

Commandment 7

Sagacious: Knowledgeable, Reflective and Shrewd

‘What is it you do, exactly?’ A frequently asked question of communication professionals by friends over dinner, or colleagues inside the company and, worryingly, sometimes senior managers. Will they ask the same of medical doctors, lawyers or accountants? Probably not. Does it mean that strategic communication and public relations needs more professionalisation? We will argue: yes. Using the ten-year data set from the European Communication Monitor alongside contemporary debates about professionalisation we are able to identify what it means to be a *professional* communicator in Europe today. And which problems practitioners encounter in executing their activities professionally. What are the drivers and opportunities practitioners today and tomorrow need to create and to work in excellent communication environments? What skills do they require? What do communication departments need to do to support the ongoing development of the individual professional?

We talk in this chapter and within the framework of this book about being *Sagacious* – as in the definition of this term – this involves being knowledgeable, demonstrating reflective wisdom, as well as shrewdness and at times applying appropriate mental discernment. We demonstrate these through detailed discussion and evidence in the chapter on educational experience and expectations as well as exploring the explicit competencies of high-performing communicators. Sagacity is a characteristic of an individual professional. It is one of the aspects of an ambitious professional that wants to perform in an excellent way. That is why being sagacious is the seventh commandment for excellent communication.

Before we go on let's establish the level of education of European professionals today, based on 2016 Monitor results.¹ The good news is they are a well-educated bunch. Today most practitioners (61 per cent) have a master's degree from a university, and even 8 per cent of the respondents have a doctorate. About 26 per cent has a bachelor's degree. The majority of the respondents thinks that a university education is a prerequisite for young people to start working in the field, as is mastering the English language.

These high levels of education have not changed in the last decade, and it suggests that the practice of strategic communication is a real profession. Only 5 per cent of respondents do not have an academic degree. But professionalisation does not stop after getting a degree. In communication management the idea of lifelong learning is very much appreciated and putting effort into your own development is regarded as essential. Let's first look a bit more closely at the concept of professionalisation.

Qualities of Professionalisation

Debates about professionalism and professions are detailed and far-reaching in many books and across numerous disciplines. That is also the case for strategic communication. To start on the same page here let us first take a look at the similar set of qualities that most professions, old and new, have.² These are (1) esoteric knowledge – theoretical or technical – not available to the general population; (2) commitment to social values such as health or justice; (3) national organisation to set standards, control membership, and liaise with a wider society; and (4) extra-strong moral commitment to support professional values. Strategic communication and public relations have this same set of qualities. They need to be developed, maintained and fostered. How are practitioners in Europe doing that? In three ways.

Three Dimensions of Professionalisation in Communication Management

Professionalisation in communication management has, according to practitioners in Europe, three dimensions: training the communication team, continuing to develop yourself and engaging in mentoring and networking (see [Fig. 27](#)).

¹ Zerfass et al. (2016), pp. 13–14.

² Cooper (2004), pp. 61–63.



Fig. 27 The three dimensions of professionalisation

These three dimensions of professionalisation contain all kinds of activities. Training the team means training communication skills and management know-how, new communicative tasks and learning to handle communication processes and business models in the organisation. The management of ‘high potentials’ and succession planning are also part of this keeping the team up to date.

Self-development is personal development and contributing to the much-needed ‘academisation’ of the field. Developing personal skills, knowledge and competences goes hand in hand with using, understanding and supporting research. This includes investing in an organisation’s own research, as is supporting academic research more generally in the field. Also, supporting the education of future professionals at universities and training institutes belongs to academisation. Building relationships with future professionals through internships and wider employer branding are also activities that contribute to professionalisation. Mentoring and networking involves benchmarking with other organisations as well as sharing best practices with them, for example, at conferences.

Women and young people find professionalisation in all its manifestations more important than men and older professionals. We also found differences in perceived value of professionalisation across different types of professionals. The so-called strategic facilitators think professionalisation, and especially self-development, is more important than do operational supporters and isolated experts (see Commandment 6 and [Fig. 23](#) for an explanation of the types of professionals).

A Positioning Problem for Public Relations

The European Communication Monitor shows some ongoing issues in communication management which can both foster and hinder achievements of professionalisation. Why is the public relations profession not as

professional as other fields? We found two barriers (1) the low status and reputation of the profession in general and (2) barriers within organisations (see [Box 33](#)).

