

# **The knowledge, skills and competencies for effective public affairs practice: A mechanism to embed ethics.**

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents a UK pilot study connecting scholarship from the fields of competencies and knowledge with the theory and practice of public affairs (PA). It suggests an improved understanding of competencies could provide a practical mechanism to improve PA practice at the micro (individual self-aware), meso (organisational) and macro (societal) level.

The study provides a basis for in-depth research that explores the knowledge, skills and competencies for effective and transparent PA practice with the view to create a knowledge and competency framework. It addresses three key questions:

- What do PA practitioners need to know?
- What do PA practitioners need to do?
- How do PA practitioners need to behave?

Although the concept of ethics is not overtly mentioned in these questions, it is tied to the debate around behaviours. It is the mechanism of competencies that is appealing as a way of making explicit and tangible what constitutes ethical behaviour.

This research is relevant from four perspectives. Firstly, it is important to the reputation of the practice. The discipline engenders extreme of views as to whether it is moral, ethical and healthy for democracy, or whether it hinders and corrupts the democratic process.

The research builds on the views of scholars such as Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) and Berg (2012) that advocacy plays a valuable role.

Secondly, it addresses the need for a better understanding of practice and the environment in which it operates. In the UK a new style of coalition government and a significant number of new MPs in 2010 has impacted on the delivery of PA. Also the complexity and interconnectedness of the modern world, the economic crisis and the growing importance of societal issues has changed the nature of governance and business. As Schepers (2010) states there are now new ways of business-government cooperation and new skills are needed to operate in this new environment. McGrath et al (2010) argues PA practitioners need to be able to analyze, interpret and anticipate trends and developments and to provide strategic counsel. This study helps to identify what this new breed of practitioner looks like and contributes to professionalism.

Thirdly, there have been concerns amplified by the UK media surrounding financial misconduct of MPs and poor behaviour of PA practitioners. In order to address these the government tightened up the regulatory framework under which MPs operate and introduced new lobbying regulation. A practice that better understands itself and its responsibilities is more likely to evoke confidence and shape a regulatory environment that is workable rather than have further restrictions imposed on it.

Finally, the study addresses a gap in the PA body of knowledge by synthesizing scholarship from complementary fields of study to provide fresh conceptual and contemporary insights.

## **Literature – theoretical foundations and insights**

### ***Defining Public Affairs and its environment***

There are many definitions of public affairs (Paluszek, 1995; Schuler, 2002; Hillman, 2002; Fleisher 2002, 2007; Toth, 2006) but common to all is the understanding that public affairs (PA) is about building relationships with those who shape public policy. Within it lies the concept of lobbying persuading policy makers to act in the interests of the organisation (Moloney, 1997). As such it is part of

Public Relations (PR) – the discipline that builds relationships between organisations and their publics.

Some argue it is corporate interest groups who mainly influence policy through their economic power (Berger, 2001) reinforcing the negative views of PA. Others like Grunig and Jaatinen (1998) argue most political systems fall between pluralism (pure advocacy with private interest competing for access and government resources) and corporatism (pure collaboration and collective action). They put forward societal corporatism that incorporates pressure politics, negotiation and collaborative interests. This perhaps portrays a more accurate worldview of the complexity of government and the macro environment in which it operates including the expectations and values of the society in which governance takes place.

The importance of the macro environment to PA is mirrored by the evolving nature of PA research. Griffin (2005) reflected and analysed US PA empirical studies, associated developments and literature between 1965 and 2004 and suggests there have been three overlapping research “waves” moving from understanding the foundations of PA to the blurred boundaries of modern-day practice that often goes beyond government relations to incorporate ideas around the firm and its network of stakeholders and how this impacts on the political arena.

This is illustrated by the likes of Post (1982) who talk of PA being a window-in and a window-out for the organisation and Mezner and Nigh (1995) who suggest an interfacing role as a buffer or a bridge helping organisations to manage any attacks on it by reaching out to stakeholders. Interestingly, Hillman and Hilt (1999) start to distinguish between the long and short-term goals of PA looking at relational (long-term relationship building with government) and transactional approaches (short-term engagement and lobbying). More recently van Schendelen (2002) talks of political alignment with the focus on facilitating and building relationships and interactions with the actors in the socio-political environment. Commentators like McGrath et al (2010) have taken this further stating PA is now one of co-creation of policy that leads to a blurring of not just organisation-stakeholder boundaries but that of organisation-government boundaries. So PA is becoming a more complex discipline with the growing tension perhaps between advocacy and relationships.

***PA knowledge areas – contemporary critique and debates as to what a PA body of knowledge (PA-BoK) should contain***

As Fleisher (2007) argues a PA-BoK is necessary for professional PA practice. There are two broad views to the shape a PA-BoK should take. Schuler (2002) suggests a grand unification theory to underpin practice, whilst others like Hillman (2002) argue that PA requires a multi-eclectic method of inquiry and a pluralistic approach to theory building.

