

Do Public Relations Graduates Exhibit Work-Ready Intelligence?

Pamela Bourland-Davis (in memoriam), Georgia Southern University
Elizabeth L. Toth, University of Maryland
Charles "Chuck" Lubbers, University of South Dakota
Hua Jiang, Syracuse University

ABSTRACT

Stage 1 of Professional Identity provides a basis to explore how college helps prepare students for entering the workforce, especially given the prevalence of Generation Z issues represented in the professional literature in the public relations field. The literature review examines Gen Z along with studies of practitioners and students and their views of their preparation. Using in-depth interviews with practitioners, this study explored qualitatively what public relations practitioners consider "work ready" to mean. The interviewees reflected on elements related to Knowledge, Skills and Abilities, and one example was in the area of writing with some expressing satisfaction and others feeling students still need work. Beyond the KSAs, however, were a number of mentions of a variety of "social intelligence" concepts ranging from being curious to interpersonal abilities. In particular, practitioners wanted to see the new hires ready to participate, ask questions, and be engaged. One other area which practitioners identified was the need for experience – in volunteer work, internships, and generally being engaged in extracurricular organizations. Suggestions focus on the curriculum and classroom – especially in helping develop immersive experiences for the students so that they can demonstrate and have confidence in their "Work Ready Intelligence."

Keywords: work ready intelligence, social intelligence,
Generation Z, workplace readiness

Introduction

The Commission on Public Relations Education's¹ (CPRE) signature report quantitative surveys (1999, 2006, 2018, 2023b) have highlighted that practitioners expected more competencies than were found in new public relations hires. The CPRE 1999 Port of Entry report concluded that, on the whole, practitioners were not satisfied that desirable knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) were found in graduates (CPRE, 1999). A conclusion from the Fast Forward (2018) report was that practitioners sampled both in the 2006 Professional Bond Report as well as in the 2018 report "didn't see the needed skills of writing; research and analytics; media relations and ability to communicate; critical thinking; and problem-solving in entry-level hires" (CPRE, 2018, p. 53). Practitioners surveyed for the CPRE 2023 Report continued to rate, lower than educators rated, the KSAs they found in entry-level practitioners, a difference perhaps because practitioners' perceptions may be of the new generation of incoming practitioners/employees rather than in their classroom performances (CPRE, 2023b, p. 38).

Prior to the publication of the Commission on Public Relations' 2023 Report, the CPRE research committee conducted two focus groups with Arthur Page Society members to learn from their employer vantage points how they were thinking about the proposed seven Report topic areas (CPRE, 2023b, p. 19). Also in 2022, CPRE's Summit Organizing Committee conducted online focus groups, resulting in key learnings about the needs and expectations of new professionals entering the public relations workplace (CPRE 2023a).

¹ The Commission on Public Relations Education's membership represents 24 practitioner and educator national and international associations. For 50+ years, it's mission has been to provide public relations education standards for successful preparation of students to enter and advance in their public relations careers online.

This study picks up from prior studies to delve deeper into how students may or may not be seen as work-ready, using in-depth interviews with PR practitioners to explore what they are expecting from new hires from college and what it takes to be perceived as work-ready or competent. To begin, the literature review will consider current definitions of work-ready, while also looking at research that considers practitioner and early career or student views of their job preparation. To understand these elements, consideration is also given to Generation Z (Gen Z), born 1995 to 2010 or 1997 to 2012 (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2023a, p. 29), and to socialization in the workplace.

Literature Review

Work-Ready (WR)

Public relations educators, like educators in other fields of higher education, are tasked with developing future employees who can make meaningful contributions in the workplace upon graduation. The knowledge, skills, and abilities cultivated in the classroom and through extracurricular activities are designed to create a work-ready employee. But how do we know that students are work-ready? Orr et al. (2023), in their systematic review of the use of the work-ready concept in articles related to Australian higher education and the results, "... confirmed differences in conceptualization of WR and that the majority of studies adopted a multidimensional measurement approach, comprising discipline-specific and generic skills" (p. 1714). Peersia et al. (2024) grouped prior work-ready research into three approaches: demand-, equilibrium-, and supply-oriented (p. 1830). According to Peersia et al. (2024), performance-based definitions of work-ready include: demonstrated proficiencies; having personal qualities; people skills/ professional abilities; a set of essential behaviors and skills; likelihood of finding employment; and suitability in relation to workplace requirements.

