

# **Do They Have What It Takes? A Review of the Literature on Knowledge, Competencies, and Skills Necessary for Twenty-First-Century Public Relations Practitioners in Canada**

Terence (Terry) Flynn  
McMaster University

**ABSTRACT** *The practice and study of public relations in Canada has had a contested and conflicted history. Theory building and empirical research have been overshadowed by the dominant, American-centric, two-way symmetrical model that was proposed some 20 years ago. Further, there has been limited focus on the requisite competencies and skills necessary for contemporary public relations practitioners, despite the transformations in the media and professional communications fields in recent years. This study is situated and contextualized in the knowledge, competencies, and skills required for twenty-first-century professional communication workers. It also explores the specific requirements for current public relations practitioners.*

**KEYWORDS** *Public relations; Organizational communication; Competencies; Skills; Knowledge management*

**RÉSUMÉ** *La pratique et l'étude des relations publiques au Canada ont eu une histoire difficile et pleine d'épreuves. La construction des théories et la recherche empirique ont été éclipsées par le modèle dominant, américano-américaines, bio-directionnelle proposé il y a 20 ans. En plus, il y a eu un focus limité sur les compétences nécessaires pour les professionnels en relations publiques de nos jours, malgré les transformations dans les secteurs du média et la communication professionnelle dans les années récentes. Cette étude se situe dans le contexte des connaissances et compétences requises par les professionnels en communication au 21<sup>e</sup> siècle. Elle explore aussi les exigences particulières pour les professionnels en relations publiques de nos jours.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Relations publiques; Communication organisationnelle; Compétences; Gestion des connaissances*

## **Introduction**

**P**ublic relations is a contested field of study and practice. From its murky early-twentieth-century history of publicity and promotion to its current and continuing association with political spin, propaganda, and persuasion, the profession continues to be challenged by critics, scholars, and journalists. Over the past decade, the practice

**Terence (Terry) Flynn**, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Communications Studies and Multimedia at McMaster University, Togo Salmon Hall 329, 1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, ON L8S 4M2. Email: [tflynn@mcmaster.ca](mailto:tflynn@mcmaster.ca).

of public relations in Canada has taken a number of important steps toward professionalization, including the embryonic development of its own body of knowledge, the adoption of an official definition,<sup>1</sup> and an increased focus on certification and accreditation. More recently public relations, as a professional field of study, is continuing to grow stronger, with new academic programs being developed and offered at both the university and college levels. In Ontario alone over the past four years, three new bachelor degree programs have already been approved and a number of other programs are currently under consideration (Flynn & Sévigny, 2013).

This growing educational emphasis has not, however, been mirrored by a similar growth or emphasis on scholarly research. In fact, published research on the roles, practices, and knowledge of those practising public relations in Canada is almost non-existent. This lack of empirical and theoretical consideration from and within both professional associations and academia (Flynn & Sévigny, 2013) has opened the field of public relations to ambiguous interpretations and loose definitions about what it takes to practise public relations in the current Canadian context. According to Derrick Pieters (2007), senior government communicator and former president of the Canadian Public Relations Society, “[W]hile many major corporations have elevated public relations practitioners to executive management, there is still little general knowledge and acceptance of the role, responsibilities, skills and competencies required to function at the various levels of the profession” (2007, para. 3).

In Bowen’s (2009) research on the perceptions and credibility of the public relations field and its practitioners, she concludes that the profession “is undermined by these misunderstandings about the very purposes, activities, and ethical principles involved in public relations” (p. 409). These misunderstandings and the continuing lack of agreement on the scope and purpose of the field continues to challenge its position and perception within organizations. According to Bowen, “[S]enior management is not likely to understand the public relations function and the potential contribution to the bottom line of strategic communication” (2009, p. 409) as long as the definition and societal value remain contested. Bowen goes on to warn that the uncertainty caused by these representations may in fact continue to deter future students, scholars, and practitioners. Breakenridge (2012) echoes this sentiment in her analysis of the current expectations held by business employers in Kazakhstan regarding the crucial skills and competencies that a university graduate with a public relations degree should possess in order to be successful in their organizations. The research demonstrated that the lack of a developed, widely understood communication discipline had led to a failure among most to understand the value of the discipline to the business sector.

In these studies (Bowen, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012), the authors concluded that the credibility and value of the public relations field is undermined by an overarching sense of confusion and misunderstanding about the field and the roles, competencies, and skills of the practitioners situated within the field. Understanding who is practising public relations in Canada and detailing their skills, competencies, and knowledge is critical to building a practical and theoretical body of knowledge as well as demonstrating the value of the field. Furthermore, having a clearer understanding of the qualifications of Canada’s practising public relations practitioners will enable educational

institutions, professional associations, and employers to continue to establish appropriate standards for educating and training new practitioners in the field. At the same time, because of the present lack of barriers to entry into the field and lack of mandatory accreditation/licensing, establishing the requisite skills, competencies, and knowledge should help to differentiate between those who have what it takes to succeed in the profession and those who have limited capabilities.

Research into public relations roles, as an academic and scholarly area of study, is relatively young, with most of the seminal work being conducted in the 1980s by Broom (1982) and Dozier (1981). The findings from these studies, along with the research conducted by Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995), concluded that there were two types of functions being performed by public relations practitioners: technical and managerial. Over the past 10 years, scholars in Europe and Asia have replicated these studies and have validated this two-role typology (Gregory, 2008). In Canada there has only been one published study testing Broom and Dozier's research, conducted by University of Calgary scholars Piekos and Einsiedel (1990). There is an obvious need for further research on the roles, competencies, and skills held by Canadian public relations practitioners, as well as the qualifications expected by employers of entry-level practitioners. The limited research in Canada on this subject has created a gap between what is expected from those seeking to enter the public relations field and what is taught in communication and public relations courses, in certificate, diploma, and degree programs.

Over the past 10 years, rapid and fundamental changes within the business, media, and communication sectors have created a need for public relations practitioners to have new and different competencies, skills, and knowledge. Communicators are now, more than ever, on the front lines of the call for greater organizational transparency, the globalization of products and services, the explosion of social media channels, and the overwhelming volume of data, information, and noise promulgated and promoted by the Internet. As such, one could conclude that today's public relations practitioners, operating within this "always on," hyper-communicative environment, require a different skill set and competencies than their counterparts who practised in the twentieth century. This article aims to understand what, if any, new competencies, skills, and knowledge public relations practitioners require in the twenty-first century.