Box 33 Barriers to professionalisation of strategic communication

1. Low status and reputation of the profession
2. Internal barriers

The low status of PR/communication associations and bodies is seen as problematic.³ The current codes of ethics do not suffice and there is a lack of formal accreditation systems for the field. Most practitioners see advantages of such systems, like those in place in the United Kingdom, Brazil and other countries.⁴ They think that the system will improve the reputation of the field but will not help much for developing the quality of the profession. Furthermore a shortage of up-to-date communication training and education is observed and practical experience is more highly valued than specific qualifications in communication/PR. All these elements are hindering the field's professionalisation. The low status of the field is felt by all but young people, with women, team members and more highly educated practitioners worrying more about this than others. Not surprisingly members of a professional association and consultants are also more concerned than others about this positioning problem for public relations. Many argue that other and somehow more advanced concepts like 'corporate communication', 'strategic communication' or 'integrated communication' should be used to create more trust in the profession. But this will be a long way to go.

The second barrier is an internal barrier. This consists of two elements: the lack of understanding of communication practice by top management and the difficulties professionals have in proving the impact of communication on an organisation's goals.⁵ Women perceive these internal barriers more than men, and these barriers are also related to the organisational culture. Professionals working in organisations with a so-called interactive or *systemised* culture perceive them more than those working in an organisation with an *integrated* culture (see 'Commandment 4: Embedded:

³ Zerfass et al. (2011), pp. 19–29.

⁴ Zerfass et al. (2012), pp. 36–41.

⁵ Zerfass et al. (2012), pp. 38.

Influence Through Communicative Leadership’ for an explanation of organisational cultures).

Necessary Competencies for Working in Communications

It’s a common cliché that, having learned, you never forget how to ride a bike. Cycling is a combination of skills and knowledge that enable most of us to safely and competently navigate the streets from childhood to old age. Therefore competence is a word we use frequently to describe our abilities to do a variety of day-to-day activities. But what does competence mean when we talk about our professional capabilities? Is it simply a case of once learned we never forget? We don’t need to maintain and develop the competency? Much is written about competencies for different disciplines and fields, particularly psychology and human resource management.

This debate is also highly relevant for the communications industries as well. Before we get into the specifics for strategic communication and public relations, we take a look at the concept of a competency.

What Is a Competency?

What is clear from studies of skills, knowledge and personal attributes is that they overlap in terminology and that there is a pattern forming about how skills, knowledge and personal attributes lead to broader competencies. Although some studies focused on the skills, knowledge and personal attributes of practitioners, there was no definitive research that brought these elements together in a single study until the ECOPSI research project funded by the European Union.⁶ It was conducted by universities from several European countries and Turkey.

The ECOPSI programme took the broad labels provided by prior research and used them to examine four roles in communications: internal communicator, social media expert, crisis communicator and the communication director role. The research observed how these roles are enacted across Europe, and the skills, knowledge and personal

⁶ Tench et al. (2013a, b); Tench and Moreno (2015).

attributes required, which subsequently contribute to the competencies needed by practitioners to fulfil these roles efficiently. This research helped to define the differences between skills, knowledge, personal attributes and competences for the field of communication management (see [Box 34](#) for the definitions). The research combined qualitative and quantitative research. In-depth interviews with professionals were conducted as well as a survey among professionals as part of the European Communication Monitor.

Box 34 Competencies in communication management – some definitions

- *Knowledge*
Can be defined as what practitioners are required to know in order to do their job/role effectively.⁷
- *Skills*
These are the things practitioners must be able to do to perform their job/role effectively.⁸ Identifying 'skill' will be a complex process, but a useful definition is: 'goal-directed, well-organised behaviour that is acquired through practice and performed with economy of effort'.⁹
- *Personal attributes*
Are defined in the literature as separate from competencies. The distinction being that personal attributes can determine how well a competency is performed, and secondly competencies can be taught while personal attributes are modelled or fostered.¹⁰
- *Competencies*
Are the sets of behaviours the person can perform. These behaviours are based on the application, combination and potential integration of knowledge and skills.¹¹

Researchers Lynn Maud Jeffrey and Margaret Ann Brunton from New Zealand highlight the advantage of studying competencies over roles. They say: 'as . . . roles outline tasks and responsibilities in the job description, in today's dynamic workplace these same roles are likely to change frequently. In contrast, competencies are the underlying foundational abilities that are integral to successfully carrying out the tasks and

⁷ PRSA (1999, 2006).

⁸ Katz and Kahn (1978); Goodman (2006); PRSA Public Relations Society of America (1999, 2006); Gregory (2008).