Generation Z

From public relations to human resources surveys, researchers have questioned whether graduates are truly work-ready despite having specific, career-focused education. In some cases, studies raise the question of the value of higher education. In other cases, questions arise on the abilities – beyond college – of Gen Z. Another paradox is emerging as well, where Gen Z is touted as having the needed “fresh perspectives, digital fluency and bold ambitions” (Martinez, 2025, para. 1), but at the same time, many are being terminated soon after being hired.

Martinez (2025) listed the following key issues for employers of Gen Z workers: they may not have the soft skills needed for workplace readiness, Gen Z tends to job hop, Gen Z appreciates diversity and mental health, which may not align with more traditional cultures, and Gen Z may engage less when in unstructured remote or hybrid jobs. Tyler (2024) similarly indicated that not considering Gen Z’s expectations can lead to “disengagement, high turnover, and a failure to capitalize on Gen Z’s fresh perspectives and skills” (para. 16).

On the other hand, Martinez (2025), reported that Gen Z employees perceive the workplace as rigid and not inviting of their input, as not addressing mental health appropriately, as not open to “rapid career growth, meaningful work and competitive compensation” (para. 12), and as not supporting training and mentorship. Crist (2024) highlighted Gen Z as focused on job security and work-life balance, with an interest in skill development to provide greater security. At the same time, Gen Z would question organizational culture, expressing “family” themes that would blur the lines between work and life. Tyler (2024) argued for employers to recognize Gen Z values. With “the importance of flexible work environments, publicly advocating for societal change, and diversity, equity, and inclusion – employers can attract and retain Gen Z talent and foster a dynamic and innovative organizational culture” (para. 16).

Competency Conceptually Defined - Workplace Readiness

Generally, public relations scholars have equated the term “competencies” with the human resources categories of knowledge, skills, and abilities (Federal Employees’ Career Development Center, 2023; McNamara, 2018; Flynn, 2014).

Practitioner Views on Competency

One line of research describing practitioner views of preferred KSAs for entry-level hires comes from analyses of job ads. For example, Brunner et al. (2018) content analyzed 199 entry-level job ads posted to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) job center to learn what degrees were sought, what knowledge/skills related to writing formats, social media platforms, design tools, management tasks, and soft skills were sought in employment ads. Among their findings were “hard skills, such as writing, but also soft skill abilities, such as time management, deadline orientation, and collaboration” (Brunner et al., 2018, p. 3). Meganck et al. (2020) in their analysis of skills required in 1,000 PR job ads, reported that the most frequently required skills were “written communication skills, organizational skills, administrative software skills, social/digital media skills, leadership abilities, ability to work in teams, and graphic design” (p. 5). They described as “soft skills” those of organizational skills, leadership abilities, and the ability to work in teams. They recognized that while educators can influence the development of soft skills, they are difficult to teach and may be things that will be “learned over time” (Meganck et al., 2020, p. 6).

Bernhard and Russmann (2023, 2024), having reviewed several United States studies of public relations job ads, conducted a longitudinal automated semantic analysis of 336,639 job ads between 2015 and 2020 in Austria and Germany, finding similarities with US studies in demanded skills (Bernhard & Russmann, 2024). Their analysis continued to categorize job ad requirements as either hard or soft skills. Soft skills categories included social skills, such as ethics, emotional intelligence, or

patience (Bernhard & Russmann, 2024). Additional soft skills listed were “methodological skills (professional appearance, being decisive or able to deal with stress); general communication soft skills; presentation skills; work ethics; creativity; teamwork; work methods (multi-tasking, hands-on mentality); analytical skills; innovating thinking; and working with clients” (Bernhard & Russmann, 2024, p. 630).

