

**PR / Communication Department Structure:**

**Findings From a Global Study**

**Danny Moss**<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Professor of Corporate & Public Affairs  
University of Chester Business School  
University of Chester  
Queens Park Campus  
Chester, United Kingdom  
CH1 4BJ  
[d.moss@chester.ac.uk](mailto:d.moss@chester.ac.uk)

**Fraser Likely**<sup>b</sup>

Adjunct Professor  
Communication Department  
University of Ottawa  
&  
<sup>b</sup> President  
Likely Communication Strategies  
200 – 1775 Courtwood Crescent  
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada  
K2C 3J2  
[likely@intranet.ca](mailto:likely@intranet.ca)

**Krishnamurthy Sriramesh**<sup>3</sup>,

**Maria Aparecida Ferrari**<sup>4</sup>,

**Peter Stokes**<sup>2</sup>

**and Bert Regeer**

Correspondence concerning the article should be addressed to Professor Danny Moss ([d.moss@chester.ac.uk](mailto:d.moss@chester.ac.uk)).

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

## Abstract

This paper draws on and reports on some of core findings drawn from a recent major international study of public relations/ communications (PR/C] department structures which was supported by the IABC Research Foundation , which represents the most substantial study of its kind to date. Drawing on a survey sample of some 278 Chief Communication Officers [CCOs] based in organizations operating across all five continents. The study found quite notable variations in the type of (PR/C] departmental structures with no one dominant structural model emerging. In effect each organization appeared to adopt a structural design to suit their individual circumstances although there were nevertheless some reasonably common component functional elements within each department. What was perhaps most surprising was that department structure did not appear to be strongly influenced by department size, other than in terms of each determining their own solution in terms of the ' structural architecture that best suits their needs. In short , there do not appear to be any common formulas or prescribed solutions for how organizations should or do orchestrate the design of the PR/C department structures, rather CCOs and appear to be able to exercise a degree of latitude in determining what works best for them and their organizations in terms of organising and managing the public relations/ communications function.

*Keywords:* PR/Communication Department Structure, PR/Communication Department Size, Chief Communication Officer, International

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

### **PR / Communication Department Structural Models:**

#### **Findings From a Global Study**

### **1.0 Introduction**

#### 1.1 Organizational and Department Structure

While the past two-three decades have witnessed remarkable growth in the body of literature focused around the role of communication and public relations within and on behalf of organizations, arguably one obvious area where scholarship has remained far from complete is in the development of comprehensive theory to explain management practice and behaviour in the public relations/communication (PR/C) departmental context. Although more recent research has begun to address questions about managerial roles, practices and competencies (e.g. Moss, Warnaby, & Newman, 2000; Moss, Newman, & DeSanto, 2005; Gregory 2008), comparatively little research has been conducted to explore the structural and organizational framework within which PR/C managers at all levels must work to control and direct the strategic and day-to-day tactical activities of their department.

Mainstream management scholars have continued to examine the importance of organizational or enterprise-wide level structures, perhaps most notably in terms of the long-running contentious debate about the relationship between organizational structure and strategy (Chandler, 1962; Hall, & Saias, 1980; Mintzberg, 1990; Birkinshaw, & Gupta, 2013), but no such parallel debates appear to have occurred amongst PR/C scholars or professionals. Moreover, while management scholars have focused specifically on structure as a key variable affecting organizational performance, exploring for example, the efficacy of

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

different organizational structural configurations (e.g. Mintzberg, 1990; De Wit, & Meyer, 2005); from a PR/C perspective, where organizational or department structure has been examined at all it has been largely in the context of other mainstream debates such as those about functional relationship between public relations and marketing, or in terms of PR/C reporting and access to the dominant coalition and leadership influence or power within organizations (e.g. Grunig, L., 1990; Grunig, J., Grunig, L., & Dozier, 2002; Berger, & Reber, 2013; Zerfass, 2010; Zerfass, & Franke 2012; Gregory, 2013).

The notion of organisational structure can be seen as a multifaceted concept comprising not only the physical architecture , comprising the component elements of an organisation or department and the relationships between those elements, but also delineating the lines of command and control , framework for distribution of resources ,and from a communications perspective , the conduit along which information is both disseminated and collected within the organisation . However this notion of organisational structure as a form of organization or department- wide *architecture*, is not one that has gained much traction within the communications / public relations literature, which is hardly surprising given that the subject of functional or organizational structure per se, has received relatively little attention from mainstream communications / public relations scholars..

### 1.2 IABC Research Foundation Sponsored Study

Recognizing this gap in the body of knowledge, the *International Association of Business Communicators'* (IABC) former Research Foundation (as of 2015 called simply the Foundation), funded an international study of communication department structure, (awarded to the authors of this paper) the aim of which was to provide an

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

in-depth insight into the structure of top performing communication functions, as well as identifying the factors that influence department structure. This paper draws on this programme of research, offering insights into the most significant findings uncovered by the programme of research that spanned organizations located across five continents: Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, and North America.

From the outset, it was acknowledged that because of the limited and/or relatively superficial coverage of the topic of organisational and departmental structure within the communications and public relations literatures, it would be necessary to draw on the management and organisation theory literature to supplement the limited body of PR/C literature on the topic of structure, and thereby help inform the design of the empirical research and also provide a context for the interpretation of the findings.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### 2.1 Management/Organizational perspectives

In recognising the need to rely strongly on literature drawn from the organization and management fields, it was also evident that little, if any, of that literature referred directly to the experience of communication professionals or communications departments.