⁹ Proctor and Duttan (1995), p. 18.

¹⁰ Jeffrey and Brunton (2011), p. 69.

¹¹ Boyatzis (1982); Bartram (2012); Gregory (2008); Jeffrey and Brunton (2011).

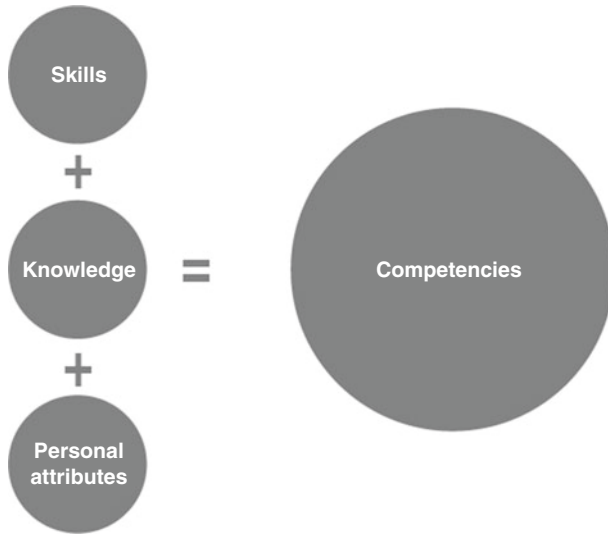


Fig. 28 Skills, knowledge and personal attributes contributing to competencies

responsibilities, and thus remain a stable blueprint for practice over time'.¹² Figure 28 illustrates how skills, knowledge and personal attributes combine to form competencies.¹³

The difficulty in establishing a workable definition of competencies has been discussed in the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP). Their aim was to clarify the concepts of knowledge, skills and competences.¹⁴ Competences provide a link between education (and skills) and job requirements (roles). Three professional competencies can be distinguished. First, 'conceptual competence' which refers to knowledge about an entire domain. Second 'procedural competence' which refers to the application of conceptual competence in a particular situation. Third 'performance competence' which is required to assess problems and select a suitable strategy for solving them.

In communication management competency is usually defined as conceptual competence and performance competence. In other words competencies refer either to the substantive ability to carry out a task or how practitioners should behave in order to perform in the role.

¹² Jeffrey and Brunton (2011), p. 61.

¹³ Adapted from Tench and Moreno (2015).

¹⁴ Winterton et al. (2005).

Competencies for communication practitioners can therefore be seen as having two categories¹⁵: (1) specific qualifications – those qualifications which are directly connected to the content of strategic communication as a topic and (2) unspecific qualifications – those qualifications, like leadership, which can be seen as a core competence for the performance of practitioners.

Four Qualifications for Communicators

Following the competence line of thinking about qualifications we asked the European professionals in the survey of the European Communication Monitor what they think the most important qualifications for communication management are. Four groups of qualifications could be retrieved from the answers. Communication professionals should (1) have a social and empathic antenna, (2) be able to produce and deliver effective messages, (3) have research skills and organisational management skills and (4) have knowledge about society (see [Box 35](#)).

Box 35 Four necessary qualifications for communication professionals

1. Social and empathic antenna
2. Producing and delivering effective messages
3. Research skills and organisational management skills
4. Knowledge about society

What do they mean? The *social and empathic antenna* has to do with the skill to coach others in their communication or put differently enabling others to communicate. It's also about handling power and coalition building between people inside and outside the organisation. This can mean initiating and moderating dialogues with a cross cultural and cross gender sensitivity. Furthermore it has to do with handling ethical issues and knowing about ethics and with managing projects globally.

In order to be able to *produce and deliver effective messages* it is necessary to have a lot of knowledge about the effects of traditional and new media, about

¹⁵ Szyszka (1995).

persuasion concepts and strategies but also about how to manage relationships inside and outside the organisation. The actual message production and delivering and presenting messages as a public speaker are also characteristics of this dimension.

Research and organisational management skills concern developing knowledge practical understanding about communication technologies and research to be able to perform effect studies as well as forecasting based on data retrieved. Also being able to interpret the data for insights about marketing, consumers and other stakeholders is part of this qualification. The management skills are handling organisational change and development, as well as finances, budgeting and accounting for the communication function of the organisation.

Knowledge about society is about thoroughly understanding the way society and politics work and how this is translated into legal requirements and issues for the organisation. Knowledge about the functioning of organisations in democratic societies and the rule of law are considered important here.