Lubbers et al. (2024) offer a different perspective on the study of job advertisements in public relations. Instead of focusing on the KSAs expected of the applicants, their research determined if the position descriptions were addressing ten expectations and priorities of the Gen Z employee. The mean score for the ads was only 2.7 out of ten, indicating that employers were not addressing the topics important to Gen Z applicants for entry-level public relations positions. These studies of job ads and quantitative opinions of practitioners provide descriptions of the ideal candidate, with numerous requirements, generally categorized as hard and soft skills, but lacking in qualitative analyses or prioritization of skills needed immediately, that is, work-ready.

Another line of research to learn from public relations practitioners about their expectations for future PR employees has been based on surveys. Krishna et al. (2020), for example, reported on the purposive/convenience perceptions of PRWeek subscribers and members of other PR-related organizations, who overall ranked writing, listening, and creative thinking as the most important skills of aspiring public relations practitioners. The authors noted that these rankings closely followed CPRE’s Fast Forward report (DiStaso, 2019). They also found some differences in perceptions across early-career, mid-level, and senior-level practitioners, although writing was essential across all experience groups, as were the soft skills of ability to lead teams and to develop talent. Based on their findings, Krishna et al. (2020) concluded that public relations

curricula should include coursework on “listening, digital storytelling, communicating effectively in today’s environment of misinformation, leadership, how to work effectively with PR firms and other outside consultants, and most importantly, business acumen” (p. 53).

Public relations practitioner expectations of future entry-level employees were reported in the Commission on Public Relations Education’s 2023 Report. Among the top knowledge traits practitioners desired were ethics, cultural perspectives, social issues, and DEI (diversity, equality, inclusion). Among the top skills rated by practitioners as desired in entry-level employees were communication, writing, and social media management. Practitioners’ perceptions of graduates’ public relations abilities prioritized problem-solving, creative thinking, analytical thinking, and strategic planning. For all of these knowledge, skills, and abilities traits desired by practitioners, their perceptions of whether these KSAs were found were rated lower (CPRE, 2023b).

Students’ & Early Career Practitioners’ Perceptions of Workplace Readiness & Socialization

Few studies have provided insights from students and early-career practitioners on workplace readiness. Waymer et al. (2018) conducted qualitative interviews of 24 young public relations professionals (six were white and 18 were under-represented racial or ethnic individuals). These early career professionals reported on what elements of their undergraduate public relations education were beneficial to their career preparation and what skills and knowledge they wished they’d learned more about. From their early career employment, they perceived that most beneficial to their preparation were writing-intensive and experiential learning classes. However, they reported that if they had more technical skills and applied business knowledge, they would have had an easier time transitioning from college to work. In their reporting, they saw more benefit in immersive socialization opportunities in order to interact better

with professionals “for and/or attempting to secure employment” (Waymer et al., 2018, p. 124), and having enough networking opportunities.

Another theme in the interviews concerned the under-representation of males in their public relations courses, which made adjustment to a more gender representative workplace challenging. The Waymer et al. (2018) inductive approach to assessing career readiness centered on key agents of socialization, providing observations from the field as opposed to quantitative analyses that sought statistical competency representations.

Providing a different perspective on early career individuals in a variety of positions in Romania, Ioan (2023) identified three ways early career individuals develop meaning at work, including finding work that is personally meaningful, learning new skills, and considering how their work benefits others. Ioan adapted Goffman’s phases to include Stage 1, lasting about three months, when the employee learns on the job, both in terms of information needed and norms. Stage 2, from one to three years, is the confidence developing stage and the time when the individual becomes part of the group. Stage 3 is a time of routinized work, which typically leads to a new job, and/or burnout. A variation of this is offered by Cohen-Scali (2003), who highlighted two dimensions that influence what is described as Professional Identity. Specifically, there are two phases of socialization, with the initial one being through family and/or school, and the second being the process of becoming part of a work setting.