Much of the academic literature on organizational structure has inevitably focused on the issue of identifying the most appropriate structural design or form that will enable organizations to perform most effectively. Seminal works by scholars such as Weber (1947) Chandler (1966), Burns (1963), Pfeffer (1978) and subsequently Mintzberg (1979, 1983, 1993) and Robbins (1990) have all examined different

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

forms of organizational structure, exploring how structure may affect or be affected by different variables. Indeed, while there are differing schools of thought about how best to tackle the task of analyzing and prescribing the most effective forms of organizational structure, two principal approaches have generally dominated the literature on structural design: the traditional '*dimensional approach*' to understanding structure; and the '*configuration approach*' (McPhee & Poole, 2001). While the 'dimensional approach' involves deconstructing the structure into a set of variables or dimensions for analysis; the 'configuration school' focuses on capturing the interrelationship between different structural dimensions and to define 'organizational types' reflected in structural configurations.

### *2.1.1 Traditional Dimensional and Configurational Approaches*

Traditional dimensional analysis of organizational structure has tended to focus around a number of core dimensional variables, the most important of which scholars such as Pugh (1974) and Robbins (1990) suggest comprise: *complexity* (the extent of differentiation, the number of different component parts and the degree to which work is divided up into sets of operational activities/skills); *specialization* (the degree to which work is undertaken by specialist roles); *centralization* (the degree to which power and control over decisions is held within the top management hierarchy) and finally *configuration* (the 'shape' of the organization's hierarchical structure, including chain of command and span of control).

While organizational structures have begun to change more radically in recent years in response to marked changes in technological, economic and market forces (Fritz, 1996; Scott, 2004; Stanford, 2007), a number of broad

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

structural forms have emerged that have evolved through the history of industrial development. These continue to be relevant in describing the structure of contemporary organizations. Two key variables appear to act as the principal drivers and determinants of structural design, namely, organizational *complexity* and *organizational size* (Mintzberg, 1989).

From a configuration perspective (e.g. Mintzberg, 1979, 1989), organizational structure is understood in terms of a number of 'organizational types' each comprising a specific combination of structural features. Five key structural models have generally dominated configurational thinking: *Simple Form*; *Unitary Form (U-Form)*; *Multi-divisional Form (M-Form)*; *Matrix Form*; and *Virtual Form*. The chief characteristics of each of these models are summarized in appendix1. Mintzberg (1979, 1989) acknowledged there is also potential and in some cases necessity for overlapping configurations, as well as for configurations to evolve and change over time to reflect changing market and industry conditions as well as internal organizational changes.

### 2.1.2. Departmentalization

Turning to what the literature tells us about structure at the departmental level ( e.g. at the PR/C department level) much of the discussion emphasizes the notion of what has been termed specialization or 'departmentalization', characterized by the division and organizing of labour into specialist groups. At the organizational level, departmentalization is the way in which organizations coordinate activity that has been horizontally differentiated (Robbins, 1990), with departments created on the basis of simple number, function, product/service,

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

geography, client or process. In larger organizations multiple criteria may be used to divide /segment departments, such as first by function (finance, manufacturing, sales, HRM), then perhaps by geographic region, or for manufacturing by product category. Thus, in general, the larger and more diverse the organization, the more elaborate the departmental structures that are likely to be found, both in terms of vertical and horizontal architecture used to harness, direct and control specialized talent, while in small organizations a simple horizontal structure may suffice.

### *2.1.3 Size*

The significance of organizational size and its possible influence on organizational level structure is one of most commonly recurring themes found within the organizational management literature (e.g. Pugh et al, 1969; Child, 1972; Pugh, 1973; Robbins, 1990; Stanford, 2007). Child (1972) examined two main strands of causal argument relating size and structure. Firstly linking increasing size of an organization with increased specialization, which will manifest itself in terms of greater structural differentiation. Second, focusing on the problem of directing a large number of people, which increases likelihood of the adoption of a centralized system using impersonal mechanisms of control. Child went on to suggest that the challenge of coping with large numbers of organizational members might be tackled by breaking large organizational units into smaller quasi-independent ones. Of course , as Child and other authors have acknowledged, despite its undoubted importance, size is only one variable among a number of others ( e.g. environmental conditions, human agency or technological change) influencing decisions concerning organizational and functional department structures.



## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

### 2.2 Public Relations Literature

As was acknowledged in the IABC Foundation's commissioning of this research, the subject and treatment of the notion structure within PR/C departments has received relatively little attention within the extant body of PR/C literature. Indeed, as, Zerfass and Klewes (2014, p.1) acknowledged recently: "there is little discussion and almost no empirical knowledge about the organization of communication departments in contemporary organizations." Of course, the subject of structure as manifest in the PR/C context has not entirely escaped academic attention. Perhaps most notably, the question and significance of structure, particularly at the organization level, has attracted the attention of scholars engaged on the earlier IABC-supported 'Excellence' study (J. Grunig, 1992; J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) which also including and drew on the earlier work of J. Grunig (1976), J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) and L. Grunig (1985; 1987; 1989). Beyond the Excellence Study, a small body of work has gradually emerged over the past two decades, which to a greater or lesser degree has examined topic of structure in the communication context (e. g. Spicer, 1991; Van Leuwen, 1991; Prout, 1991; Likely, 1998; Cornelissen, Locke & Gardiner, 2001; Holtzhausen, 2002; Korver & van Ruler, 2003; Stokes, 2005; Sterne, 2008; Koul, 2009; Zerfass & Klewes, 2012). Of these works, only Van Leuwen (1991) has attempted to explore departmental architecture in any depth, suggesting that horizontal structures for PR/C department tend to organized primarily on the basis of public or market rather than by function.