Scholars (Getz, 2001; Vining et al, 2005; Windsor, 2005; Toth, 2006; Oberman, 2008; Dahan, 2009; and McGrath et al, 2010) have all reflected on political involvement, why firms engage in the political arena and the type of knowledge and processes necessary for effective action. Interestingly, Vining et al (2005) argue lobbying strategy requires effective planning, management and communication skills against an understanding of the political environment. He cites Michael Porter's Five forces (1980) arguing that government can often dominate and impact on the other industry forces so a commercial understanding in this wider policy context is essential. In many respects this connects to the ideas of Oberman (2008) who sees PA as a resource management function turning socio-political resources into operational ones.

Windsor (2005) conducted one of the first summaries of what constitutes theories of PA. He looked across previous studies and connected to additional scholarship from the arenas of issues and stakeholder management and suggests PA draws on a variety of theoretical roots including business and management, communication, ecology and organisational psychology. As Shaffer and Hillman (2000) state PA sits at the interface of multiple activities within an organisation.

Toth (2006) continues a communications perspective suggesting there is little direct PA theory but there is PR and communication theories that support PA practice. According to McGrath et al (2010) the scope of the discipline has evolved substantially over the last 10 years with a particular focus on managing the public issues life-cycle. As Boddewyn (2012) suggests the concept of issue identification is a rightful focus but the profession should also look into the role of PA through resource-dependency theory and the position of PA in wider

society. Also scholars like van Schendelen (2012) look at how trends in the European Union are impacting on PA delivery.

Also of relevance is the work of de Lange and Linders (2006) who suggest that at its heart PA is reality construction and cites the work of cultural theorists Berger and Luckmann (1975) who argue that there is a meaningless world and reality is created by sense-giving observers. PA through discourse and narrative creates reality and meaning. They do not suggest constructionist theory can equate to Schuler's (2002) grand unification theory but it might be helpful lens enabling practitioners to deepen their understanding of their role. Here Moloney (2000) is interesting given his reflections on the political public sphere drawing in social theory from Habermas (1984) for deeper understanding of the PR discipline.

Based on an analysis of the work of previous scholars, it is suggested PA knowledge roots can be broadly categorised into five main strands –political science, culture, economics, communication and the organisation. The table below captures the type of concepts explored by the scholars above. However, given the rise of the media-ization of politics (Louw, 2010), and the impact of social media on the wider political arena (Castells, 2000; 2013) new areas for inclusion are worthy of exploration and are included below. Ethical theory too is included.

<b><i>Knowledge Roots</i></b>	<b><i>Conceptual components</i></b>
<i>Political Science</i>	<i>Interest Group Theory Political systems</i>
<i>Culture and Society</i>	<i>Social constructivism Public Sphere Media Theory and media-zation of politics Social media and the socio-political arena</i>
<i>Communications</i>	<i>Situational Theory of Publics Excellence Theory in PR Issues Management Theories Crisis Management Theories Stakeholder Theories Social Capital Theories Persuasion Theories</i>

	<i>Communitarianism</i>
<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Systems Theory</i> <i>Corporate Social Responsibility</i> <i>Business ethics</i> <i>Resource Dependency Theory</i> <i>Competitive positioning and theories of the market</i>
<i>Economics</i>	<i>Collective Action Theory</i> <i>Public Choice Theory</i> <i>Transaction cost economics</i>

Table 1: Conceptual Components of PA knowledge roots

So there is reflection on what a PA-BoK must contain, but Fleisher (2007) believes that a BoK must reflect the specialised knowledge that is unique to PA. It can't list everything PA practitioners should know but it should identify what is central. PA is clearly multidisciplinary (Windsor, 2005) but he alludes to the differences between theoretical roots (the conceptualisation of PA) and practical theory (that support the day-to-day delivery of PA practice). This blurring between the two concepts is seen in the grid above. The distinction between the two, however, is relevant and is supported by Meznar (2002) who suggests that there is large and disorganised literature on PA and political strategy which lacks coherence and consensus.

By building on this duality it may be possible to develop an integrated PA schema that connects the theoretical basis of the discipline to the practical theories and skills that drive effectiveness and produce an interdisciplinary model with more integrative synthesise.

***Relating a PA BoK to skills and competencies***

Fleisher (2007) usefully suggests a range of competencies and knowledge for effective PA practice and a PA BoK which provides a starting point for debate but his ideas are drawn from the US experience and focuses primarily on functional skills.

At the same time, the topicality of PA competencies is emerging in practice with two recent studies undertaken by UK-based recruitment

consultants. The Changing Face of Public Affairs report (Watson Helsby, 2012) illustrates the growing complexity and evolutionary nature of PA as suggested by McGrath et al (2010). Here PA practitioners argued the need to understand corporate strategy, stakeholder proliferation and connectivity, the impact of globalisation, issues and crisis management techniques and the ability to respond to a more informed, challenging and vocal consumer/electorate. The VMA study (2011) identified three important attributes highlighting the ability to communicate effectively the organisation's/client message, solve problems and network. Of note is the lower importance placed on having influential contacts that perhaps relates to the idea of Schepers (2010) who states there are now new ways of business-government cooperation.

Picking up on the idea of personal attributes, McGrath (2006) conducted a major qualitative study looking at lobbyists in Washington, London and Brussels. This study identified the importance of listening, observation and relationship building, as well as courtesy, honesty, integrity and credibility. In fact the study suggested that woman made better PA practitioners because of these traits.