### **Defining competencies and skills**

Within the current literature, there is a lack of strong consensus amongst researchers and those in the public relations industry about the definitions of terms such as "competency," "skill," and "knowledge." The most prominent discrepancy is the discussion surrounding what, if any, the difference is between a skill and a competency. Chappell and colleagues (2003) argue that in our modern economy, one that demands flexibility from its workers, the difference between what is meant by "skill" and "competency" is shrinking. Once thought of as the technical knowledge required of a particular job or occupation, skills are considered more dynamic and include a wide array of general and personal capacities and attitudes (Chappell, Hawke, Rhodes, & Solomon, 2003). Finegold and Notabartolo (2010) find the concepts to be so similar that they use the

terms “skill” and “competency” interchangeably throughout the course of their interdisciplinary literature review of twenty-first-century competencies and their impact.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in its Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) project, does recognize a difference between the terms. The OECD defines competency as “more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilizing psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual’s knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating” (2005, p. 4). In her research study on the competencies held by senior communication practitioners in the United Kingdom, Gregory (2008) recognized the imprecision in the interpretation of what constitutes a skill versus a competency and noted that personal characteristics or traits are often conflated with skills throughout the literature. Gregory borrows working definitions from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) to define knowledge as “what practitioners need to *know* in order to undertake their role competently” and skills as “what practitioners need to be able to *do* to undertake their role competently” (p. 216). Gregory defines competencies as “behavioral repertoires or sets of behaviors that support the attainment of organizational objectives” (2008, p. 216). In other words, competencies can be understood as how knowledge and skills are enacted or used in relation to performance criteria necessary to achieve their role objectives (Bartram, 2004).

Competency has been described as being a complex concept with a multidimensional construct. Jeffery and Brunton (2010) operationalized competencies as having two dimensions: “domain content” and “cognitive processing capacity.” The cognitive abilities comprising competencies can be further classified as “domain specific abilities” (those whose articulation defines a particular occupation) and “generic abilities” (those that underpin all work-related performance regardless of occupation, e.g., reading and writing) (p. 202). Cernicova, Dragomir, and Palea (2011) explain competence to be “the proven capacity to select, combine and use adequately knowledge, skills and other attainments (values and attitudes)” (p. 5), and, similarly to Jeffery and Brunton (2010), they indicate the complex nature of the concept by dividing competencies into two categories. They describe the first category, “professional competences,” as those competences that are specific to a professional activity in order to successfully solve problem situations related to the respective profession. The second category, “transversal competences” (Cernicova, Dragomir, & Palea, 2011, p. 5) are those competences that transcend a certain field of work or area of study. This second category, essentially the same as Jeffery and Brunton’s (2010) “generic abilities,” includes things such as teamwork skills, oral and written communication, problem-solving, and decision-making (Cernicova, Dragomir, & Palea 2011).

Despite the varying definitions of “skill,” “competency,” and “knowledge,” there is relatively widespread agreement about the notion that competencies are broader concepts that can be comprised of skills, attitudes, knowledge, education, and personal attributes (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Breakenridge, 2012; Cernicova, Dragomir, & Palea, 2011; Jeffery & Brunton, 2010). Due to long-term shifts in the occupational struc-

ture, these broad competencies are in greater demand by employers because of the decline in lower-skilled, manual labour and the growth in knowledge work and service-based occupations that are characteristic of the twenty-first century (Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010). As a result of these changes in the nature of work and business, there have been changes in what employers expect from and seek in employees has also changed. Many are referring to these desired abilities as twenty-first-century skills and competencies.

### **Twenty-first-century skills and competencies**

Skills and competencies required for most occupations today differ from those required in the twentieth century due largely to the emergence of complex information and communication technologies (Dede, 2010). As these technologies expand their capabilities to accomplish tasks that previously only humans were capable of, the types of work done by people opposed to the kinds of labour done by machines is constantly shifting (Dede, 2010). This results in the reality that “growing proportions of the nation’s labour force are engaged in jobs that emphasize expert thinking or complex communication—tasks that computers cannot do” (Levy & Murnane, 2004, pp. 53–54). Today’s skills have become increasingly important, as they are more suitable for the emerging models of economic and social development that characterize the current landscape of business. A major reason for the focus on twenty-first-century competencies is that the majority of recent job growth in developed nations has been, and will continue to be, in services and knowledge work occupations, which require higher levels of these general skills than manual work (Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010). Our society has shifted from an industrial mode of production to a “knowledge economy” (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009, p. 5), and the skills required for successful work are reflecting this shift.

Ananiadou and Claro (2009) state that the acquisition of these competencies is so important to students’ futures as successful employees that they must be incorporated into the national education standards that are enforced and evaluated by governments. In many countries this push to incorporate the teaching of twenty-first-century skills and competencies within schools came in the form of an educational reform. In 2006, Norway instituted a curriculum reform entitled Knowledge Promotion that had as its goal to “help all pupils develop fundamental skills that will enable them to participate fully in our knowledge society” (p. 12). Elsewhere, in 2009, Poland introduced a new national curriculum in response to the rapid changes in science and technology, and in Mexico, curriculum reform was introduced in both 2006 and 2008 in order to develop competencies in their students more consistent with contemporary society (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009).

A new and growing area of research has sought to understand the necessary competencies required to be successful in the twenty-first century. The processing and sense-making of complex information and data as a result of the growth of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has triggered an influx in information that is able to be accessed and shared and as such requires new skills for assessing, evaluating, and organizing information in digital environments (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). According to the researchers, it is not enough to just be able to process and organize the flows of digital information; people must also be able to transform it to create new

knowledge (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Dede (2010) echoes the importance of information processing when he states that a crucial twenty-first-century skill is the ability to rapidly filter large amounts of incoming data and the ability to extract from this data valuable information for decision-making. Finegold and Notabartolo's (2010) findings also evidence that information processing is a key competency for being able to understand and employ digital information in multiple contexts—be it home, work or in the community—to develop one's knowledge and potential. Research, problem-solving, information literacy, and innovation are all skills that can be encompassed within the competency of information and data processing (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009).