#### *2.2.1 Excellence study*

Reviewing the treatment of the notion structure found within the Excellence Study (J. Grunig, 1992; Grunig et al, 2002), which focuses on building a broad

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

framework for defining what constitutes 'excellent communication and public relations management'; the emphasis is strongly centred around examining the importance of structure at the *organizational* rather than *departmental* level. Thus, for example, J. Grunig (1992) explored the concepts of organization structure and its relationship to communication processes and communication effectiveness, recognizing that structure serves to determine the role and scope of the activities that practitioners can perform and hence their influence within organizations. Here their underlying aim was to try to identify 'the' best' type of structure – the one that would best enable the organization and its various functions (including PR/C) to achieve their goals.

Here J Grunig (1992) and previously L. Grunig (Schneider, 1985; L. Grunig, 1987; L. Grunig, 1989) attempted to draw specifically on the work of Hage (1980) and Hage and Hull (1981), and the structural typologies that they had constructed- *tradition/craft, mechanical, organic and mixed mechanical/organic*- to explore the relationship between these Hage-Hull typologies and vertical structures of public relations departments, and or the forms/models of public relations practice found within the organizations studied. However, their research found no significant relationship between the Hage-Hull typologies and the pattern of horizontal structure found in PR/C departments.

In searching for a plausible explanation for the structures observed within PR/C departments, J. Grunig (1992) turned to the work of organizational theorists such as Robbins (1987, 1990) who have suggested that variability in structure may be explained by a number factors including prevailing strategy, organization's size, technology and environment, which collectively Robbins (1990) suggested might account for between 50-60 per cent of the observed variation in structure. Robbins

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

argued that residual variation might be explained by a 'power-control view' of structure – whereby structures at any time are largely determined by the prevailing dominant coalition within the organization.

J. Grunig, L. Grunig & Dozier (2002) subsequently went on to draw on further work by organizational theory scholars as well as their own research data to advance a composite model of factors influencing organizational and PR/C department structure, comprising a mix of environment, culture, power-control, prevailing strategy along with elements of the existing structure and internal communication systems. While acknowledging the contribution of the Excellence study this work to While it is important to recognise that in considered the contribution of the Excellence study, to our understanding of PR/C department structure and to the effective management of such departments , it is important to recognise that the excellence study had an underlying research agenda , namely to test the applicability of the core principles of 'excellent communication management practices' advanced by the research team. Moreover, despite the various limitations in the conceptual underpinning of the structure-communication relationship explored in the Excellence study, this work still represents the most significant examination to date of how structure may affect the functioning of PR/C departments in the organizational context.

### 2.3 Summary

The importance of understanding organizational and functional structures was pointed out by Grunig (1976, p.1) who argued that: "the behaviour of public relations practitioners is largely determined by the structure of the organization and

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

the practitioners role in that structure". In this sense, structure represents a defining and enabling framework shaping the responsibilities and tasks performed by practitioners. Hence, it follows that a key aim for structural research is to try to identify the most effective form of overall and the resulting vertical and horizontal structures for any organization. Here the fact that structure is concerned with many different variables in terms of both vertical and horizontal structuring of tasks and responsibilities, resources and reporting relationships makes for an extremely complex challenge in determining any one 'best' structural solution.

By necessity, this relatively brief review of literatures surrounding the subject of organizational and PR/C departmental structure has highlighted the challenge of determining the most appropriate way to structure. The lack of research into how PR/C departments based in different organizations around the world are in fact structured, vertically and horizontally, posed the first key challenge for this paper. The second challenge was that the literature, while recognizing size as a factor, did not provide references to studies where size was examined in relation to vertical and/or horizontal architecture. This comment concurred with our view that the topic of organizational and departmental structure has received limited and/or relatively superficial coverage within the PR/C literature. These challenges were taken into consideration when developing our research questions for this paper.

### **3.0 Research Questions:**

As pointed out earlier, the research reported in this paper represents the first and perhaps most fundamental part of a substantive international study of communications/ public relations department structure , supported by the IABC

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

Foundation. The first research question was part of the original set research program questions, while the second is added for the purposes of this paper.

*RQ 1: Are there specific structures/models for PR/C departments?*

*RQ 2: Does department size affect PR/C department structures/models?*

The seven RQs are:

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

*RQ2: Is there a relationship between communication department structure and organizational structure?*

*RQ3: What are the most critical factors determining communication department structure?*

*RQ4: Is there a link between the structure of the communication department and organizational efficacy?*

*RQ5: Does the structure of communication departments remain constant across different geographic regions?*

*RQ6: If there are global differences in communication department structures, what are they?*

*RQ7: Is it possible for there to be a universally effective communication department structure?*

## 4.0 Methodology

As indicated earlier, the overall goals for the research program were set out in the research team's proposal to the IABC Research Foundation and translated into seven key research questions which were also outlined earlier in this paper. The IABC Research Foundation's requirements [ set out in their RFP] involved the need for both a qualitative and quantitative study of Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) from both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations which would offer a global picture of communications department structures. Initially it was anticipated that the survey phase of the research would be conducted amongst IABC members. In this paper, we have focused only on the quantitative phase of the research with the findings from the qualitative phase of the research, which comprised in –depth interviews with some 26 CCOs based in organizations around the world, discussed elsewhere because of the word constraints of this paper.

### 4.1 Quantitative Study

While the qualitative phase of in-depth interviews was designed to provide rich, in-depth insight into how structure is understood and manifest in the communication context (Miles and Huberman, 1994), the subsequent quantitative

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

survey stage of the research was intended to build on the qualitative findings and provide a broader range of data about department structures that would enable further elaboration and generalization of the findings (Saunders et al, 2009). In Because there had been no previous survey research into communication department structure to draw on, the research team had to construct a new survey questionnaire, drawing on both the literature review as well as the findings from the qualitative stage of the research. The resulting questionnaire contained 39 questions and it was estimated that it would take respondents around 15-18 minutes to complete online. Thirty-five questions were close-ended dichotomous or multiple choice questions, with just four open-ended questions. The survey was hosted on the university web server of one of the members of the research team. The Latin American questionnaires were deployed in both the Portuguese and Spanish languages. The structure and intent of the English-language questionnaire was strictly adhered to in both the Spanish and Portuguese versions.

