delving deeper into the motivating factors behind practitioners seeking APR.

2. Method

This study data used secondary data collected in 2012 by the Universal Accreditation Board in a nationwide survey of public relations professionals after they had taken the computer-based exam while in pursuit of their APR. Public relations roles, employer type, and motivation variables served as the main foci in this analysis.

Role enactment was defined in accordance with previous studies, guided by Broom's roles scale. An abbreviated 12-item version of the scale tested by Sha and colleagues (Sweetser & Sha, 2013) served as the main instrument for measuring role enactment here.

Motivation for pursuing accreditation for each respondent was measured through a series of dichotomous variables. Previous qualitative research had revealed the main "reasons" one pursued APR, and the most commonly occurring reasons were then presented on the survey as options for the respondent to self-identify whether that reason applied in his or her own pursuit of the APR. The reasons ranged from internal motivations (e.g., greater confidence in strategic management, personal satisfaction) to more external motivations (e.g., job promotion, higher salary).

Finally, various professional demographic questions were also asked such as degree and course work information, industry and tenure in public relations.

3. Results

Of the 150 respondents, the majority were female ($n = 121$; 80.7%) and white/Caucasian ($n = 118$; 78.7%). Respondents were nearly equally split in the number who had worked in public relations their entire career ($n = 74$; 49.3%) and those who had transferred into public relations from another career ($n = 71$; 47.3%). The breakdown of employer types provides a clear range of practitioners working in educational institutions ($n = 32$; 21.3%), government/military ($n = 28$; 18.7%) and nonprofit/association ($n = 28$; 18.7%), as well as within PR consultancy/agency/firm ($n = 24$; 16%), corporations ($n = 20$; 13.3%), and as independent practitioners ($n = 4$; 2.7%) or in professional services ($n = 1$; 0.7%).

The most frequently selected reason for pursuing APR was *personal satisfaction* (82.7%; $n = 124$), followed closely by the *desire to be a better practitioner* (80%; $n = 120$), and *greater confidence in strategic management* (72.7%; $n = 109$). Less selected motivations included *job promotion* (32.7%; $n = 49$) and *to obtain a new job* (26%; $n = 39$).

A series of independent samples *t*-tests revealed whether there was a difference in age or tenure working in public relations based on the individual motivations for pursuing accreditation. Those who noted *job promotion* as a motivation for obtaining the APR were younger ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.76$ years) than those who did not specify that as a motivation ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.14$), $t(143) = -2.14$, $p = .034$. Age and tenure were not statistically significantly different for any remaining motivations for accreditation.

A series of chi square tests were run to examine the presence of each motivation and one's career path (i.e., candidate had worked in public relations entire career or transferred into public relations from another profession). Those who had been in public relations their entire career were more likely than those who had transferred into public relations to have pursued accreditation for: *higher salary* (62.2% compared to 39.9%), $\chi^2(1, N = 145) = 5.95$, $p = .015$ and *job promotion* (43.2% compared to 23.9%), $\chi^2(1, N = 145) = 6.03$, $p = .014$. There were no other statistically significant results based on motivation and career path.

Looking at motivation and industry type, a series of chi square test compared whether one's motivations for accreditation might differ based on employer (e.g., corporate, government/military, nonprofit/association, corporate, agency). For this analysis employer types with fewer than 20 respondents working in the industry were excluded from the analysis to allow for statistical power. Only one motivation showed statistically significant differences in motivation based on employer type: *greater respect from employer/clients*, $\chi^2(4, N = 132) = 14.57$, $p = .006$. Here, those who worked for a consultancy/agency/firm were the most likely to list this benefit as a motivation (75%), followed by those at a nonprofit/association (64.3%), those in government/military (60.7%), those at a corporation (55%), and those working for an educational institution (28.1%).

A chi square test revealed men (79.2%) were more likely than women (49.6%) to name *greater respect from employer/clients* as a motivation for seeking accreditation, $\chi^2(1, N = 145) = 7.06$, $p = .008$. There were no other statistically significant differences in motivation for accreditation based on gender.

A series of stepwise linear regression analyses revealed the leading motivations for each of the three role enactment factors. Using each role factor (manager, technician, social media synapse) as a dependent outcome variable and the individual motivations as independent dummy variables, the results revealed which motivations were present in each type of practitioner.

In predicting the manager role being enacted, *job promotion* and *higher salary* proved to be the significant predictors ($R^2 = .087$; $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .075$). In this equation, the desire for a promotion was negatively correlated ($\beta = -.353$, $p = .001$) and the desire for a higher salary was positively correlated ($\beta = .308$, $p = .003$) with motivation of practitioners in the manager role to pursue APR.

In predicting the technician role ($R^2 = .037$; $R^2_{adj} = .030$), only the desire to *obtain a new job* resulted as a significant predictor in the model ($\beta = .192$, $p = .021$).

4. Analysis and conclusion

The data show that individual characteristics of practitioners may matter in terms of what motivates them to pursue APR. Younger professionals are more likely to be motivated by external factors, such as the potential for a *job promotion*. This makes intuitive sense given the stage of their career and what may be foremost in their mind in terms of professional development. A somewhat counter-intuitive result was that men are significantly more likely than women to be motivated by *respect from an employer or client*. This may be because men in PR feel their male peers in other professions (e.g., marketing, engineering, law) garner more respect. The fact that those who have been in PR their entire careers are more likely to be motivated by *salary* and *promotion* than those who transferred into PR from other fields may indicate that those with a long track record in public relations are disturbed that recent professional “immigrants” from journalism or other fields are given similar status in spite of their relative lack of experience and knowledge about public relations.

Those who enact the technician role are more motivated to pursue the APR when they are seeking a *new job*. This may mean that technicians who aspire to a management role feel they are unable to do so given the structure in their current organization and feel the credential will help them land interviews and job offers elsewhere. These technicians might well see the APR as a resume-building opportunity to attract a new and higher ranking position. Meanwhile, those who enact the manager role are motivated for *higher salary* and when they have no desire for promotion. While the salary motivation makes sense, the negative correlation of desire for promotion with pursuit of APR seems counter-intuitive. It may be that the subjects in this data set already had achieved a promotion (job title), but not a desired salary that made them feel more valued for their PR expertise. Or they may feel that failure to pass the APR exam would hurt their chances for promotion.

Earning *greater respect from employers or clients* was the only motivator that showed a statistically significant difference among employer types. Those who worked for an agency, nonprofit organization, or government/military job were the most likely to list respect as a motivation. One possible reason that the APR may be highest for those in agencies is because they must compete for clients and they work as outsiders to organizations, thus a credential may earn respect in place of insider status. The higher likelihood of those in nonprofits to list respect as a motivator may be explained by the fact that the executives in this sector see PR as merely “getting the word out” or that nonprofits and the public sector generally lag behind the private sector in professionalism and professional development.

This study has provided interesting insights into the motivations for public relations professionals to pursue the APR credential, a subject without much research to date. The results are of scholarly significance for contributing to the body of research about public relations roles with a new dimension of understanding of the differences between those who enact the manager and technician roles. This and other variables for seeking APR could be the subject of future research and contribute toward development of a theory regarding professional development.

The findings in this study have practical importance as well in that they may help professionals in the field recognize that career paths and professional development decisions may be unique given the context of their practice. Finally, the study may aid the UAB and other professional associations to create specific accrediting processes tailored to a professional’s employer type, similar to the APR + M for practitioners who work in military settings. Promoting the accreditation could take into consideration the other variables in this study, such as gender, age, and years of experience in the profession.

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