What is common to the four investigations above is the generation of lists of attributes which are useful but appear disconnected from a wider knowledge base and the lack of clarity over terminology using knowledge, skills, attributes and behaviours almost interchangeably. There is also no linkage to competency scholarship. Only Fleisher (2007) referenced ethics explicitly though it can be argued words such as integrity have the ideas of ethics embedded within.

	<i>Type of Study</i>	<i>Findings</i>
<b>McGrath (2006)</b>	<i>Qualitative US, UK and Brussels 60 practitioners</i>	<i>Identified personal qualities of</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Listening</i></li> <li>• <i>Observant</i></li> <li>• <i>Relationship building</i></li> <li>• <i>Courtesy</i></li> <li>• <i>Honesty</i></li> <li>• <i>Integrity</i></li> <li>• <i>Credibility</i></li> </ul>
<b>Fleisher</b>	<i>Commentary</i>	<i>Identified knowledge areas:</i>

<b>(2007)</b>	<i>Paper US-focused</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Development of intercultural competence</i></li> <li>• <i>Impact of societal factors on PA such as nature of social networks, political ideologies, legal system, nature of media and public communication channels for example</i></li> <li>• <i>Understanding local public policy institutions</i></li> <li>• <i>Nation-state specific applications of PA functions</i></li> <li>• <i>Language skills</i></li> <li>• <i>Understanding ethics in a global/international context</i></li> <li>• <i>Managing international consultants, alliances and partners</i></li> </ul>
<b>VMA (2011)</b>	<i>Quantitative UK-focused 393 practitioners from variety of levels</i>	<p><i>Top 10 most important skills/attributes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Ability to effectively communicate organisation/client message</i></li> <li>• <i>Problem solving ability</i></li> <li>• <i>Networking ability</i></li> <li>• <i>Knowledge of legislative framework</i></li> <li>• <i>Campaigning skills</i></li> <li>• <i>Commercial nous</i></li> <li>• <i>Passion for politics</i></li> <li>• <i>Experience of other communication sectors eg PR</i></li> <li>• <i>Social media and awareness skills</i></li> </ul>
<b>Watson Helsby (2012)</b>	<i>Qualitative UK-focused 30 senior practitioners</i>	<p><i>Top 6 core competencies of growing importance</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Real understanding of how business works</i></li> <li>• <i>Leadership and management</i></li> </ul>

		<i>skills</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Campaigning skills</i></li> <li>• <i>Issues radar and management</i></li> <li>• <i>Political sophistication</i></li> <li>• <i>Influencing upwards</i></li> </ul>

Table 2: Summary of four leading PA competency investigations

It is also worth mentioning the work on competencies undertaken by PR scholars (Oughton, 2004; Gregory, 2008; Sha, 2011; Jeffrey and Brunton, 2011) but there are similar issues here in terms of use of terminology and quite broad statements. Though Gregory's (2008) exploration using the SHL universal competency framework has considerable merit. The current European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation Programme (ECOPSI) is also worth noting that aims to map and evaluate contemporary and future communication management skills of practitioners in Europe. It draws on some competency scholarship and brings thoughts on PR skill-sets together in a useful summary (see below). The eventual outcome of this study in terms of devising a useful diagnostic tool and more insightful perspective into communication competencies will make a valuable contribution to the debate. The focus, however, is on competencies for social media, internal and crisis communications and those of communication directors. Public Affairs is omitted enabling this study to benefit from, as well as contribute to, this study.

<i>Skills</i>	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Personal characteristics</i>
<i>Writing/oral communication</i>	<i>Business knowledge/literacy</i>	<i>Handling pressure</i>
<i>Project planning and management</i>	<i>Current awareness</i>	<i>Leadership</i>
<i>Critical thinking</i>	<i>Theoretical knowledge</i>	<i>Integrity/honesty/ethical</i>
<i>Problem solving</i>	<i>Knowledge of PR history</i>	<i>Objectivity</i>

<i>Media Skills</i>	<i>Knowledge of other cultures</i>	<i>Listening</i>
<i>Persuasion</i>	<i>Knowledge of communication models</i>	<i>Confidence/ambition</i>
<i>Strategic thinking</i>	<i>Knowledge of how to apply PR theory</i>	<i>Team player</i>
<i>Mentoring and coaching</i>		<i>Energy/motivation</i>
<i>Advanced communication skills</i>		<i>Discipline</i>
<i>IT skills (including new media channels)</i>		<i>Intelligence</i>
<i>Crisis management</i>		<i>Ability to get on with others/interpersonal skills</i>
<i>Research</i>		<i>Wide interests</i>
<i>Reading comprehension</i>		<i>Intellectual curiosity</i>
<i>Community relations</i>		<i>Creativity</i>
<i>Consumer relations</i>		<i>Flexibility</i>
<i>Employee relations</i>		<i>Judgement and decision making</i>

<i>Professional service skills</i>		<i>Time management</i>
<i>Social responsibility</i>		<i>Respect for hierarchy</i>
<i>PR ethics</i>		<i>Follows organisational rules</i>
		<i>Honesty</i>
		<i>Adaptability</i>
		<i>Integrity</i>
		<i>Ambition</i>
		<i>Reliable attendance</i>
		<i>Willingness to accept assignments</i>
		<i>Completes work on time</i>