Another Romanian-based study included interviews of over 400 Romanian student representatives of Gen Z, with no exclusion by fields of study, some with and without work experience (Botezat et al., 2023). Their results align with current thinking on Gen Z, such as their interest in work-life balance, although that was less important for the students with at least two years of work experience. The students also valued meaningful work, especially important to lower turnover.

Emotional Intelligence Theory

As a baseline, exploration of early career work includes the work of Goffman (1959) who outlines three stages in what he identified as the moral career of young employees. The stages included adapting and learning, gaining confidence, and establishing routines. Other related concepts include emotional and social intelligence.

Zhang and Adegboha (2022) define emotional intelligence or emotional quotient as “a wide range of competencies to know and manage one’s emotions, self-motivate, recognize emotions in others, and handle social relationships” (p. 1). Based on their empirical review of public relations literature addressing emotional intelligence, they recommended that public relations education offer courses in emotional intelligence, social skills, and listening skills (p. 7).

Another emerging perspective is in the area of social intelligence which is centered in communication and interpersonal relations, including listening, impression management, and adapting to different roles (Riggio, 2014). The elements appear to enact Goffman’s (1959) concept of individuals as performers:

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess. (p.17).

If one considers the performer in this case as the new hire, especially one coming out of school, the observers clearly have any number of expectations of the degreed individual. But first impressions don’t always live out in the daily exchanges in the workplace – especially when that workplace may also exist virtually, and when a generation of digital natives who have also experienced learning around the time of COVID-19 are put into a workforce of colleagues from different generations.

Research Questions

The previous literature on Gen Z, work readiness, social intelligence, and emotional intelligence theories provided context for the following research questions. These RQs focused our theorizing on the Stage 1 socialization in terms of how college prepared students/graduates for their Professional Identity and work in general (Cohen-Scali, 2003). The RQs adopted a multidimensional framework to determine what performance-based criteria, as exemplified by Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs), are used to characterize a work-ready public relations graduate, as well as considered graduate preparation and social and emotional abilities.

1. In what ways do practitioners observe or experience new hires as competent (KSAs, etc.)?
 - 1 a. How do practitioners define “work-ready”?
 - 1 b. Do traditional routes to increasing competency (e.g., internships, master’s degrees) make a difference in student work readiness?
2. How did public relations practitioners reflect on their workplace experiences with Gen Z?
3. In what ways did practitioners recommend improving competency/work readiness of new graduates?

Method

We recognize that work is constituted largely through interactions (Ioan, 2023), and any study of the workplace relies on those social relationships. To capture that essence, we relied on a series of personal, in-depth interviews, which also provided a perspective not limited to a fixed-choice style of survey.

In-depth interviews were conducted under IRB approval from Georgia Southern University. The interviewees were primarily members of the Research Panel² of the Commission on Public Relations Education, individuals who were specifically invited to participate in the CPRE 2023 study. Members were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate; 16 agreed. These participants were mid- to senior-career public relations practitioners. With all the interviewees representing mid-career to senior-level practitioners, an additional interview was conducted to ensure an early-career voice was included. The early-career interviewee had less than 5 years' experience. The interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes, and were conducted by the authors and graduate students³. The interviews were conducted using Zoom meetings, with initial transcripts created by Zoom and then revised by the interviewer.

The interview transcripts were then reviewed by the authors. Analysis of the data sets involved an iterative process, first assessing the broader themes emerging as they related to the research questions, highlighting what Owen (1984) referred to as recurrence (of themes), repetition (key words or phrases), and forcefulness (emphasis used). The authors begin the data analysis through open-coding of the interview transcripts for participant conversations that reflected work readiness, KSAs, and competencies, as discussed in the literature review, and using initial research questions as a guide. After a first round of identifying themes and concepts as close as possible to participant verbatim responses through the use of the constant-comparative method, the authors conducted axial coding on the data, resulting in thematic categories (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Lindlof and Taylor (2019) note that "axial

² The CPRE Panel is an established group of practitioners who have volunteered to participate in CPRE surveys.