### *4.2 Sampling & Sample Profile*

Originally, it was intended that the survey would be distributed to IABC members only. However, when interrogation of the IABC database revealed that the IABC membership would be unlikely to yield sufficient numbers of CCOs [ only 200 CCOs in total ], it was recognised that the research sample needed to extend outside of the IABC membership to target CCOs headquartered across all five continents. Along with e-mail solicitations distributed to CCOs who were IABC members, the research team employed snowball techniques, identifying other mailing lists and intermediaries that could distribute the same email and url. A wide

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

range of professional and industry associations and networked individuals the world-over was asked to promote the research program and survey address. When the survey closed after a few months, 278 usable responses were received from CCOs located around the world.

### 4.3 Analysis

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

### 4.4 Limitations

The research team recognised the potential dangers inherent in the analysis and the problems of possible bias associated with the data collection methods (e.g., Nisbett & Ross, 1980), all of which could lead to spurious interpretation of the findings. For the qualitative phase of the research, measures were taken to combat such potential errors, particularly in terms of the obtaining additional documentary evidence from CCOs included in the study (e.g., annual reports, corporate charts, etc) to help corroborate the accuracy of the information supplied. Given the need to employ snowball techniques, the survey became a purposive, non-probability survey. Because of this purposive, non- probability approach, and the type statistical data gathered (i.e number of employees; number of department strata; etc.) it was not possible to apply standard tests of validity. However, because this quantitative phase of the study was set within the overall three stage design of this research project, the research team felt that by adopting a process of triangulation

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

of not only to the forms of data collected, but also in the form of investigator triangulation and methodological triangulation, the study had followed a long established strategy for conducting robust research. The research team believed that by adopting this approach at all these stages in the research process, it would best help us answer the research questions that guided the program. That said, the research team acknowledges the inability to extrapolate findings to the population of CCOs as a whole.

## **5.0 Results and Discussion**

### *5.1 Sample Profile*

Of the 278 valid responses received, 79.9% were from CCOs working in for-profit organizations, with the remaining 20.3% working in non-profits. While 33% of all the organizations in the sample operated on a purely domestic basis (either locally, regionally or nationally) in their home countries, two thirds of the sample was found to operate in more than one country, either continentally or globally. North America was the headquarters for 41.5% of all organizations, with the remaining organizations headquartered in Latin America (25.9%), Europe (18.1%), Australia/New Zealand (6.3%), Asia (5.6%) and Africa (2.6). As with the qualitative phase of the research, for-profit organizations in the survey sample were found to operate across an extremely broad range of sectors, ranging from financial services to technology, manufacturing, consumer goods, energy, pharmaceuticals and wholesale distribution. For non-profits the range was as broad: charities; education development; professional associations; and grant-making bodies.



## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

Here we examine the evidence derived from the survey relating to this paper's two RQs.

### 5.1 RQ1

To answer RQ 1 (*Are There Specific Structures / Models For Communication Departments?*), we reviewed the frequencies to a number of survey questions and conducted cross tabulations. First, we established the **scope of responsibility** of the CCO. The majority of those surveyed had responsibility for a set of core functions: external communication (86.7%); internal communication (74.1%); issues/crisis management (76.6%); media relations (82.0%); and web (71.2%). (It should be noted that social media was not provided as a separate category in the on-line survey.) That is, the vast majority of CCOs had these responsibilities, while a lesser number had other responsibilities, including community relations (58.3%), research, planning and/or measurement (51.1%), marketing communication (44.2%), public affairs (41.7%), investor relations (14.0%), fundraising/donor communication (13.7%), member communication (13.7%) or other (11.2%). Second, we determined if there was a single, integrated PR/C department in each organization. In the survey, in answering the question, **In my organization, the communication function is integrated as one single department** under me, 59.1% of CCOs said yes. In the 40.9% of non-integrated PR/C departments, there are separate departments for: marketing communication (22.7%); public affairs (19.8%); investor relations (17.3%); internal communication (14.4%); corporate social responsibility (12.2%); and fundraising/donor communication (11.5%). Third, we determined the **vertical structure** by asking the CCO the number of strata in their department. Of the CCOs who responded to this question, 42.4% headed departments with two levels of stratification - where the

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

CCO formed one layer, with a single layer of communication staff reporting directly to her/him. In 43.7% of the cases, CCOs headed departments with a three level hierarchy, where essentially a middle layer of managers served to coordinate and organize communication staff at the implementation end of the functional chain of command. In 10.4% of cases, departments operated with four levels of stratification where the CCO formed the first level, managers the second, supervisors the third and those who reported to supervisors were the fourth level. Only in 3.4% of departments were there five or more levels of hierarchy. Fourth, we ascertained how CCOs *group staff members into organization units on the horizontal axis*.

Those surveyed stated that they grouped primarily by technical communication activities/services (by speech writing; event planning; etc.) 48.9%, stakeholders (by employees; government; etc.) 36.0%, internal client (by account executives) 25.9%, communication process (by research; planning; etc.) 22.7%, geography (by region) 21.2%, and technology (by print; web; etc.) 9.0%. (Note, these percentages do not add up to 100%, since multiple responses were provided.) Fifth, we asked the respondents to describe their *organization's corporate structure*. Survey respondents stated that 41.1% worked in centralized U-form, 37.4% in matrix, 19.1% in decentralized and divisional M-form and 2.4% in hollow/virtual organizations. Finally, sixth, we determined the CCOs *sphere or scope of operations*: global; continental; national; or regional/local. Of the CCOs surveyed, 30.3% had global responsibility for their organization's communication, 11.5% had continental; 42.6% had national; and 15.5% had regional/local.