Another reoccurring competency recognized as being crucial to success in the twenty-first century is communication skills. In their report on educational frameworks attempting to incorporate twenty-first-century competencies across the globe, Finegold and Notabartolo (2010) found that communication competency was echoed in every national framework surveyed. Interestingly, they found that many employers viewed communication skills as a prerequisite for hiring (Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010). In their survey of organizations in the hi-tech, pharmaceutical, and medical devices sectors, the Irish Expert Group on Future Skills Needs found that “communication skills in those areas were of ‘ever-increasing importance in the work place’ but that such ‘soft’ skills were more difficult to train” (Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010, p. 11). Regardless of career path, communication skills are essential for success in the workplace (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010) and for meaningful exchange, critique, and presentation of information and participation in the broader society (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Media literacy, critical thinking, public speaking, and written communication are skills that may be encompassed within the competency of communication (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009).

Collaboration and teamwork are emphasized throughout the literature as being key competencies of the twenty-first century (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Dede, 2010; Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010; Karoly, 2004; USDL, 2012). The “degree of importance for collaboration capacity is growing in an era where work in knowledge-based economies is increasingly accomplished by teams of people with complementary expertise and roles, as opposed to individuals doing isolated work in an industrial setting” (Karoly, 2004, p. 111). Though collaboration and teamwork were valued competencies in the twentieth century, the nature of these competencies is changing as face-to-face conference-table-style collaboration as well as a more technologically mediated form of collaboration are both required daily activities in many workplaces (Dede, 2010). Employees are often expected to use ICTs to virtually interact and collaborate with colleagues, clients, and employers who are sometimes located in other regions of the world. (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). Factors effecting teamwork include strength of problem-solving, mentorship, mutual respect for team members, shared goals, and shared knowledge among group members (Gittell, 2001).

With the advances in technology being a leading cause of the changes in expected skills and competencies, it is only fitting that strong ICT skills are one of the most cited desired competencies of the twenty-first century. Though it is a competency in itself, the ability to use information and communication technologies also underpins most,

if not all, of the skills and competencies needed for success in the twenty-first century. Therefore having a strong competency for using ICTs becomes crucial for the acquisition of other skills and competencies (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009). The evidence of the value of ICT competencies is expressed in the research study that found that computer skills were valuable even for those in non-technical jobs. The study found that students who took one computer course earned \$828 (3.1%) more per year on average and 1.4% more per hour than their peers who took none (Bishop & Mane, 2004).

Along with information and communication technology competency, Finegold and Notabartolo (2010) indicate the ability to “take responsibility for managing their own lives” (p. 12), “media literacy” (p. 14), “adaptability” (p. 15), “innovation” (p. 15), and “flexibility” (pp. 15–16) as competencies that students and employees should possess in the twenty-first century. Competencies that are projected to be important in the near future include systems thinking, financial literacy, cross-cultural fluency, global acumen, and emotional intelligence (Finegold & Notabartolo, 2010). The United States Department of Labor (2012) released a series of video vignettes intended to help “all youth, including those with disabilities, develop and strengthen six essential skills needed to succeed in today’s work force” (para. 1). These skills are communication, networking, enthusiasm and attitude, teamwork, problem-solving and critical thinking, and professionalism. Though employers have identified these as important competencies necessary for young workers, a study showed that 75% of new high school graduates are deficient in these “soft skill” areas (USDOL, 2012, para. 2). According to the study, consideration of which competencies enhance performance in the twenty-first century and how best to facilitate their development is beneficial to both companies and employees.

Dede (2010) conducted a comprehensive comparison between the frameworks that have been developed to incorporate “the new millennial content and processes teachers should convey as part of students’ schooling” and to teach students twenty-first century skills (p. 1). Dede (2010) uses the Partnership for 21st Century Skills Framework (P21) as a baseline to compare other current conceptual frameworks for twenty-first century skills because P21’s conceptualization of twenty-first-century skills is more detailed and more widely adopted than any of the alternatives.<sup>2</sup> The Partnership for 21st Century Skills Framework includes core subjects (i.e., mathematics, science, history); twenty-first-century content (i.e., global awareness, health and wellness awareness, civic literacy, business literacy); learning and thinking skills (i.e., critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, innovation, communication skills); ICT literacy; life skills (i.e., ethics, leadership, self-direction); and twenty-first-century assessments that have been created to measure the previous five categories (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006). According to Dede (2010), other organizations that have constructed frameworks for twenty-first-century skills include the Metiri Group and NCREL in 2003, the American Association of Colleges and Universities in 2007, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2005).

The findings of Dede’s (2010) framework comparison conclude that “fortunately, groups developing conceptualization of 21st century skills have built sufficiently on each other’s ideas to avoid a Tower of Babel situation” (p. 14), in which people use the

same words, but mean quite different things (p. 14). The frameworks that were analyzed were found to be largely consistent in terms of what skills and competencies should be added to the curriculum (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Composite list of twenty-first-century global competencies and skills by research study**

Competency/Skill	Study
Information processing	Ananiadou & Claro (2009), Dede (2010), Finegold & Notabartolo (2010)
Communication skills	Ananiadou & Claro (2009), Finegold & Notabartolo (2010), USDL (2012)
Collaboration / Teamwork	Ananiadou & Claro (2009), Dede (2010), Finegold & Notabartolo (2010), Gittel (2001), Karoly (2004), USDL (2012)
ICT (Information and communication technology) competency	Ananiadou & Claro (2009), Bishop & Mane (2004)
Innovation	Finegold & Notabartolo (2010)
Adaptability / Flexibility	Finegold & Notabartolo (2010)
Problem-solving / Critical thinking	USDL (2012)

This composite list of global competencies and skills is an important starting point for both public relations educators and hiring managers. For educational institutions, focused program reviews should be conducted to assess the degree to which their academic programs provide the necessary and critical outcomes identified above to ensure that the graduates of their programs “have what it takes” to succeed. A number of these competencies, while taught in classroom settings, can only be assessed through in-class simulations (problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability) or work placements (collaboration, teamwork, flexibility). Efforts should be made to highlight and validate how learning outcomes are tied directly to these competencies. The same can be said for public relations managers who are hiring or working with entry- or junior-level employees. If these twenty-first-century competencies and skills are critical to the core values of the organization, then further in-house training or professional development may be required to help recent graduates learn and obtain these assets.