³ The authors thank graduate students, including Trevor Sconyers, who participated in the training and conducted some of the interviews and students in the Professional Communication and Leadership course at Georgia Southern University.

coding brings previously separate categories (or concepts) together under a new thematic category” (p. 324). The authors continued to use previous conceptualizations of work readiness, KSAs, and competencies found in the literature review as a guide for their analysis and interpretation. The resulting themes represent a consensus interpretation by the authors.

Results and Discussion

Those agreeing to participate in the interviews included 12 female practitioners and five male practitioners, with nine currently working at firms and several indicating they had worked in a variety of other settings as well. The others were in corporate, university, nonprofit, and religious-based public relations practices. The mean number of years of public relations experience was 22.5, with a range of two to 45, clearly a sample representing senior leadership. In addition, 16 had undergraduate degrees, with eight in public relations/communication, three in journalism, three in English, and one in Urban Affairs, with one not reporting. Of the respondents, six had pursued or were pursuing master’s degrees, and three had certifications.

The following highlights their responses to questions related to student or new hire preparation in the Stage 1 socialization of their professional identity and their impressions of student readiness.

RQ1: In what ways do practitioners observe or experience new hires as competent (KSAs, etc.)?

Strengths

Participants shared their observations and experiences about new hires’ competencies by thinking about their strengths. These observations fell into four themes: *knowledge competencies*; *skills competencies*; *soft skills competencies*; and *abilities competencies*. *Knowledge competencies* seen by participants in new hires included understanding public relations “and having a passion for it,” having a baseline knowledge of press releases and key messaging documents; understanding the industry

standpoint; knowing what public relations looks like in practice; “knowing what we are doing;” and being versed in social media.

Skills competencies reported in new hires included writing. Some participants said: “able to write and communicate,” “solid foundation in writing,” and “writing/marketing – to look at the numbers and turn them into a story.” Participants also indicated that “writing has typically been better” and general writing “ok,” still competent in their experience but less so. Other skills competencies reported in new hires were research skills; “design chops;” technical skills, such as with the internet and camera, and strategic communication skills.

Soft skills competencies in new hires observed by the participants included listening skills; creativity; teamwork; prioritization of tasks; getting the work done; self-motivation; empathy; learning mindset; curiosity mindset; enthusiasm for work; having flexibility; desire to be mentored; attitude vs. skills; maturity and poise; and not having fear in asking leadership questions when needed. One participant reported that there was a “sense of the new hire wanting to learn, wanting to grow, and having an understanding of how to go about it.”

Abilities competencies in new hires cited by participants included: having a point of view “that was interesting;” “ability to think outside the box;” ability to listen and take instruction; to take direction and work independently; problem-solving; ability to be responsive; great research ability; and “taking a task like media research or topic research and at least doing a first draft of that.” Another participant said of a new hire: “ability to ask questions or willingness to ask questions. Our best entry-level person had no problem picking up the phone and calling to ask a question.”

Weaknesses

Participants also found weaknesses in new hires that fell into the knowledge, skills, soft skills, and abilities categories. Participants experienced new hires who lacked knowledge of how the business works

or general business knowledge. Skills weaknesses of new hires observed by the participants included “a decline in writing ability”; weaknesses in presentation skills/speaking; being able to communicate in a succinct manner; needing better writing styles; and weakness in analytical skills or “how to tie outputs to outcomes.” Soft skills lacking in new hires observed by participants included observations of new hires being afraid to ask for help; lacking in listening skills; lacking in punctuality; having trepidation, that is “hiding behind the keyboard;” and knowing when to be quiet. One participant said, “Entry-level people want to throw out a bunch of ideas without really saying what is the strategy – What is the end goal– my reason for this?” Another soft skill lacking that was cited was knowing how to advocate for their needs. One interviewee said, “If you can’t get to work or schedule differently, being able to communicate that, and if you are struggling, that’s another thing, or if you have done something, to be able to communicate it in a professional way.” Other soft skills lacking, as cited, were being unaware of the culture and the ability to find his/her voice and stand up for themselves. New hire’s abilities and weaknesses observed by participants were the ability to think strategically, the ability to ask the right questions; lacking ability to pitch the media; and lacking ability to take direction.