To address the question of whether there are specific structures/models for communication departments, several statistical indicators were employed. We utilized the survey question - *as CCO for my organization, I have responsibility for*

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

*the following communication functions (disciplines) - as a dependent variable.*

Since the majority of CCOs had responsibility for the same set of core functions, we wanted to understand how those variables correlated with variables related to: the CCO's sphere of operation; how the CCO organized horizontally; whether the department was integrated; the levels of hierarchy in the department and the organization's structural model.

### *5.1.1 Communication functions for which the CCO was responsible*

The first indicator studied was the relationship between **communication functions (disciplines) for which the CCO was responsible and the CCO's sphere of operation** (global, continental, national or regional). This provides an indication of whether the core responsibilities are the same regardless of the scope of departmental operations. The data revealed that the CCO's sphere of operation did not significantly alter their responsibility for the top disciplines. For example, 86.7% of the total sample had responsibility for external communication. By scope of operation, the differences were not much different: global 90%; continental 78%; national 85%, and regional/local 88%. Taking a second example, 76.6% of the total sample had responsibility for issues/crisis management and by scope of operation, the differences were not significant: global 76%; continental 81%; national 75%, and regional/local 77%. What emerged was the fact that the CCOs' pattern of functional responsibilities showed little if any difference across different spheres of operation, whether that sphere be global, continental, national or regional/local. The vast majority of CCOs had the same top responsibilities regardless of the reach or sphere of their responsibilities.

The second indicator was the relationship between **communication functions (disciplines) for which the CCO was responsible and** *In my communication*

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

*department we organize and group our staff into units primarily by*

(activities/services; internal client; stakeholder; geography; communication process; technology). This gives an indication of whether the core responsibilities are the same regardless how employees are organized into units on the horizontal axis. The data demonstrated that, regardless how the CCO organised staff members, the five core functions remained the same. For example, of the 72 CCOs who organised primarily by internal client, 65 had responsibility for external communication, 62 for internal, 63 for media relations, 61 for issues management and 59 for web. Or, for example, of the 59 who organised primarily by region, 52 had responsibility for external communication, 52 for internal, 53 for media relations, 52 for issues management and 45 for web. There did not appear to be any correlation between a specific responsibility or function and a particular form of horizontal organization.

The third indicator examined the relationship between *communication functions (disciplines) for which the CCO was responsible and* *In my organization the communication function is integrated as one single department under me* and shows whether the core responsibilities are the same regardless of single department integration or not. For the CCOs who led a single integrated department, 96.0% had responsibility for external communication, while 86.0% had responsibility for internal, 91.0% for media relations, 86.0% for issues and 86.0% for web. These are higher percentages than for the CCO sample as a whole, as reported above: external communication (86.7%); internal communication (74.1%); issues/crisis management (76.6%); media relations (82.0%); and web (71.2%). For the CCOs who worked in organizations where there was more than one PR/C department – that is, no single integrated department – of these CCOs, only 70.0%

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

had responsibility for external communication, 65.0% for internal, 78.0% for media relations, 70.0% for issues and 58.0% for web. Here, there is evidence of a meaningful relationship between CCO core responsibilities and integration into a single department.

The fourth indicator examined the relationship between **communication functions (disciplines) for which the CCO was responsible and** *In my communication department for which I have responsibility there are \_\_\_\_ levels of hierarchy.* This indicator demonstrates whether the core responsibilities are the same regardless of the number of strata in the structure. This can also be a proxy for size of department. Again, there appears not to be any correlation between a specific responsibility or function and the number of strata. For example, of the 98 CCOs who lead a department with two strata, 85 have responsibility for external, 75 for internal, 84 for media relations, 78 for issues and 76 for web. Of the 5 CCOs who lead a department with five strata, 3 have responsibility for external, 3 for internal, 3 for media relations, 2 for issues and 3 for web. There didn't seem any significant relationship between this variable and the degree of hierarchy in the PR/C department.

Last, the analysis explored the relationship between **the communication functions for which CCOs in the sample were responsible and** *I would describe the corporate organizational structure of my organization as.* In this case, there was little evidence of any significant relationship between the type of department structures adopted and these variables. For example, 91% of CCOs who worked in centralized, U-form organizational structures had responsibility for external communication, with 91% in matrix form, 85% in M-form and 100% in hollow/virtual (6 of 6). The percentages were similar - regardless the organizational structure -

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

across internal communication, media relations, web and issues management. The same can be said for functions such as marketing communication, government relations, community relations and research / planning / measurement, for which a third to a half of CCOs had responsibility or such as investor relations for which few CCOs had responsibility. There did not appear to be any correlation between a specific responsibility or function and a particular form of organizational structure.

### 5.2 RQ2

One variable that might have been expected to impact on PR/C department structures/models is size, both with regard to organizational size and with regard to departmental size. To answer RQ 2 (*Does department size affect PR/C department structures/models?*), we reviewed the frequencies and conducted cross tabulations relating to this variable. When we examined *the size of the department*, we noted that 58.0% of CCOs led departments of less than 10 employees, with 19.6% leading departments of 11-25, 9.6% of departments of 26-50, 6.8% of departments of 51-100 and 6.0% of departments of 101 and above. That is, 77.6% had less than 25 employees. It is difficult to determine if this finding is representative or not. While previous studies (e. g. Van Leuven, 1991; L. Grunig, 1989; J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) collected data on the number of departmental employees, these numbers were not presented. More recent studies such as the regular European Communication Monitor or the USC Annenberg Generally Accepted Practice (GAP) studies either do not present employment numbers for PR/C departments or these numbers are not representative. For example, the GAP studies in particular target a population of CCOs working mostly in larger organizations.