Source: Pieczka (2002), Oughton (2004), Brown and Fall (2005), DPRG (2005), Goodman (2006), McCleneghan (2006), Schumann (2007), Gregory (2008), Schick and Mickleleit (2010), Jeffrey and Brunton (2011) and Sha (2011)

Table 3: ECOPSI Research Report (2013: 15-17)

So, competency work exists in the fields of both PA and PR but there is an opportunity to add granularity by linking to scholars in the field of Human Resource Management (HRM). A review of some of this HRM scholarship clearly demonstrates the opportunities to add greater depth and clarity to PA competency investigations.

### ***Understanding competence and competencies***

Garavan and McGuire (2001) argue competence relates to a skill in a functional area and competency focuses on associated behaviours. Nordhaug (1998) suggest competencies operate at an organisational and individual level and equate to capabilities or distinctive strengths.

At an organisational level, these are traditionally known as “core” as suggested by Hamel and Prahalad (1993) and give an organisation strategic competitive advantage. At an individual level these relate to concepts such as attributes, knowledge, skills, attitudes, traits and motives.

Over recent years a number of typographies and frameworks have been suggested (Boyatzis, 1982, Sparrow et al, 1994, Nordhaug, 1998, Cheetham, 1996, 1998, Kuijpers, 2001 cited by Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005). What appears to emerge from these models is the importance of linking individual transferable generic skills, the unique firm-specific (core) and then those made necessary by a specific job or profession. HRM has tended to focus on the generic and job specific, whilst organisations have focused on the firm-specific.

In addition, scholars (Rowe, 1995; New, 1996, Drejer, 2001 cited by Soderquist et al, 2009) suggest that competencies can be viewed from three perspectives. Generic v organisation-specific competencies (ie competencies that relate to a specific job that is common to all individuals but which also may have specific requirements given the organisation in which the job takes place); managerial v operational (ie competencies relating to the managerial such as planning or operational referring to how a specific task is carried out); competencies as skills v competencies as behaviours. Soderquist et al (2009) takes this idea further suggesting that based on these three couples of competencies an eight-fold typography can be devised that allows a more comprehensive model that is more helpful in moving organisations from a task orientation to a competency-based approach.

Competency frameworks exist to help individuals and organisations improve performance by providing guidance and clarity as to the skills or outcomes required (Boyatzis, 1982; Goleman et al, 2002; Conger and Ready, 2004 cited by Mitchell and Boak, 2009). However as Boak (2001) posits, the effectiveness of a framework depends on its quality referring to accuracy (including the descriptors used), acceptability, accessibility and the manner in which it is implemented.

This is relevant for PA. Any competency model for PA needs to focus firmly on the individual generic skills and the professional in order to improve effectiveness, but be flexible enough to allow this to be integrated into existing organisational and firm-specific frameworks

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that may exist. It also needs to be acceptable by the PA profession itself.

A key challenge and one identified by Soderquist et al (2009) is blending both competence and competencies into a holistic framework. Earlier work by Hodkinson and Issitt (1995:149 cited by Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005) suggest approaches that integrate knowledge, understanding, values and skills that sit within the practitioner. This has appeal when looking at professions and disciplines such as PA as the focus is on the individual rather than the organisation. Cheetham and Chivers (1998) purport to have done this by looking at five dimensions that look at cognitive (explicit and tacit knowledge), functional (skills), personal (behaviour), ethical (values) and meta (dealing with uncertainty, learning, reflection). This provides an interesting and significantly broad framework that could help address the evolving nature of the PA profession and its socio-cultural inter-connectedness and explicitly draws out the idea of values as linked to ethics.

Building on this multi-dimension approach Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005) suggest a four dimensional approach as outlined below. Of relevance is the concept of social competence that draws together behaviour and attitudes.

	<i>Occupational</i>	<i>Personal</i>
<i>Conceptual</i>	<i>Cognitive competence</i>	<i>Meta competence</i>
<i>Operational</i>	<i>Functional competence</i>	<i>Social competence</i>

Table 4: Typography of competence, Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005:39)

This model seems well-suited for development against the backdrop of PA allowing for knowledge to be constantly updated and refreshed as the policy world evolves, and for focus to be placed on social and meta competences that are of particular relevance given the complexity of the social world. It also enables connections to be made to current scholarly work on Emotional Intelligence and social effectiveness (Abraham, 2004; Carmeili and Josman, 2006; Cote and Miners, 2006 cited by Kunnanatt, 2008). At its heart PA is a social discipline rooted in stakeholder engagement and empathy to the wider policy environment and societal trends.

One of the criticisms of competency approaches is the focus on current or past behaviours (Iles, 2001). Any competency approach for PA must be forward thinking and flexible to evolve as the policy environment around it evolves to keep it contemporary. Work on looking at how to explore future competency requirements has been conducted by Robinson et al (2005). They categorised competencies into core, emerging (those that may or may not become core) and maturing enabling a reflexive approach to competency development.