RQ 1a: How do practitioners define “work-ready”?

Our participants’ discussions of “work-ready” centered on their expectations (demands) of new hires. Three work readiness expectations categories were “foundational skills,” “knowledge,” and “abilities.” Foundational skills referred to communication, editing, and writing. Participants expected graduates to have knowledge of the difference between the classroom and practice, know the day-to-day of interacting with clients or your employer or know how to function in a professional environment; understand the basics of business before they get to the workplace; and understand how the organization works. Participants

spoke of these work-ready abilities: “taking in everything fired in your direction;” open-mindedness; willingness or an openness to learning; and being able to contribute “regardless of skill; or add value on day one, “meaning that you understand the responsibilities and are ready to make an impact.” One participant said, “when someone is work-ready, they’re able to start working on those projects that you really need.” In terms of the “supply” approach to work readiness, the participants valued prior internship or immersive experiences.

RQ 1b: Do traditional routes to increasing competency (e.g., internships, master’s degrees) make a difference in student work readiness?

When considering what students could do to prepare for their entry-level jobs, the respondents highlighted a number of expected methods, including *internships, continued education, student group (organizational) work, and what would be considered class-immersive experiences*, along with some references to KSAs.

Internships were important in terms of the “world of work” understanding it offered. At least one respondent indicated that any internship was helpful and it did not have to be a public relations-specific internship for one to learn about communication. Other interviewees highlighted the internship process as “looking for potential hires,” and as such, “we try to create as much of a real working experience for the intern as possible,” including demonstrating the agency culture. Interviewees recognized that internships were helpful for the student to determine areas of interest.

One of the interviewees reflected on his own internship experience, and shared that it occurred in a small office, but he learned “how important it is to collaborate with people who are a whole lot smarter than I am.” Within the small shop, he noted, “Professors were telling me things, but he (the site supervisor) was asking me questions, and I learned a great deal from him.”

Interviewees also recognized their own roles in the internship process as a teacher or guide, including helping students understand that it's "not about the mess up. It's how you recover." This interviewee noted the incremental learning, such as giving interns projects that encourage strategic thinking, but not asking for a strategic plan on day one. This internship supervisor described giving the student the opportunity to work on a plan with guidance initially. The premise here was an intentional process that would allow the intern to be successful. Another supervisor recognized that 10-15 years ago, the intern might be "the master of the clipbook." Now she talks about working with the intern to help come up with the strategy, and then "build out the tactics to execute it."

Another interviewee described successful interns as the ones who "are curious and are willing to take on any project even if it's not what they signed up to do." Another practitioner highlighted that experience can come in other forms such as working on a communication committee for a nonprofit or helping a local church promote an event. "That experience is powerful because it (develops)... a certain level of understanding and as you build on that foundation of understanding, it lets you take the next step."

The concept of *continued education* included seeking a master's degree or APR certification. One interviewee did specify that other certificates are often sought by students, such as those offered by social media platforms, but stressed that "it's about the inquiry," not just the certificate. One interviewee pointed out that a degree reflects "that a person can complete something. It shows that they're willing to work ... but it doesn't show me that they're any smarter or any better qualified for the job."

In general, it appeared that most of the interviewees who had continued their education tended to value it more. One specifically pursued an MA "to help with data analytics," and "to be taken seriously."

Another identified that a master's degree could be beneficial for strategy and research. Similarly, another interviewee said that a master's could be helpful to learning about an area within one's career, while another emphasized that it really depended on the individual. That was highlighted by another senior-level interviewee who indicated that he read and learned on his own rather than through any degree. A couple of interviewees placed value on an MBA in helping anyone. And one highlighted the benefits of APR while also recognizing that career advancement may have come a bit more quickly with an advanced degree that would allow one to be more strategic earlier on in the career. But he also noted that APR provided the same support for developing strategic thinking, and provided a recognition that helped him secure his current position.