### **Keeping pace within public relations skills and competencies**

#### *Historical perspectives of public relations*

Public relations roles and competencies have been a topic of scholarly interest dating back to the late 1970s, when Broom and his colleagues conducted the first notable research study to arrive at a typology of public relations roles. Broom and Smith (1978, 1979) conceptualized five distinct consulting roles after reviewing a wide range of “consulting” literature. These roles were then operationalized for a public relations context

to represent the varying ways that communication practitioners behave. These five roles were expert prescriber, communication technician, problem-solving process facilitator, communication facilitator, and acceptant legitimizer (Broom & Smith, 1978, 1979). Succeeding research on these “role models” found the value and efficacy of the first four roles, whereas the “acceptant legitimizer” role was dropped from use. Though public relations practitioners were found to engage in a variety of roles, activities, and tasks, they often develop a dominant pattern of job-related behaviour that takes shape through a combination of individual preference, training, and in response to others’ expectations and contextual constraints (Broom & Smith, 1978, 1979).

In the role of *expert prescriber*, the practitioner

operates as the authority on both public relations problems and their solutions. The client, or management, is often content to leave public relations in the hands of the ‘expert’ and to assume a relatively passive role. The practitioner researches and defines the problem, develops the program and takes major responsibility for its implementation. (Broom, 1982, p. 18)

Practitioners operating in the role of *communication technician*

are typically hired on the basis of their communication and journalistic skills—writing, editing and working with the media. Rather than being part of the management team, practitioners in this role are primarily concerned with preparing and producing communication materials for the public relations effort. (p. 18)

A *communication facilitator* may be considered a “go-between” or “information broker” and serve as a “liaison, interpreter, and mediator between the organization and its publics. The emphasis is on maintaining a continuous flow of two-way communication” (p. 18). *Problem-solving process facilitators* operate as part of the management team and collaborate with others throughout the organization in order to define problems and guide the organization through a rational problem-solving process (p. 18). According to Johnson and Acharya (1982), these roles “systematically differ in the amount of input they contribute and the approach they use to help resolve problems” (p. 11).

Dozier (1981) elaborated on Broom’s seminal research by factor analyzing Broom’s information database on public relations roles. Through this factor analysis, four empirical models of organizational roles were developed: manager, technician, media relations specialist, and communication liaison (Dozier, 1981). The *manager* was found to be a dynamic role, engaged in activities that involved communication facilitation, expert prescription, and problem-solving process facilitation; three of the four “role models” that Broom (1982) had identified (Dozier, 1981). According to Dozier’s (1981) typology, *technicians* engage in activities similar to that of Broom and Smith’s (1978, 1979) communication technician role. Dozier (1981) identified the *media relations specialist* as those practitioners who were specialized in external media relations as opposed to internal communication activities and referred to this role as another type of technician. *Communication liaisons* were found to act as senior-ranking advisors to decision-making practitioners but did not actively contribute to organizational decision-making themselves. Dozier (1981) conceptualized the liaison role to be a subcategory to the

*manager* role. He also conceptualized the *manager* and *technician* roles as being a simplified way of grouping major public relation practitioner roles into two categories.

Later researchers exploring public relations roles “have found that the roles of manager and technician are consistent over time” (Piekos & Einsiedel, 1990, pp. 98–99). Among those who have embraced and employed Dozier’s (1981) two-role typology are Lauzen (1994), Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig (1995), Piekos and Einsiedel (1990), and Gregory (2008). Over the past 10 years, scholars in Europe and Asia have replicated these role research studies and have validated this two-role typology within public relations practice (Gregory, 2008).

A disagreement exists within the literature as to whether this two-role typology is still a suitable, comprehensive way to conceptualize the various tasks, activities, and roles enacted by public relations practitioners. Dozier’s findings were criticized for trivialising the role of the technician by failing to take into account the role-making process (Culbertson, 1991), including factors such as differences in male and female practitioners (Creedon, 1991), and how practitioners perform managerial activities (Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000). The two-role typology has been further critiqued for not being mutually exclusive (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001) and creating a false dichotomy (Creedon, 1991). Scholars have debated that the emphasis on two discrete practitioner roles has led to a “hierarchy of two seemingly dissimilar roles—the manager who decided policy and the technician who implements ‘his’ policies” (Creedon, 1991, p. 79)—when in fact the relationship of practitioner to role is much more complex. In actual practice, public relations practitioners tend to carry out a mix of both managerial and technical tasks (Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001).

The relatively limited body of research on public relations practitioners’ roles and competencies is significantly American-centric. In Canada there has been only one published study testing Broom and Dozier’s research, conducted by University of Calgary scholars Piekos and Einsiedel in 1990. In their study of 700 members of the Canadian Public Relations Society<sup>2</sup> (CPRS) and International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the researchers found that the single largest majority of respondents (41.7%) were categorized as *communication technicians*. *Expert prescribers* made up 16.2% of the respondents, *problem-solving process facilitators* made up 15.2% of the respondents, and *communication facilitators* made up 12.3% of the respondents (Piekos & Einsiedel, 1990).

This study focused on program evaluation techniques used by the responding practitioners and discovered that intuitive techniques were used significantly more often than scientific ones (Piekos & Einsiedel, 1990). The researchers found that scientific approaches to measurement and evaluation are avoided partly because most practitioners lacked the training needed in order to use these approaches, with less than 3% indicating that they had any background in scientific research methods (Piekos & Einsiedel, 1990). As well, the limited support from top management in terms of encouraging the use of research methods also led to a low use of these methods (Piekos & Einsiedel, 1990). The findings, when compared to similar studies done in the United States, show that communication technicians in Canada “are involved in

all phases of program evaluation whereas in the United States, technicians generally do not conduct evaluation” (Piekos & Einsiedel, 1990, p. 110).

Further review of the literature has revealed that the practice of public relations in Canada has been one of the most understudied disciplines within the traditional suite of communications studies programs (for more information on the history and state of communication studies education in Canada, see Sévigny & Flynn, 2009, and Flynn & Sévigny, 2013). Although a handful of professional books have been written by practitioners on the state of the field dating back to the mid-1950s (*The PR in Profit* (1955), by Leonard Knott, among them), scant empirical studies have been conducted and published on the state of the practice.