***Organisational v professional competence and competencies***

Much competency literature has focused on the organisation primarily in terms of core competencies. In addition, there are numerous organisational specific studies that link to generic and job roles. Examples include the work Mitchell and Boak (2009) looking at competency frameworks in UK healthcare and Horton (2000) looking at competency management across the British civil service provide useful insights in terms of best practice. The work of Campion et al (2011) stands out in terms of useability. They suggest 20 best practice requirements to competency modelling or frameworks. This is based on their academic expertise and review of other scholarship, as well as their managerial experiences working in HRM. Although US-focused it does provide useful structure.

	<b><i>Analysing competency information (identifying competencies)</i></b>
<i>1</i>	<i>Considering organisational context</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>Linking competency models to organisational goals and objectives</i>
<i>3</i>	<i>Start at the top</i>

4	<i>Using rigorous job analysis methods to develop competencies</i>
5	<i>Considering future-orientated job requirements</i>
6	<i>Using additional unique methods</i>
	<b><i>Organising and presenting competency information</i></b>
7	<i>Defining the anatomy of a competency (the language of competency)</i>
8	<i>Defining levels of proficiency on competencies</i>
9	<i>Using organisational language</i>
10	<i>Including both fundamental (cross-job) and technical (job-specific) competencies</i>
11	<i>Using competency libraries</i>
12	<i>Achieving the proper level of granularity (number of competencies and amount of detail)</i>
13	<i>Using diagrams, pictures and heuristics to communicate competency models to employees</i>
	<b><i>Using competency information</i></b>
14	<i>Using organisational development techniques to ensure competency modelling acceptance and use</i>
15	<i>Using competencies to develop HR systems (hiring, appraisal, promotion, compensation)</i>
16	<i>Using competencies to align the HR system</i>
17	<i>Using competencies to develop a practical “theory” of effective job performance tailored to the organisation</i>
18	<i>Using information technology to enhance the usability of competency models</i>
19	<i>Maintaining the currency of competencies over time</i>
20	<i>Using competency modelling for legal defensibility (eg test validation)</i>

Table 5: Best Practices in Competency Modelling, Campion et al (2011: 230)

The tri-partite division of analysing, organising and using competency information is a useful one. It also links to the work of Soderquist (2009) who identified the critical role of job analyses and focusing on the usability of competencies. So there is depth in competency scholarship that could add real depth and practical value to discussions of PA.

***So where does that leave the vexed question of ethics?***

The ethical dimension of lobbying is not as well developed as other aspects of PA scholarship (Berg, 2012). She suggests that political scientists have reflected on its legitimate uses as part of the democratic process but little attention has been paid to it by PR scholarship. One of the few to investigate this area is Edgett (2002) who suggests an ethical framework for advocacy arguing that advocacy is a central function of PR. Though PR scholars themselves are divided on whether advocacy is a legitimate function – advocacy in the sense is a form of persuasion that is seen as less excellent if one reflects on Grunig (1992) model of two-way symmetrical communication.

Scholars such as Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) link persuasion to marketplace theory with all organisations being entitled to a voice and the truth will emerge. Others approach it from a rhetorical perspective (Heath, 2001) with persuasion as a communication tool grounded in demonstrating argument suggesting persuasion itself is not inherently good or bad but a necessity of human interaction. Though the logical conclusion here is that persuasion inevitably leads to discourse that is a symmetrical function.

But what is ethical? Ethics is a body of knowledge in its own right, but put simply it relates to a framework of decision-making that enables right and wrong to be reasoned allowing for consistent behaviour as suggested by Trevino and Nelson (2004). There are different ethical traditions which means there is no one approach but there are commonalities which link to ideas of honesty and minimising harm but above all it is about a clear and visible process.

Many scholars have explored the ethics of persuasion (Baker and Martinson, 2002; Edgett, 2002; Fawkes, 2007). Perloff (2010) suggests there are three viewpoints. Some argue it is immoral as the communicator is often asking somebody to do something that is not necessarily in the interest of the individual concerned. Others say it is moral suggesting that individuals can accept or reject messages. He argues for a third-way that is closer to the truth. Persuasion can be used for good or bad purposes with ethical and unethical intentions perhaps mirroring the earlier view of Heath (2001). Ethical theory can inform our actions but ultimately one should return to the view that you are more effective if you are honest. Ethical persuaders advance arguments forcefully but do not coerce, encourage debates and the dignity of those involved, individuals are free and autonomous so that people can take the most thoughtful decisions possible.

Edgett (2002) taking the view that persuasion can be ethical and drawing on the traits of legal advocacy in the US has drawn up ten criteria for ethically desirable advocacy in PR.