In examining *organizational size*, 28.1% of organization had less than 1000 employees, with 29.2% having between 1001-5000, 17.9% having between 5001-

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

25,000, 16.1% having between 25,001-100,000 and 8.8% having over 100,000.

Thus, the majority of organizations employed less than 5000 people, with only just over 8% employing over 100,000. Against this, we should consider the fact that Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) make up at least 90% - and depending on the continent or country upwards of 96-98% - of all for-profit organizations worldwide. Medium size enterprises are usually defined as having less than 250 employees (500 in the United States). Therefore, it's clear that any medium size enterprises in the sample made up a much lower percentage. Indeed, the distribution of different-sized organizations within the sample may well represent a degree of bias towards larger sized organizations when compared to the typical size profile of organizations within the global population as whole.

To address the question of size in relation to specific structures/models for PR/C departments, several statistical indicators were employed. We utilized the survey question - *The number of employees in communication functions in my organization is* - as a dependent variable.

### 5.2.1 Department Horizontal Structure

The first indicator studied was the relationship between *In my communication department we organise and group our staff into units primarily by* and *The number of employees in communication functions in my organization is*.

As we noted above, overall with respondents providing multiple answers, 48.9% of CCOs grouped primarily by technical communication activities/services, 36.0% by stakeholders, 25.9% by internal client, 22.7% by communication process, 21.2% by geography and 9.0% by technology. When we analysed these organizational choices against the size of department, the same primary choices of horizontal organization were not as apparent. In four of the five departmental size categories,

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

CCOs reported that organising by technical communication activities/services was the first choice. The exception were the CCOs who led the 26-50 employee sized department. But, where organizing by technical communication activities/services was the first choice, it wasn't that clear a choice, given that only 30.0% of CCOs of 1-10 employee departments, 24.0% of 11-25, 25.0% of 51-100 and 26.0% of over 100 made this choice. Likewise, the second, third fourth and even fifth choices were not distinct. With the exception of 'by technology' where the range was between zero and 5.0%, there was no clear pattern. For example, for departments of between 1 and 10 employees, CCOs reported that 30% organized primarily by technical communication activities/services, 21.0% by geography, 18.0% by stakeholder, 15.0% by internal client and 11.0% by process. This could be compared to departments of more than 100 employees where 26.0% of CCOs organized primarily by technical communication activities/services, 26.0% by geography, 23.0% by stakeholder, 16.0% by internal client and 10.0% by process. A second way of looking at this data is to examine each method of organizing against each of the department sizes. Taking organizing by technical communication activities/services, 30.0% of CCOs who led departments of 10 or less employees organized this way, compared to 24.0% for departments of 11-25 employees, 18.0% for 26-50, 25.0% for 51-100 and 26.0% for over 100 employees. For organizing by stakeholders, it was 18.0%, 20.0%, 23.0%, 23.0% and 23.0%. These similarities held true across all methods of organization. Thus, the data revealed that the CCO's choice of organizing strategy did not fundamentally change regardless the size of their department. No significant relationship was found between a specific method and a specific size of department.

### *5.2.2 Department Vertical Structure*



## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

The second indicator studied was the relationship between *In my department, I have responsibility for ... levels of hierarchy* and *The number of employees in communication functions in my organization is*. With regard to the size of the communication department, when we examined *the size of the department*, we noted that 194 CCOs led communication departments of less than 25 employees. Of the 194, 145 led departments of less than 10 employees. For departments of under 25 employees, CCOs put in place a structure that had two or three levels of hierarchy, with the two levels more dominant in departments of under 10 employees and the three levels more prevalent in departments of under 25. As the size of the department increased, CCOs could employ four or five levels, with only the larger departments creating five or six levels of hierarchy. Common thresholds needed to move to the next level of hierarchy appear to be nine to ten employees for moving from two to three levels, somewhere between the high twenties and low thirties to justify movement from three levels to four levels and between seventy and over 100 employees to employ five levels.

### 5.2.3 Organizational Structure

The final indicator studied was the relationship between *I would describe the corporate organizational structure of my organization as* and *The number of employees in communication functions in my organization is*. Here we explored the data to determine if there is a relationship between the choice of organization structure and the size of the PR/C department. As we presented in 5.1 above, CCOs stated that 41.1% worked in centralized U-form, 37.4% in matrix, 19.1% in decentralized and divisional M-form and 2.4% in hollow/virtual organizations. When examining this data by department size categories, the same pattern was apparent for CCOs who worked in M-form and Hollow/Virtual form organizations. Across all

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

department sizes, approximately 18-20% worked in M-form and approximately 3% worked in Hollow/Virtual. The difference was between U-form and Matrix form. For departments of 1-10 employees (45.0%) and 26-50 employees (50.0%), the majority of CCOs worked in U-form organizations. For departments of 11-25 (43.0%), 51-100 (59.0%) and over 100 employees (67.0%), the majority of CCOs worked in Matrix form organizations. Certainly, the majority of CCOs worked in either of U-form or Matrix form organizations, but there isn't a clear relationship between size category and type of organization structure although the data suggests that the larger the department the tendency is to work in a Matrix form organization.

### **6.0 Conclusion**

The majority of CCOs, regardless of their organization's corporate structure, their sphere of operation or their PR/C department's vertical or horizontal structures, had responsibility for the same set of core functions or disciplines. The only relationship we found was between these core functions and whether a CCO led a single, integrated department. As one would assume, if the CCO did not lead such a department, the CCO did not have responsibility for the set of core functions – other wise the CCO did.

Although we found thresholds relating to when a CCO moved from a certain vertical strata to another, we did not find any relationship between size of the department and type of horizontal structure chosen to organize employees into units. Nor was there a correlation between department size and organizational structure.