Although there is a high degree of agreement on these qualifications some differences stand out. In general women, professionals working in joint stock companies and strategic advisors consider these four qualifications more important than others in the field.

Commandments in Practice: Sagacious



Electrolux

Communications Playing a Key Part in Cross-Functional Innovation Initiatives

For the past decade or so, Electrolux has been on a journey to reshape the company from a traditional manufacturing and engineering company to become more consumer-focused and innovation-driven. We are well on our way, and with the digital revolution continuing to transform Electrolux and our industry, it is more important than ever to develop our thinking and approach in this area.

This journey is not only affecting how Electrolux does research and development or designs its products – it is also having a fundamental impact on the role of corporate communications, global marketing and PR. These functions are becoming integral to the innovation process at Electrolux, as we seek to broaden

our horizons and build new business in a period of change which we expect will affect the entire value chain and the competitive landscape of the appliance industry. Reflecting current strategies, breaking barriers and building knowledge to shape future markets is a key objective for communications nowadays. There are many questions that need to be answered. We know that a large number of home appliances will become connected in the coming years, but what are the benefits and what are consumers actually looking for in this area? How can we make online services a larger part of our revenue stream? How will we use new technologies like big data, artificial intelligence and machine learning to deliver more value to consumers? What other disruptive developments and opportunities wait around the corner?

Communications and related functions are playing a key part at Electrolux in providing useful answers to these questions, and in developing the solutions. To remain at the forefront of our industry, we have to look beyond the stakeholders traditionally involved in business and product development and build on the tribal knowledge of the entire company, as well as on other potential sources of insight.

Since 2012, Electrolux has operated with the 'Innovation Triangle' as a guiding concept, having teams from R&D, design and marketing collaborate in all product development projects. The marketeers have provided many of the insights and research necessary to ensure a new product will be preferred by consumers. With this integrated strategy in place, it's been a short step to where communications is deeply involved in various external and internal innovation initiatives. The aim is to tap into the collective wisdom of employees, consumers, experts, thought-leaders and other companies.

The first such initiative we introduced on a broader scale was the iJam (innovation jamming), a 72-hour brainstorming session for all of our employees, asking them to draft ideas for products and services on a specific theme and collaborate across functions and business areas to make them even better. The four iJams held since 2012 have generated almost 7,000 ideas, many of which have been integrated in our product portfolio planning. Not just cross-functional in its purpose, the iJam has been cross-functional also in terms of execution, with strategic internal communication one key aspect of the project.

Another project worth mentioning in this context is Electrolux Ideas Lab, a global online-based consumer competition that aims to trigger creativity and out of the box thinking around matters relating to the home and everyday life. Is this project about generating PR, consumer insights or new product ideas? For Electrolux, the first two of these are the main benefits, while useful ideas will be a welcome side effect.

On the other end of the spectrum, the Electrolux Open Innovation organisation is tasked with managing incoming ideas from potential business partners, as well as with scouting the wider market for relevant innovations. Not in any traditional sense a communications activity, Open Innovation is nevertheless an important carrier of corporate messages for Electrolux.

As we can see from the above, communications and business operations are becoming more tightly knit together at Electrolux, with one truly supporting the other and vice versa. It may well be that this is the first step on another transformational journey; one where communications functions broaden the scope of their usefulness beyond stakeholder and leadership communications, to become drivers of new and relevant business development in their own right.

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About Electrolux

Electrolux is a global leader in home appliances and appliances for professional use, selling more than 60 million products to customers in 150 countries every year. The company focuses on innovations that are thoughtfully designed, based on extensive consumer insight.

Advancing a Career in Communication

What do you have to do to advance a career in strategic communication and public relations? What skills and knowledge do you need for boosting such a career? According to the European Communication Monitor, two aspects are important: permanent academic education (prior to the job and on the job) and keeping in touch with the labour market.¹⁶ This last aspect consists not only of moving to a new employer now and then, but also networking among peers and colleagues, job rotation in the same organisation and mentoring by senior colleagues.

Geographically there are regional differences in thinking about career development. In Southern Europe, networking is more important than in Northern Europe. Other marked regional differences are job rotation, which is seen as more important in the East and South as well as specifically in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, and internships, which are less valued in Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

On the more concrete level of skills and knowledge we asked European professionals what skills and knowledge they found important to develop further to advance their career. Their answers showed two groups of skills to be developed once you are working in communications: (1) business and management skills and (2) communication skills (see [Box 36](#)).