<b><i>Ethically desirable criterion</i></b>	<b><i>Definition</i></b>
<i>Evaluation</i>	<i>Detached or objective evaluation of the issue-client organization before determining whether it merits PR advocacy</i>
<i>Priority</i>	<i>Once the PR practitioner has assumed the role of advocate, the interests of the client or organization are value above those of others involved in the public debate</i>
<i>Sensitivity</i>	<i>Balancing of client priority on the one hand with social responsibility on the other</i>
<i>Confidentiality</i>	<i>Protection of the client's or organization rights to confidentiality and secrecy on matters for which secrets are morally justified</i>
<i>Veracity</i>	<i>Full truthfulness in all matters; deception or evasion can be considered morally acceptable only under exceptional circumstances when all truthful possibilities have been ruled out; this implies trustworthiness</i>
<i>Reversibility</i>	<i>If the situation were reversed, the advocate-client-organisation would be satisfied that it had sufficient information to make an informed decision</i>
<i>Validity</i>	<i>All communications on behalf of the client or organization are defensible against attacks on their validity</i>
<i>Visibility</i>	<i>Clear identification of all communications on behalf of the client or organization as originating from that source</i>
<i>Respect</i>	<i>Regard for audiences as autonomous individuals with rights to make informed</i>

	<i>choices and to have informed participation in decisions that affect them; willingness to promote dialogue over monologue</i>
<i>Consent</i>	<i>Communication on behalf of the client or organisation is carried out only under conditions to which it can be assumed all parties consent</i>

Table 6: 10 Criteria for Ethically Desirable Public Relations Advocacy (2002:20)

Taking this framework, Berg (2012) in a small scale US state study evaluated this framework specifically against lobbyists. Evidence of practice against these criteria clearly existed and suggested that lobbyists had a standard of norms with understood conditions of conduct. This seems to suggest that the further exploration of this framework in a wider context could prove useful and move it beyond a US focus. Yet in this paper there was no connection to the idea of competencies that could be a way of standardising these norms and embedding them in practice allowing for a clear decision making process as suggested by Trevino and Nelson (2004) which doesn't necessarily conflict with issues of confidentiality.

***Knowledge, effectiveness and professionalism***

The discussion around a BoK, competencies and ethics is tied to the wider debate around professionalism. There is a significant body of literature here but whether defined from a philosophical (very defined framework such as Downie, 1990) or sociological (broad framework such as L'Etang, 2008), there is a necessity for defined specialised knowledge, collective responsibility (ethics and a sense of integrity) and importance of membership organisations. However, Windsor (2005) argues that PA is neither a unified discipline nor a profession as it can take many different forms depending on the cultural, political and organisational environment in which it operates. There is truth here but if one looks at professionalism as effectiveness then as Drucker (2006) states this is about doing the right things not just about doing things right and this links back to knowledge and competencies.

But the concept of knowledge is relevant. There are two types of knowledge explicit and tacit (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Explicit is objective and codified, whereas tacit is subjective, experiential and difficult to formalise. According to Greenhaigh et al (2004) tacit knowledge does not exist in written form, it is based on the expertise of the individual and the meaning of knowledge is dependent on its context and ability to share. In PA little explicit knowledge is codified – there are no standard rulebooks, agreed training and qualifications. Often it is argued it is the tacit knowledge – the years of experience that enable practitioners to know how policy is made and what works and the players involved in the decision. Yet scholars such as Cowan et al (2000) believe too much knowledge is suggested as tacit where in fact it can be codified. This suggests more of what PA does can be taught and specified.

### ***Literature Review Conclusion***

There is clear scope to bring fresh insights. Themes can be bundled into three broad areas:

- The opportunity to synthesize scholarship from HRM involving competencies and knowledge with PA and PR, ethics and advocacy to elucidate new concepts and ideas – a gap in the literature clearly exists.
- The potential for competencies to provide a practical and tangible mechanism to embed ethical behaviour into practice and the concept of competencies more broadly as a critical component in establishing professional identity and driving professionalism and effectiveness
- The real possibility that a PA schema can be created that reflects the core and interdisciplinary nature of practice linking conceptual and practical knowledge. There is clear evidence that a competency framework for PA can have granularity and detail by engaging with the richness of competency scholarship and best practice approaches. The challenge is ensuring this is dynamic able to reflect the changes in the social world in which it operates. Other challenges include the integration of short-term (lobbying) and longer-term (relationship) building activities.

## **Methodology**

## ***Research Philosophy***

This research is in the tradition of interpretivism in part to reflect the complexity of work itself as suggested by Garavan and McGuire (2001) but also to reflect the complexity of the policy environment where definitive laws and generalisations may be difficult and where a true understanding requires greater insights into human interaction.

The pilot study consists of six in-depth semi-structured interviews and content analysis of competency frameworks of four diverse bodies to provide a benchmark. This feeds into a full study involving 32 in-depth interviews with practitioners and policy makers and a quasi-ethnographic study. This involves spending two weeks observing practitioners one week with an in-house team and the other with agency team to draw out comparisons. The incorporation of ethnography builds on the suggestion of Everett and Johnson (2012) that such an approach is imperative to deepen understanding of PR generally.

This is being complimented by the use of deductive techniques. As outlined by Tashakkori and Teddie (2003) multiple methods can be useful if they provide better opportunities to answer the research question. So it falls more into a post-positivist approach where knowledge must be subject to wide critical examination to help expose the reality as closely as possible (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Therefore the full study will include a survey of PA practitioners to test themes emerging from the initial inductive stage and apply structural equation modelling to help elucidate fully the connections between knowledge, competency and practice.