### *Public relations roles*

Within the field of public relations, practitioners have been noted to assume a variety of roles. In addition to the previously discussed roles of manager and technician, researchers have considered the roles that practitioners enact in the various levels of public relations. After rigorous qualitative and quantitative research, a list of 12 common public relations work categories, or “groupings of tasks that practitioners do on the job” (Sha, 2011, p. 3), was compiled by the Universal Accreditation Board (UAB). The 12 roles or “work categories” of public relations according to the UAB are account/client management, strategic planning, public relations program planning, project management, media relations, social media relations, stakeholder relations, issues management, crisis management, internal relation/employee communications, special events/conferences/meetings, and community relations.

Specific to more senior-level communication managers, there has been significant discussion throughout the literature about the increasing importance of the practitioner’s role as “part of the dominant coalition” (Berger, 2005, p. 8). Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig (1995) identified the dominant coalition as the hub of organizational control and power; however, in the time of their research, public relations practitioners were rarely members of this inner circle. Today many senior-level communicators have taken seats at the table with the organization’s leadership and have come to be recognized by CEOs as a necessary component of executive decision-making (McClenehan, 2007). In regard to their position at the executive table, the senior communicator’s role has been referred to as “counsel to the CEO” (Breakenridge, 2012, para. 2; Killingsworth, 2011, p. 13) and “part of the inner circle” (McClenehan, 2007, p. 15). In a study that demonstrates the increasing role of practitioners’ executive involvement, it was found that two-thirds of surveyed Canadian business professionals reported that the senior communicator in their company was involved in *strategic decision-making* as part of the management team (Killingsworth, 2011).

From a set of focus groups conducted by Killingsworth (2011) about Canadian executives’ perceptions of senior communicators, findings revealed that the senior communicator’s role was perceived to be one of advocacy for business and stakeholders, strategy, offering an “outside-in perspective” (p. 36), social media use, and reputation management. Flynn (2006) also noted that public relations professionals have an opportunity to help the organization increase both its reputational and relational capital

by creating an equilibrium between the interests of the organization and the interests of its multiple stakeholder groups.

Other roles that the senior communication practitioner assumes include reputation management, issues management, government relations/public affairs, evaluation/measurement (Killingsworth, 2011), environmental scanning, issues identification, evaluative research (Gregory, 2008), definition and instillation of company values, stakeholder relations, and the building and managing of trust (Breakenridge, 2012).

As opposed to a senior-level communicator whose role is more involved in leadership, management, and developing strategic objectives, an entry-level public relations practitioner's role is more technical and requires the gathering and disseminating of information and data (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2013).

### *Industry expectations*

Many predominating and consistent themes are found throughout the literature about what competencies and skills hiring managers expect from public relations practitioners. One overarching theme noted throughout the literature is that employers are increasingly more concerned with general competences that are transferable, as opposed to more specific skills or specialization (Cernicova, Dragomir, & Palea, 2011). In a 2010 study, Watson and Sreedharan surveyed leading European and international senior-level communicators to determine the knowledge, skills, and abilities that senior public relations professionals will need in five years and what is required to prepare the next generation of leaders for success. Study participants expressed the need for public relations practitioners to possess a broader, cross-disciplinary set of skills and knowledge (Watson & Sreedharan, 2010).

Communication skills, both written and oral, were expressed in the literature as being competencies that are expected from entry-, mid-, and senior-level public relations practitioners. In a research study conducted by Cernicova, Dragomir, and Palea (2011) in a national effort to create a generally accepted template of skills and competencies as part of the accreditation of university programs in Romania, "oral and written communication" was ranked the highest as most important by survey participants out of 37 other competency areas measured. Seventeen out of 20 respondents graded "oral and written communication" at the maximum level of importance (either a four or a five) on a five-point rating scale (Cernicova, Dragomir, & Palea, 2011). In a different survey using the SHL Universal Competency Framework to determine a competency profile for employee success within a public relations role, the results demonstrated that "written and verbal communication" is among the top 10 competencies considered to be integral to the success of public relations practitioners working in the private sector in the United Kingdom (Gregory, 2008, p. 219). In a focus group conducted by Killingsworth (2011) in a pursuit to "define the ideal senior communicator," Canadian executives and CEOs expressed the need for senior-level public relations practitioners to possess "good communication skills, written, verbal, and visual" (p. 41). And in a 2008 email questionnaire distributed to 79 identified independent public relations counsellors, "writing competency" was ranked as the third most important job skill for the industry out of the potential 11 job skills listed (McCleneghan, 2007, p. 16). Though many new skills and competencies are emerging as being vital to the success

of communication practitioners, the more traditional communication competencies of oral and written communication are still as important as ever (Hanson, 2012; Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2013).

Proficiency with information and communication technologies (ICT) was highlighted throughout the literature as a critical competency for success as a communication practitioner. "Using IT and new media for professional communication" (Cernicova, Dragomir, & Palea, 2011, p. 6) was ranked as the second most important competency necessary for the public relations profession in the previously discussed Romanian study. Professional communicators are increasingly expected to "enable the enterprise with new media skills and tools" (Breakenridge, 2012, para. 2) and "have a good understanding of two-way symmetrical communications, including social media" (Killingsworth, 2011, p. 42). In Hanson's (2012) list of top 10 skills needed for public relations practitioners to succeed in the next 10 years, which was compiled based on conversations with recruiters, agency owners, and colleagues, more than half of the skills were directly related to ICT competency. Video editing/production, social content creation/curation, search engine optimization, programming skills, management of virtual teams, and blogger outreach are six of the ten skills listed for success in the PR field (Hanson, 2012). "Using information technology efficiently" is included in the Universal Accreditation Board's list of competencies deemed most necessary to execute public relations work tasks and includes "information management, knowledge of distribution channels and technology literacy" (Sha, 2011, p. 5). Social media proficiency is repeatedly noted as being a key competency for success within the field of public relations throughout the literature (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Watson & Sreedharan, 2010; Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, & Shin, 2013). In addition to social media, use of blogs and website maintenance are vital, because today's consumers "expect to access any information they require in a matter of moments. If your employer or client doesn't make that information accessible, prospective consumers quickly turn to competitors" (Brody, 2004, p. 7).