Our data demonstrates that CCOs have many choices with regard to horizontal and

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

vertical organizational options and, most importantly, they don't limit their selection to one or two. Couple this with differences - in their possible spheres of operation, in the type of organizational structure they work in, with departmental integration and with departmental size – and one sees easily that the CCO has many variables to weigh and configures to suit a particular situation.

In answer to our research questions, the first answer is no to RQ 1: Are there specific structures/models for PR/C departments? For RQ 2 - Does department size affect PR/C department structures/models? - the answer is again no. We can only conclude that each PR/C department is unique to its situation. Each PR/C department is a hybrid. Perhaps not surprisingly, the conclusion that each department is a hybrid is similar to findings from other researchers: *“Organizations differ in the ways that they organize their communication disciplines”* (Korver & van Ruler, 2003, p. 197); *“Most public relations departments studied are organized by a combination of horizontal structures”* (L. Grunig, 1989, p. 191); *“combination of methods”* (Grunig & Hunt, 1984); and *“The structure of the communication function in the global organizations analysed is characterized by diversity and heterogeneity.”* (Zerfass & Klewes, 2014, p.1). The fact that our sample was global, taken from all five continents, suggests that a 'hybrid' is a universal way CCOs approach the question of optimal structural configuration. Subsequent papers from this program of research will address how PR/C departments and CCOs are positioned within organizational structures and how CCOs structure when they have international and/or global scope.

While much of the debate about organizational structure focuses on issues such as structural configuration and structural architecture, traditionally these arguments are associated with the situation found in larger sized organizations and departments. Indeed 'size of department' has generally been found to be a key

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

determining variable affecting the importance attached to structure, particularly in terms of the type structural architecture best suited to the department/function/organization, and ultimately, the relevance of structure. However, the evidence from this study seems to almost turn such arguments on their head - suggesting something of a 'structural paradox' in that with the relatively small sized PR/C departments found in the majority of organizations, structural architecture assumed just as much if not more importance to the functioning of the department. Here what emerges is the recognition that even in relatively small sized departments, how control and the distribution of responsibilities are allocated and managed horizontally is just as important as in larger sized departments. In this sense it can be argued that structure has an underlying relevance to the effective functioning of PR/C departments of all sizes. Certainly, employing a hybrid approach to organizing work of the department would seem feasible and relevant in any size department. In a larger department, it would be possible to employ specialists and then to organize these specialists into a greater number of specialized units, whether devoted to specific services or to internal clients or to external stakeholders or to general functions. On the other hand, in a smaller sized department of 25 employees or less, managing the work in a hybrid organizational structure may prove more difficult. There might be only one, or perhaps two, employees assigned to any specialized unit, be that unit organized by activity/service, stakeholder, internal client or process. In a smaller sized communication department, it might be more difficult to manage backfilling and to move employees to other units to provide support in peak periods. Communication departments with less than 25 employees might have to employ more generalists than specialists as well as to engage in considerably more cross-training across

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

specialties. That said, if a communication department of less than 25 employees attempts to be as 'full service' as a much larger communication department, the importance of organizational structure might take second seat to the importance of employee capabilities and competencies. But, as noted, most departments, regardless of size, attempt to be full service, in that they have a similar scope of primary responsibilities: external communication; internal communication, issues management; media relations; and web communication. Therefore, we suggest that further research is required, research that examines more finely how large and small departments organize employees within their chosen structure.

### Paradox

reached in this paper seem to support the notion that structure may be an important variable influencing the effectiveness with which all departments operate, almost irrespective of size. It can be argued that structure has an underlying relevance to the effective functioning of PR/C departments of all sizes, whether manifest in terms of formally configured architecture (e.g. in terms of 'U'-form, 'M'-form or more complex matrix structures), or the 'softer' power-related form of the division of specialized expertise architecture discussed above.

### **7.0 Acknowledgement:**

This research program was funded by a grant from the former Research Foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC). We thank them for their financial support.

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

The two authors of this paper thank the other four members of the original international research team for their contribution to the research program and to the report delivered to IABC. Subsequent papers will focus on the place of the PR/C department and CCO within the organizational structure and on the structure of the PR/C department with international scope and responsibilities.

### 8.0 References

- Berger, B. K., & Reber, B. H. (2013). Power and influence in public relations. In K. Sriramesh, A. Zerfass, & J-N Kim (Eds.). *Public Relations and Communication Management: Current trends and emerging topics* (pp. 178-192). New York, Routledge.
- Birkinshaw, J and Gupta,K. Clarifying the Distinctive Contributions of Ambidexterity to the Field of Organization Studies, *Journal of Management Studies*. 27 (4), 287-298.
- Burke, W. W., & Litwin, G. H. (1992). A casual model of organizational performance and change. *Journal of Management*, 18(3), 523-545.
- Chandler, A.D. Jr. (1962). *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Child, J. (1972). Organizational structure, environment and performance: the role of strategic choice. *Sociology*, 6, 1-22.
- Conrad, C., & Poole, M. S. (1998). *Strategic organizational communication: Into the twenty-first century*. Fort Worth , TX: Harcourt Brace.
- Cornelissen, J. P., Lock, A. R., & Gardiner, H. (2001). The organization of external communication disciplines: An integrative framework of dimensions and determinants. *International Journal of Advertising* 20(1), 67-88.
- Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, **14**, 532-50
- Galbraith, J., Downey, D., & Kates, A. (2002). *Designing dynamic organizations*. New York: Amacom.
- Gregory, A (2008) Competencies of senior communication practitioners in the UK : An initial study. *Public Relations Review* , 34(3) , pp.215- 223.
- Gregory, A. (2013). Institutionalization, organizations, and public relations. In K. Sriramesh, A. Zerfass, & J-N Kim (Eds.) *Public Relations and Communication Management: Current trends and emerging topics* (pp. 268-282). New York, Routledge.