From a post-positivist position, the philosophical concept of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1998) has value for this research as it focuses on the social world of human interaction. As suggested by Kilduff et al (2011) there are unobservable forces and structures at work that exist independently of the mind but are real and are best investigated through observation rather than by quantitative methods. Often these structures encompass aspects of power and the new knowledge produced often challenges existing power structures in society, industry and government. This reinforces the need to include some aspects of ethnographic study to get inside contemporary practice. This

study sits in the heart of power structures of influence and advocacy perhaps challenging aspects of contemporary PA practice.

### ***Research Methods – Pilot Study: Mapping Competency Frameworks***

Practical insights were gained from analysing existing competency frameworks. Four frameworks were chosen and analysed against Campion et al's (2011) best practice approach and competency scholarship generally. Of relevance is the new Government Communication Professional Competency Framework (April 2013) that although places communications in the context of the UK civil service, it does draw out specific functional and behaviour competencies necessary for effective communication practice. The diverse professional bodies of the Institute of Civil Engineers, the Royal Pharmaceutical Association and the ACCA were also chosen to provide contrasting application.

### ***Research Methods – Pilot Study: Enquiry through interviews***

The first part of this study falls firmly into an exploratory approach finding out “what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light” (Robson, 2002:59). Six in-depth semi-structured interviews took place. Five with practitioners followed a convenience sampling approach and one with Nick Helsby who commissioned the Watson Helsby report. This helped to clarify the research approach of the final study, issues affecting practice and garnered insights into how the value of competencies is being integrated and used in practice. Interviews were analysed using a thematic approach drawing on the work of Attride-Stirling (2001).

### ***Validity, Reliability and Limitations***

This is a small-scale pilot study using qualitative techniques that are subjective. The limitations relate to its scope – a UK focus. Once the final study is complete a more accurate picture can be obtained. Further studies in different cultural and political settings also needs to be encouraged and perhaps longitudinal studies developed to look at the longer-term impact of whether a competency approach can lead to improved practice.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The section below outlines key themes emerging from interviews and learning points from an early analysis of competency frameworks from professional bodies.

### ***A split in practice***

A view that there is a split in practice between the desire to have more theoretical underpinning v those stuck in the same tactical approach

“There is a desire for PA to reach a state of maturity but PA practitioners fall into two camps – those that fall into the category of narcissism (self-admiration and belief) and those that want to approach practice with more academic context and professionalism” (Interviewee 1).

He went on to add that there are those that just see PA as a “craft” function and it is difficult to unify the different sides. Some suggested there could be an age perspective here with older practitioners groomed in an age when PA was embryonic and perhaps more narrow, whereas now it is a maturing practice integrated into the organisation and communications more generally.

Some felt practitioners would be interested to know more about the roots of their practice “the social context and theoretical framework ...how PA meets the need of society and the solid basis for it” (Interviewee 2)

### ***Key to effectiveness is behaviours***

A belief that some of what PA does can be taught (some functional skills/competence) but key to effectiveness are personal attributes (behaviours/competency)

Practitioners interviewed were of the belief that more of what they do can be explicitly codified and taught but that the real skill of a PA practitioner lay in the ability to read situations and people that required a degree of emotional intelligence and maturity.

Interviewee 1 in particular stressed the importance of emotional intelligence in respect of showing empathy and knowing “when to push on an argument and when to stop”. The importance of certain types of behaviours necessary to do the PA role came across strongly.

***Issues still persist around knowledge transfer and the “intellectual” capital of the PA function***

Although the issue of emotional intelligence came up in all interviews, one practitioner in particular felt that knowledge is never truly transferred or shared in PA practice and perhaps can never be.

“PA knowledge is the insight and analysis that is the asset value of a good PA professional that are sold to their clients” (Interviewee 5), however this practitioner did admit that PA does have many theoretical and practical processes that are open and transparent and can be shared as they evolve through PA industry training and networks.

***Affirmed difference between body of knowledge and practical “models and theory” that can be applied in daily practice***

Some confusion over what was meant by body of knowledge, but when probed many practitioners talked of PA being linked to politics, economics, marketing, psychology, decision-making, behaviours, relationships, society. General feeling that PA needed some sort of knowledge base or “canon” – a term used by Interviewee 5

***Idea of competencies appeared to resonate with all practitioners as did the idea of competencies being linked to professional practice***

“they help break down the smoke and mirrors or mystery of early PA which relied heavily on address books and contacts (they can) demonstrate key skills and expertise as a marketing/PR discipline in its own right” (Interviewee 5)

Areas identified included reputation and relationships, engaging others in discussion and dialogue, persuasion and influence. Ability to write well, plan, good inter-personal skills and to think strategically were others that have common resonance.

Critical skill base involves “understanding of political system and policy development” according to Interviewee 2. This came up with

all interviewees but there was general agreement that some of this could be taught though experience within the political system itself would be beneficial.

***Key competence is business acumen and to connect policy environment to organisational return on investment and business goals***

This point was stressed in particular by Nick Helsby who recruits into senior PA roles but other practitioners too felt the importance of being able to connect PA fully to the business.