Box 36 Two areas of professional skills and knowledge development

1. Business and management skills
2. Communicative skills

¹⁶Zerfass et al. (2014), pp. 44–59.

The business and management skills include practical business skills such as budgeting, dealing with invoices, contracts and taxation and knowledge about markets, products and competitors. Management skills like decision-making, planning and organising were considered important and so was knowledge about current affairs, social and political trends, ethics and legal affairs. The older the professional communicator is the less important he or she thinks the further development of these skills are. Women perceive the development of these skills as less important than men anyway and so do unit leaders and team members compared with heads of departments. Juniors value the development of these skills more than seniors, people with a master's degree more than people without an academic degree, joint stock company workers less than consultants which all clearly highlight variance in the assessment of these skills.

The advancement of communication skills includes developing written and oral message production capabilities, building more knowledge about theories and principles of communication, audiences, programme development, as well as campaigning and evaluation research. Here also women perceive developing these skills as less important than their male counterparts do. Unit leaders and team members think it more important than heads of the department, the same goes for junior and mid-career professionals compared to seniors.

Important Management Skills for Career Advancement

Delving deeper into the management skills professionals think are important for career advancement we learn that there are two categories of skills professionals think about: (1) substantive strategic skills and (2) process and procedural skills. What do they mean and how important are they and for whom?

Substantive strategic skills are about the management of information (mainly data analysis), strategic positioning of the organisation and linking communication to business goals. Planning activities like developing communication concepts, tools and activity plans are also part of this area of skills. Does everybody think the same about the importance of these skills? No, they do not.¹⁷ Older professionals think the development of these skills

¹⁷ Empirical results on development needs and qualifications are reported in Zerfass et al. (2014), pp. 76–99; Zerfass et al. (2016), pp. 84–97.

is less necessary than young professionals and so do unit leaders, team members and people with other functions compared to heads of departments. Junior and mid-career professionals think it less important than seniors and people with an academic degree think this is more important than people without a degree. Consultants working with agencies consider these skills more important than people working in organisations and people working in an entrepreneurial and systemised culture think this less important than people who are part of integrated cultures.

The second component of management skills, process and procedural, are a combination of bureaucratic and communication skills. Bureaucratic skills include establishing structures and processes like job charts, procedures and workflows, managing human resources, managing financial resources and implementing control systems. Communication skills entail things like managing relationships in shaping the organisation's culture, managing informal networks and building trust. Leading people and groups in the sharing of knowledge and ideas and motivating them are also part of the process and procedural skills that professionals want to develop. Again not everybody thinks the same about the importance of those skills. Women think they are more important than men and so do heads of departments and senior professionals. In non-profit organisations these skills are considered less important than in agencies and the same goes for organisations with interactive, entrepreneurial and systemised cultures compared to integrated cultures.

Mentoring Is Key to Career Development

Mentoring is not a new phenomenon but it is increasingly discussed and applied as a form of career development across management disciplines.¹⁸ It has been acknowledged as one of the key career development and advancement tools in organisations.¹⁹ Also mentorship is recognised as a critical on-the-job training development tool for career success for both men and women.²⁰

The greatest problem can be defining when mentoring is taking place. Evaluation of over 200 academic journal articles identifies that most discussion about mentoring is conceptual, anecdotal and empirical rather than

¹⁸ Tench et al. (2016).

¹⁹ Simonetti et al. (1999).

²⁰ Hunt and Michael (1983), p. 483.

theoretical. Their findings also conclude that there is a lack of consensus on definitions for mentoring and mentor; however, researchers continue to examine various facets of mentoring such as types of mentoring, mentoring phases, potential benefits, diversity and alternatives to mentoring.²¹ What does that mean for mentoring in communication management?

We found that almost two-thirds of the European professionals consider ‘mentoring by senior colleagues’ as (very) important and that only a third of respondents had never had a mentor.²² Almost 20 per cent had searched for a mentor on their own, and about 14 per cent of the PR professionals took part in a mentoring programme offered by their employer. Meanwhile only a few professionals were engaged in an external mentoring programme.

Thinking in a more professional way is the major outcome of mentoring. It has a positive impact on empowerment, career motivation and career progression and on feeling more professional. Professionals who had been both a mentor and mentee are more satisfied in their job, followed by those who had only been mentors and those who had only been mentees. So being a mentor also has a positive impact on their working life. Recent research identified that 10 out of 40 professional PR associations across the world had a mentoring programme. Most were established in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which is relatively late given that mentoring has been recognised as a development tool for young professionals since the 1960s.²³ Mentoring programmes have a strategic value not only for the mentors and the mentees but also for the organisation.