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

- Grunig, J.E. (Ed.) (1992). *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grunig, L.A., Grunig, J. E., & Dozier, D. M. (2002). *Excellent Public Relations and Effective Organizations: A study of communication management in three countries*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Grunig, J.E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing Public Relations*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Grunig, L.A. (1989): Horizontal Structure in Public Relations: An Exploratory Study of Departmental Differentiation, *Public Relations Research Annual*, 1:1-4, 175-196
- Grunig, L.A. (1990): Power in the Public Relations Department, *Public Relations Research Annual*, 2:1-4, 115-155
- Hall, D.J. and Saias, M.A. (1980). Strategy Follows Structure! *Strategic Management Journal*, 1 (2) (April-June 1980) 149-163
- Hammersley, M. (1992). *What's wrong with ethnography?* London: Routledge & Kegan.
- Holtzhausen, D. (2002). The effects of a divisionalized and decentralized organizational structure on *Journal of Communication Management*, 6(4), 343-339.
- Kirk, J., & Miller, M. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Korver, F., & van Ruler, B. (2003). The relationship between corporate identity structures and communication structures. *Journal of Communication Management*. 7(3): 197-208.
- Koul, S. (2009). Communication structure of the public sector in India: An empirical analysis. *Corporate Communications : An International Journal*, 14(3), 320-332.
- Lawrence, P. R., & Lorsch, J. W. (1967). *Organization and environment*. Boston: Harvard Business School.
- Likely, F. (1998). Reorganize your communication function: ten structural models for the new look organization. *Strategic Communication Management* (August/September), 28-33.
- McPhee, R. D., & Poole, M. S. (2001). Organizational structures and configurations. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication*. Thousand Oaks , CA: Sage.

## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

Martha M. Lauzen and David M. Dozier, (1992). The Missing Link: The Public Relations Manager Role as a Mediator of Organizational Environments and Power Consequences for the Function, *Journal of Public Relations Research* 4 (Summer; 205-220

Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*. Second Edition. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Mintzberg, H. (1979). *The structuring of organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mintzberg, H. (1983). *Power in and around organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mintzberg, H. (1989). *Mintzberg on management: Inside our strategic world of organizations*. New York: Free Press.

Mintzberg, H. (1990). The design school: reconsidering the basic premises of strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 11, 171-195.

Moss, D.A, Newman, A.J., and DeSanto, B (2005) "What Do Communication Managers Do? Defining and Refining the Core Elements of Management in a Public Relations/Corporate Communication Context," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84 (Winter): 873-890.

Nisbett, R. E., & Ross, L. (1980). *Human interface: Strategies and shortcomings of social judgement*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Pascale, R., Athos, A. (1981) *The art of Japanese management*, London: Penguin

Prout, C. H. (1991). Organization and function of the corporate public relations department. In P. Lesley (Ed.). *Lesley's Handbook of Public Relations and Communications* pp.727-737.0 Chicago: Probus Publishing.

Pugh, D. S. (1973). The measurement of organization structures: Does context determine form? *Organizational Dynamics*, Spring, 19-34.

Robbins, S. P. (1990). *Organizational theory: Structure, design and applications* (3rd ed.). Englewood-Cliffs, NJ.

Saunders, M. Lewis, P, Thornhill, A (2009) *Research methods for business students* (5<sup>th</sup> Edition). Harlow: Pearson Education

Schneider (aka Grunig) L. A. (1985). The role of public relations in four organizational types. *Journalism Quarterly*, 62, 567-576.

Silverman, D (2011) *Interpreting qualitative data*(4<sup>th</sup> Edition) London : Sage

Silverstein, A. (1988). An Aristotelian resolution of the ideographic versus nomethic tension. *American Psychologist*, 43, 425-30.

Spicer, C. H. (1991). Communication Functions performed by public relations and marketing practitioners. *Public Relations Review* 17(3): 293-305.

Stanford, N. (2007). *Guide to organization design: Creating high performing and adaptable enterprises*. London: The Economist with Profile Books Ltd



## SIZE/STRUCTURE OF THE PR / COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

Stokes, A. (2005). A Study of the Relationship between Organizational Structure and Public Relations Roles. M.A. Thesis. University of South Florida.

De Wit, B. & Meyer, R. (2005), *Strategic Synthesis: Resolving strategy paradox to create competitive advantage*, 2nd edition, Thompson, London.

Henry, A. 2008, *Understanding Strategic Management*, 1st edition, Oxford University Press, New York.

Richard P. Rumelt, (1974) *Strategy, Structure, and Economic Performance*. Boston: Harvard Business School,

Van Leuven, J. (1991). Corporate organizing strategies and the scope of the public relations department. *Public Relations Review* 17(3): 279-291

Zerfass, A. (2010). Assuring rationality and transparency in corporate communications: Theoretical foundations and empirical findings on communication controlling and communication performance management. Paper presented at the 13th International Public Relations Research Conference. Proceedings, pp.947-966. Miami, FL; March.

Zerfass, A., & Franke, N. (2012). Enabling, Advising, Supporting, Executing: A Theoretical Framework for Internal Communication Consulting Within Organizations  
Paper presented at the Fifteenth Annual International Public Relations Research Conference. Proceedings, pp. 830-848. Miami, FL; March.

Enabling, Advising, Supporting, Executing:

A Theoretical Framework for Internal Communication Consulting Within Organizations

By

Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass, University of Leipzig, Department Communication Management and

Public Relations

Neele Franke, M.A. ,IBM Strategy & Transformation Management Consulting