Strategic planning was a widely agreed upon competency needed for success in the current public relations field. "Developing a plan and a proper strategy for communication and PR" was empirically shown to be considered very important for success within the public relations field (Cernicova, Dragomir, & Palea, 2011, p. 7). From a series of focus groups with CEOs and executives, Killingsworth (2011) found that "the overall sentiment from the four focus groups was that the role of the senior communicator should be and most often is strategic" (p. 37) and that the participants considered the ideal senior communicator to be a "strategic thinker" and "able to leverage strategic partnerships" (p. 41). Through the distribution of a questionnaire to communication practitioners and academics in New Zealand, Jeffery and Brunton (2010) found that when participants were given a set of goal statements, two important goals associated with communication management emerged. "Strategically managing the communication process" was one of these two predominating goal statements and speaks to the importance of strategic thinking in public relations (p. 203). As previously mentioned, Watson and Sreedharan (2010) performed a study analyzing the responses of leading European and international senior-level communicators in regard to the

competencies that senior communications professionals will need in five years' time. The top-ranked competency proposed by the respondents was "strategizing":

strategy will be ever-more tightly linked to overall business strategy and less on organizational publicity. Competencies in strategic management will be part of the senior communicators' portfolios. (p. 3)

Business acumen is another competency widely agreed to be important to public relations practice. Good appreciation of business, business strategy, and business intelligence are competencies that are deemed essential of public relations professionals operating at the board level (Gregory, 2008). Industry professionals reiterated the importance of business acumen throughout the reviewed literature. One research study participant stated, "It is no longer sufficient to have a communications background only. Senior communicators need to understand business environment and management styles to be seen as trusted advisors" (Watson & Sreedharan, 2010, p. 4). Focus group participants in Killingsworth's (2011) study offered, "It's just as important that we understand how a business runs, not just about communicating," and "[i]f you offer advice, based on your understanding of business, you are much more quickly accepted. Learn the business you are advising on because content is important," and further the need to understand "how the budget of the communications office relates to the budgets of business units, and how it all feeds up to the financial health of the company" (pp. 40-41). The Universal Accreditation Board also acknowledges the importance of a comprehensive understanding of business functions and "business literacy" as one of the 10 essential competencies of public relations practices (Sha, 2011, p. 5). According to the UAB, "business literacy" includes environmental scanning, industry knowledge, knowledge of current organizational issues, knowledge of business technology and trends, understanding all levels of management, and usage of an organization's resources (Sha, 2011, p. 5).

Ethics is emphasized throughout the literature as being a crucial competency for public relations practice. In a comparative analysis of the competencies required for public relations practice in the private versus public sector, Gregory (2008) discovered that the public sector emphasized the ethics of the whole organization to perform for the public good, whereas there was more of a focus on personal standards rather than organization-wide standards in the private sector. A possible explanation provided for this difference was that communicators in the private sector may consider themselves the "exemplar of ethical standards" for their company and wish to perform their role as the "ethical guardian" (L'Etang, 2003, p. 54). Ethics is indicated by the UAB as one of the 10 competencies necessary for public relations practice and includes ethical behaviour, integrity, and knowledge of legal issues (Sha, 2011). "Socially responsible communication" emerged as one the top rated competency areas in a study that asked communication management practitioners in New Zealand to rate the importance of 30 communication competencies (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2010, p. 204). Garnett (1992) states that "to have the most value, however, truth in communicating needs to include usefulness, openness, and fairness as well as accuracy" (p. 229).

As the profession continues to develop more transparent and stringent ethical standards and frameworks, there is a growing call that practitioners continue to commit to an ethical practice. Professional organizations, such as the Canadian Public

Relations Society, have outlined principles for ethical practice that must be followed by its members, including “deal[ing] fairly and honestly with the communications media and the public ... [and practising] the highest standard of honesty, accuracy, integrity and truth” (CPRS, 2009, n.p.). In Killingsworth’s (2011) survey of Canadian executives and CEOs, when they were asked to rank the knowledge, skills, and abilities important for public relations practitioners to have, “practices public relations and communications in a legal and ethical manner” (p. 54) ranked the highest amongst participants.

In the age of globalization, communication professionals are working in an increasingly digital world without boundaries and communicating with a potentially global audience (Fitch & Desai, 2012). Due to this shift, cultural competence has become a vital competency for public relations professionals to possess. The term “cultural competence,” or “intercultural competence” as it is sometimes called, refers to “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations” (Dearsdorff, 2006, p. 247), demanding specific “knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures” (Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, & Colby, 1999, p. 50). Fitch and Desai (2012) argue that intercultural competence should be a significant graduate attribute in public relations education, a conclusion supported by their primary research, which sought to identify employer attitudes toward intercultural competence in public relations practice. They interviewed 17 employers of public relations graduates in Perth and Singapore, all senior practitioners and consultants. “Most participants identified personal attributes—such as openness, tolerance and adaptability—they would value in a potential employee when asked whether intercultural competence might influence a recruitment decision” (Fitch & Desai, 2012, p. 69). Participants suggested that the exposure to other cultures through travel would assist with these attributes.

Creedon and Al-Khaja (2005) similarly advocated for the integration of cultural competency into communication educational programs. They argue that placing more emphasis on cultural competency presents an opportunity “to educate a generation that will accept difference and value a global culture separate from national identity” (p. 344). The authors explain that it is important for public relations practitioners to know how to “present information about social issues, religious differences and cultural contexts in a way that is understandable, meaningful and memorable to audiences around the globe” (p. 346). Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, and Shin (2013) state that individuals wishing to pursue a career in public relations should have a strong cultural literacy, referring to “a knowledge of history and practices within a culture as well as cultural norms and popular trends” (p. 31). Because public relation professionals represent the interests, needs, and preferences of a broad array of publics, it is important that they have a strong cultural literacy, which Wilcox and colleagues (2013) suggest can be accomplished through taking a broad range of college courses, consuming a variety of media, travelling widely, and interacting with people from different backgrounds. The importance of cultural sensitivity or cultural competency is also widely agreed upon within the literature of the past decade (Clausen, 2007; Killingsworth, 2011; Nicholson, 2003; Watson & Sreedharan, 2010).

Other competencies that were consistent throughout the literature as being crucial for public relations practice are crisis management competency, analytic/evaluation/measurement competency, leadership, and relationship management/building (see Table 2).