For some practitioners this meant being able to discuss issues of reputational risk and brand enhancement. As interviewee 5 stated “[also of importance] is brand awareness and audience segmentation – understanding the organisation or consumer groups being represented or impacting on decision-makers”

Others saw the importance of being able to convince senior management of the relevance of PA “we need to be transformational inside the organisation” (Interviewee 1)

***Ideas around competence (skills) clearly link to PA being interdisciplinary***

Practitioners frequently referenced the need to understand business, media and digital communications, along with the traditional views of networking and negotiation. No practitioner mentioned their organisation having specific PA competencies, though some referenced almost in passing wider organisational competency frameworks.

***From Competency framework analysis***

What is striking from looking at the four frameworks is that they all fail to reference any body of knowledge associated with that profession/occupation and none used any thinking from scholarship from scholars such as Soderquist et al (2009) and Le Deist and Winterton (2005). Key points for reflection:

- Little reference to the organisational context in which the professional frameworks would be used (links to issues around how individual/practice competencies can connect to the idea of core competencies which relate to the organisation)

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- All organise and present competency information differently but all identify competency areas that contain more detailed information than lists
- They all identify different levels of competency relating to stages of a career – some with more detail than others perhaps reflecting some of the debate around entry level and management
- Only one provided very detailed information linked to practical examples of the competence in action which added extra detail and granularity enabling the terminology to be made real
- ICE provided the most detail in terms of three core areas (contextual, practice and behaviour) which was the framework which came the closest to linking competence, competency and some form of body of knowledge rather than practical “doing” knowledge which falls more broadly into skills
- All stated purpose of the framework was recruitment, performance management, training needs, personal development with only one adding a reference to linking to curriculum
- Only two looked at how to acquire relevant competencies through specified training and qualifications which seemed surprising
- Two had created online self-assessment tools to help practitioners identify skills gaps

From a practical perspective, there are useful competency frameworks available from which to draw inspiration but none demonstrate fully the best practice approaches as suggested by Campion et al (2011) and integrate the sophistication articulated by competency scholars such as Delamare Le Deist and Winterton, 2005; Soderquist et al 2009) that allow a real exploration across dimensions such as values (ethics), functional (skills), personal (behaviours) and the cognitive (knowledge).

Given the work already started by PA scholars such as Fleisher (2007) and PR scholars (Gregory, 2008; Oughton, 2004; Sha 2011) there is scope to build a PA schema that provides depth reflecting skills and behaviours but also allows the connection to the underpinning conceptual knowledge and practical theory for effective practice. This

could integrate the PA BoK reflections from scholars such as Toth (2006).

Indications from interviews reveal an appetite for improved understanding of a PA knowledge base including the concept of explicit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) and codification (Cowan et al, 2004) as part of the maturing of practice. This connects to scholarship around professionalism (Downie, 1990; Fleisher, 2007; L'Etang, 2008) and the role of knowledge and skills in training and development. The concept of emotional intelligence clearly emerged as a key attribute supporting the ideas of Kunnanatt (2008) around social effectiveness and Delamare Le Deist and Winterton (2005) on social competence. An ability to delve deeper into this idea is appealing as it links directly to issues of what is right and wrong, ethics, responsibility and trust. This is reinforced by the desire to understand how PA sits in a wider societal context Ethics is grounded in decision making about right and wrong (Trevino and Nelson, 2004) and this process can be embedded into a competency framework if that framework is sufficiently detailed and evidenced.

A desire to understand the conceptual basis of PA is apparent demonstrating its role in supporting society as purported by Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2008) using it as a way to restore trust in the profession and that advocacy is a force for good.

The role of competencies resonated with practitioners as a way of being able to demonstrate the variety of skills necessary for the job and those referenced are in line with what is emerging from scholarship (Toth, 2006; Oberman, 2008 and McGrath et al, 2010) and recent practitioner surveys but there is tension here. Agency practitioners were concerned about the intellectual capital of PA being too widely available as this is what is sold, but in-house practitioners were less concerned. They saw this being an asset to demonstrate their value inside the organisation. This reflects the view of Windsor (2005) who argues that PA is not a unified discipline. There are different perspectives and a PA schema will need to incorporate this in particular the differences between agency and organizational PA activity. It may also reflect issues around PA operating in different business sectors.

Also the ideas of competencies cited such as dialogue, discussion, media, relationships, brand, persuasion, negotiation all embody both

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theoretical paradigms, as well as having best practice approaches for delivery. This mirrors practice what Meznar (2002) sees in scholarship in terms of a lack of coherence, consensus and often perhaps conflict. There is an opportunity here to bring clarity.

## **Conclusion**

The pilot study has enabled the research to progress into its full exploratory stage. The research when completed will provide conceptual and practical value by establishing a body of knowledge and competency framework that is at the heart of debates around PA professionalism and ethics. It can be used by PA practice for educational, training and development purposes and has the scope to be integrated into wider organisational competency frameworks. It potentially addresses issues around PA transparency and the poor regard in which PA is often held. An improved understanding of practice could link directly to how future regulation may evolve.

In terms of originality, the study aims to fill the research gap between PA and competency scholarship that includes an ethical dimension. At the same time, most research into PA is North American focused. This paper adds value by looking at a UK and more broadly European perspective allowing for comparisons and shared learning.

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