We also found that women are less likely to have a mentor than men. Despite the evidence of success for women in mentoring relationships it is disappointing that fewer women took part in mentoring than men.²⁴

Generally professions, including law and accountancy, identify mentoring and networking as essential individual career strategies which help individuals to manage and develop their careers through socialisation.²⁵ Also from a broader perspective, co-presence, familiarity and face-to-face interactions

²¹ Friday et al. (2004), p. 629.

²² Zerfass et al. (2014), pp. 44, 54–59.

²³ Kiesenbauer, Burkert and Zerfass (2015).

²⁴ Zerfass et al. (2014), p. 55.

²⁵ Anderson-Gough et al. (2006); Hanlon (1994, 1998).

inherent in mentoring create trust²⁶ and structures which can stabilise business relationships.²⁷

In support of previous research²⁸ mentoring is seen as important by a clear majority of communication professionals. Interestingly, both the youngest and the oldest or most experienced practitioners name mentoring as one of the top three aspects of career development. Career sponsorship is one of the primary functions fulfilled by a mentor and mentors are usually found at higher organisational levels.²⁹ Typically, they will discuss options and dilemmas with mentees and advance their careers in organisations through providing sponsorship, coaching, exposure and visibility, protection and challenging work assignments. As sponsors, mentors actively nominate mentees for projects and promotions, publicly advocate them for their abilities and champion their behaviours. As coaches, mentors provide access to information that is available only to higher-level members of the organisation, share career histories, suggest specific strategies to achieve career goals and provide assistance in job-related skills and knowledge.

Mentoring and job satisfaction are mutually related and communication professionals who have been mentors as well as mentees during their career are most satisfied in their job, followed by those who had been mentors and those who had only been mentees. Several positive effects of mentoring are identified. First of all, mentoring makes mentees think and feel more professional. Moreover, mentors convey personal values, work ethics and strategies for achieving career goals. Thinking of the future, tailor-made mentoring programmes for communicators are a valuable approach to develop communication functions in organisations and the profession at large.

What It Means to be Sagacious

We have discussed a range of key issues that help us to understand and frame the role of the ‘ideal’ professional practitioner in the complex world of the professional communicator in Europe. The findings demonstrate

²⁶ Giddens (1991).

²⁷ Ouchi (1980).

²⁸ Allen and Eby (2010).

²⁹ Seibert et al. (2001).

that the demands and expectations on the individual are immense and intense. How do they respond to the needs of their employer, colleagues, peers and indeed their own aspirations for personal development, which are myriad and potentially conflicting. Individuals are faced with many pressures and challenges. To respond there are many ways and means of accessing information and knowledge as well as guidance to cope with these development challenges.

Being *sagacious* nowadays is necessary for an excellent communication professional. It means being knowledgeable, having reflective wisdom and the ability to judge well. It requires individual understanding about communication processes as well as the effects of communication at a societal, organisational and individual level. This inevitably has a direct impact for you as an individual practitioner as well as your communication peers and other members of the organisation you work in. Educating yourself and others throughout the working life, mentoring the next generation and networking with your peers are effective ways of being and staying sagacious.

We are seeing clear recognition of the value of help from peers through mentoring as well as the direct success and contribution to the individual of engaging in formal and informal networking. When we think of high performance in this context we therefore see pathways to success from the role models of practitioners over the last decade.

Also the field has to acknowledge, recognise and work with the PR professional practice arena as a feminised one. This has implications on how we manage each other, interact and also see the future development of the field. The implications of a feminised profession will emerge in further discussions in later chapters of the book.

In summary the ideal or 'excellent' practitioner will be able to manage the complex, dynamic context and functions of their organisation as they will possess the cognitive, technical, social and communication skills to gain the confidence of colleagues from other sectors and functions. They will facilitate communication within their organisation, as well as with external publics; they will be able to advise senior management using their higher-level skills as well as oversee more detailed hands-on activity (not least because they will have a clear understanding of relevant theories and their value to practice); they will be committed to lifelong learning and continual professional development, as well as being active in the professional body; and they will also educate others about the value of PR and communications and in this way help reinforce the position of public relations and strategic communication as a viable and valued profession. In essence the message to all is clear, 'be professional'.

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