**Table 2: Composite list of public relations competencies and skills by research study**

Public relations competency/skill	Study
ICT (Information and communication technology) competency	Breakenridge (2012), Brody (2004), Cernicova et al. (2011), Eyrich et al. (2008), Hanson (2012), Killingsworth (2011), Sha (2011), Watson & Sreedharan (2010), Wilcox et al. (2013)
Cultural competence	Clausen (2007), Creedon & Al-Khaja (2005), Deardorff (2006), Fitch & Desai (2012), Killingsworth (2011), Nicholson (2003), Paige et al. (1999), Watson & Sreedharan (2010), Wilcox et al. (2013)
Communication skills	Cernicova et al. (2011), Gregory (2008), Hanson (2012), Killingsworth (2011), McCleneghan (2007), Wilcox et al. (2013)
Ethics	CPRS (2009), Gregory (2008), Jeffrey & Brunton (2010), Killingsworth (2011), L'Etang (2003), Sha (2011)
Strategic planning / Strategizing	Cernicova et al. (2011), Jeffery & Brunton (2010), Killingsworth (2011), Watson & Sreedharan (2010)
Business acumen	Gregory (2008), Sha (2011), Watson & Sreedharan (2010)
Analytic/Evaluation/Measurement competency	Hanson (2012), Jeffery & Brunton (2010), Killingsworth (2011), Piekos & Einsiedel (1990), Sha (2011), Watson & Sreedharan (2010)
Leadership	Gregory (2008), Jeffery & Brunton (2010), Killingsworth (2011)
Crisis management	Cernicova et al. (2011), Sha (2011)
Relationship management/building competency	Breakenridge (2012), Watson & Sreedharan (2010)

While the literature has identified the requisite competencies and skills for twenty-first-century public relations practitioners, the composite list identified in Table 2 may be more utopian than real. Furthermore, while these competencies and skills have also been identified by the industry in the Pathways to the Profession curriculum framework (more details follow), many educational institutions struggle to incorporate these types of competencies and skills within a very limited range of applicable courses within their undergraduate programs. Furthermore, to have mastery over some of these competencies or skills takes more time and experience than can be offered in any four-year program. And depending on the area of practice that a practitioner

wishes to specialize in, perhaps not all of the identified competencies, skills, and knowledge are required to be successful. For example, one might argue that a media relations practitioner may not require strategic planning or cultural competence to successfully fulfill the requirements of their position. Alternatively, another might argue that in fact to be successful in today's complex and very competitive traditional and social media environments, having the ability to strategically plan and effectively implement a global media relations campaign requires the knowledge and eventual mastery of these twenty-first-century public relations attributes.

### **Education and accreditation**

Within Canada, public relations education “is offered in diverse ways within many autonomous educational systems” (Killingsworth, 2011, p. 3). This has led to confusion among executives over “the various types of public relations or communications academic credentials in Canada” (p. 63), and Killingsworth writes that “executives often have difficulty evaluating one credential over another” (p. 63). In response to this curricular inconsistency, the Canadian Public Relations Society's National Education Council developed Pathways to the Profession, an integrated program-planning model that “defines the skills and competencies required of public relations professionals at various levels and stages of their career” (Killingsworth, 2011, p. 4).

Killingsworth (2011) conducted a research study to understand

to what degree the skills and competencies identified in the manager and leader Pathways levels of the CPRS Pathways to the Profession align with Canadian executive perspectives of the competencies required of their communication managers and leaders (e.g., managers, directors, and vice presidents). (p. 7)

To date, Killingsworth's (2011) study is the most comprehensive academic research that focuses on the perceptions of the competencies necessary to practise public relations at a managerial level in Canada. However, the research says little about the education, accreditation, skills, and competencies expected of those wishing to enter the field in an entry-level position and the steps that should be taken to integrate these entry-level competencies into Canadian public relations and communication education programs.

#### *Professional accreditation*

Various accrediting organizations exist. The Canadian Public Relations Society grants the designation “Accredited in Public Relations” (APR), the International Association of Business Communicators offered the “Accredited Business Communicator” (ABC) designation, and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations in the United Kingdom, offers “Accredited Practitioner” recognition.

Some researchers have doubted the value or the need for accreditation within the public relations field and argue that age, experience, and higher education can be sufficient substitutes for accreditation (Berger, Rebar, & Heyman 2005; Likely, 2009). This seems to be reflected in the field, as fewer than 500 members of the Canadian Public Relations Society (2014) are currently accredited, representing only 30% of the association's total membership. However, Sha's (2011) recent research findings refute this

argument and show that accreditation is useful and valuable in its own right. When evaluating work categories and professional competencies among accredited and non-accredited PR practitioners, it was found that even after controlling for the influence of age and years of experience in public relations, accreditation status yielded differences between accredited public relations professionals and non-accredited public relations professionals in seven work categories and five knowledge/skills/abilities categories (Sha, 2011).

In Killingsworth's (2011) study, one executive expressed that accreditation indicates "you have these skill-sets and you've attained this level of experience," while another participant indicated that the downfall of accreditation is because people outside of the profession do not understand the credential (pp. 44-45). The majority of respondents indicated, however, that when hiring public relations practitioners, they gave preference to candidates who hold professional credentials.

### *Education*

Competencies, skills, and education are not universal or equally valuable and should always be considered within a context. One study found that in Bermuda and Italy, skills are valued over education, but in Canada and the U.S., education seems to be viewed more favourably (Murray, Owen, & McGaw, 2005). In Canada, "each additional year of schooling is on average associated with about five percent higher weekly earnings even after adjusting for directly observed skills" (p. 167). The public relations industry, like many other industries, is feeling the pressure to do more with less and therefore favours education programs that train students with technical background as well as education, taking some of the training burden off of the employers (MacCluer & Seitelman, 2005).

There is an intense need for communications and public relations educational programs to better reflect, teach, and keep up with the needs of the industry (Flynn & Sévigny, 2009; Public Relations Society of America, 2006). The role of communication educators is "to help students understand new roles and responsibilities of public relations practitioners and provide them with adequate training to cultivate fundamental communication competencies reflective of changes of the industry" (Breakenridge, 2012, para. 2).

### **Moving forward**

This review of the literature has identified the gaps in the expected skills, competencies, and knowledge of public relations professionals and what skills, competencies, and knowledge those practising in the field possess. Consequences of competency gaps can affect an entire organization. As detailed by Forth and Mason (2006), there is "strong evidence that internal ICT skill shortages—skill gaps among existing employees—have negative indirect effects on firm-level performance because of the ways in which such skill deficiencies restrict companies both in terms of ICT adoption and the intensity of use of ICTs once they have been installed" (p. 2). Shury, Winterbotham, Davies, Oldfield, with Spilsbury, & Constable (2010) found that one in five United Kingdom employers reported a skills gap for some portion of their workforce and that this gap resulted in an increased workload for other employees, increased operating

costs, difficulties meeting quality standards, and difficulties initiating new working practices. Creedon and Al-Khaja (2005) shed light on a gap between the cultural competency that employers expect communication practitioners to have and the extent to which educational programs are preparing public relations students with this cultural knowledge and sensitivity. They discovered that out of the 70 responses from accredited university and college programs, 56 required some history course to graduate, and 14 did not. Only five programs specifically required a non-Western history or non-Western civilization course (Creedon & Al-Khaja, 2005). The authors argue that to close this cultural competency gap, courses that teach non-Western values, history, and culture should be mandatory and incorporated into the curriculum.

From Killingsworth's empirical research findings (2011), she conducted a gap analysis that indicated the differences between the working knowledge and competencies demonstrated by public relations practitioners and the degree to which the executives deem their knowledge and competencies to be of importance. Killingsworth (2011) highlighted the gaps of more than 2% in working knowledge compared to the degree of importance, and these areas were said to represent areas for potential public relations education and professional development programming for senior communicators holding manager, director, and vice-president-level positions. Competencies, knowledge areas, and skills that were found to have a 2% gap or more were knowledge of finance, corporate social responsibility, managing team processes, public opinion polling and analysis, external consulting skills, leadership skills, strategic planning, commitment to lifelong learning, and negotiation skills.

This study has also revealed a profound lack of research on the competencies, skills, and knowledge that are expected of individuals wishing to enter into the field of public relations in an entry-level capacity in Canada. While Killingsworth's (2011) recent Canadian study does offer a comprehensive insight into the competencies that are expected and held within the public relations industry, the study is specific to senior-level communicators, and the conclusions cannot be generalized to communicators practising at other levels.

### **What will it take to succeed?**

This research study set out to understand what competencies, skills, and knowledge are required to be an effective public relations practitioner in the twenty-first century. The literature identified both global and industry-specific attributes that could help any professional navigate the constantly changing, information-overloaded communications environments in which they practise. Possessing all of the identified competencies and skills may not be realistic or ideal, however, having the right mix will be dependent on each practitioner's level of experience, area of specialization, work environment (whether a consulting environment or within an internal organizational communications function), and even the location and culture of an individual's practice. The literature reviewed clearly indicates that a group of foundational competencies and skills are critically necessary as the practitioner evolves from the entry level to the senior leadership team. Most important, and seemingly obvious, are communication skills, including written, oral, and non-verbal, which rank among the top desired skills identified in the research. As public relations is a communicative discipline, the

development and mastery of communication skills is well suited for educational programs that encourage and demand focused attention on professional writing—across a multitude of communication channels and platforms; on oral presentation and performance skills—gained through group and individual activities; and on the impact of non-verbal communication on the trust and credibility of the individual communicator—as observed and tested during the hiring process. Those practitioners who effectively and authentically master these foundational skills have the opportunity to set themselves apart within this very competitive industry.

The research also suggests that proficiency in managing the volumes of information and data that practitioners are now confronted with, through the use of ICTs, will also help to position entry-level practitioners for a successful career. However, the research suggests that ICTs are tools that still require information assessment, processing, and decision-making skills to determine how and to what extent they impact the specific practice areas within the profession. The proliferation of social media and new media technologies has had a tremendous impact on public relations, and those practitioners who understand how, when, and where to deploy ICTs as part of a public relations program will be among those most sought after by future employers. Knowing how to use Twitter to monitor and listen to what society is saying about an organization is one skill, but knowing what to do with that information and how to use it to influence organization behaviour and policies takes a much more mature perspective on ICTs and their deployment within the public relations profession.

The ethical practice of public relations, a topic that deserves more than just a few paragraphs of discussion, was also identified as a critical competency and skill for twenty-first-century practitioners. Society's growing demand that organizations be transparent, open, honest, authentic, fair, and socially responsible calls on communicators, as the internal voice and advocate for stakeholders, to work and manage within a high standard of integrity and honesty. Unlike some of the other competencies and skills that this study has identified as being critical for public relations practitioners, ethical decision-making and ethical practices are sometimes difficult to evaluate outside of real dilemmas. Certainly there are instances within an educational setting where ethics can and are explored and assessed in a safe and protected environment. The real test comes when an individual's ethical framework is in conflict with an organizational decision that may not be transparent, fair, or socially responsible. Educators and professional associations can play a critical role for entry-level practitioners by providing case studies, ongoing professional development, and simulation-based ethical learning environments as a means of discovering the opportunities and challenges that practitioners face during real-time ethical crises.

## **Conclusion**

Understanding what it takes to succeed in public relations in the twenty-first century is an under-researched area of communication scholarship. For some observers, the simple answer is: it depends on the situation, the type of work that is being performed, and the attributes of the individual communicator. While it is difficult to argue with such a parsimonious assessment, the challenges facing those who practise public relations today are far greater than at any other time in the profession's 100-year history.

Beyond having the requisite communications skills (written, oral, and non-verbal), practising within a personal and organizational ethical framework, and having mastery of the growing technologies that enable organizations and its diverse publics to engage in two-way symmetrical communications, today's practitioners must also have the ability to demonstrate competency in strategic planning, measurement/evaluation, and cultural awareness and understanding, as well as the ability to be flexible and collaborative—depending on the context and situational factors. No longer are communicators simply creating messages and projecting them into a controlled communications arena. Today's successful and effective public relations practitioners are actively listening, engaging, and building and cultivating relationships on- and off-line, in real time and around the world.

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### Notes

1. The Canadian Public Relations Society approved and adopted the following definition of public relations in February 2009, written by academics Terry Flynn and Fran Gregory and long-time government communicator Jean Valin: "Public relations is the *strategic management of relationships* between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of *communication*, to achieve *mutual understanding*, *realize organizational goals* and serve the *public interest*." For further elaboration, see <http://www.cprs.ca/aboutus/mission.aspx>.
2. P21 was founded by the U.S. Department of Education with support from private corporations and not-for-profit organizations.

### Websites

Canadian Public Relations Society, <http://www.cprs.ca/aboutus/mission.aspx>  
Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, <http://www.p21.org/>

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