One practitioner emphasized that the timing of graduate work was important and that it would likely be more valuable after one had experience. "It's really helped me move from tactical to strategic leadership.... As a graduate student, you know about how to apply, how to do or how to run a research program. How to take it and apply it in a corporate setting. I don't know that you would have the work experience that gives the organizational context – how this theory applies.... So, I think a master's degree is very important; it adds a ton of value, particularly for someone mid-career."

In the classroom, practitioners highlighted *immersive experiences* such as the need for students to work in teams. One practitioner focused on the ability to get in front of others. Other recommendations included situational role play, interpersonal communication training, and generally being self-aware enough to be proficient in communication. Another explained that "If I'm bringing somebody to a meeting, I want them to participate. I'll give them guidance on where not to overstep, but you don't want somebody in the room if they're not contributing something." Another interviewee felt the classroom was an opportunity to provide a

greater understanding of the PR industry, “different sectors... types of work.” This individual felt that “there’s a lot of turnover in early careers because students have a tendency to think of PR as a broad bucket, and it doesn’t fit with what they ... expected.” One practitioner extended this idea to having guest speakers and field trips, and finding opportunities for engagement in the sense of “we’ve got to pull it out of the pages and do it.”

Others highlighted *KSAs* in the areas of ethics, news experience, news writing, and Associated Press style. Another interviewee stressed the benefits of courses such as world history and religious studies to help one become more well-rounded. She also related this to having a business sense, where “if you work for a publicly traded company, [you] know the ins and outs of what that means,” you know “how that affects what can and can’t be said in social media.” Another practitioner raised the issue of needing graduates to have “an early adopter mindset.” In particular, this individual wanted students to understand algorithms and AI, not just for use, but for collaborating with organizational departments such as legal and regulatory so that Artificial Intelligence, for example, is used in a thoughtful way.

Students who were involved in *groups*, whether the Public Relations Student Society or other groups, including sororities and fraternities, on campus could obtain volunteer activity experience, and see how meetings are managed. It also gave them the chance to get in front of others and develop a better understanding of “the nuances of human behavior.”

Mentorships were also mentioned, but most references focused on once someone was employed rather than aligning with the Stage 1 school-level preparation for soon-to-be graduates.

RQ2: How did public relations practitioners reflect on their workplace experiences with Gen Z?

While not asked directly, none of the interviewees mentioned Generation Z specifically at any point when answering the questions. Given the prominence of research and writing about the nature of Gen Z as our most recent generation of employees, the lack of reference to the group was surprising, although some of the interviewers would have fallen within this generation. Further analysis of the responses indicated that there were some references to “entry-level” or “new” employees, as well as a few references to generational differences. For example, one practitioner noted that, “we make a lot of assumptions about understanding the culture of the workplace, and I do think that’s probably a real challenge for new hires.” The practitioner noted that because of the pandemic lockdown, Zoom meetings, etc., some nuances of the workplace would need to be learned after entering the field.

When discussing the new hires, several practitioners noted themes discussed in other sections of the results, such as a need for the development of soft skills. Two of the practitioners suggested that these entry-level employees come with “tactical skills” but need to develop the ability to think strategically. Another said, “You guys are totally much more digital” while another recognized that “earlier career [individuals] don’t like to read the news.” Other practitioners indicated that current generations are not up on their manners, while another referenced the higher turnover in early careers. In an effort to help new hires learn soft skills, workplace skills and strategic thinking, several practitioners advocated for incremental development of knowledge, skills and abilities, and once on the job, careful, deliberative mentorship programs

RQ3: In what ways did practitioners recommend for improving competency/work readiness of new graduates?

When participants answered questions about indicators of competencies for public relations, the conversations broadened

into recommendations for new hires that centered on three themes: *preparation; on-the-job actions; and lifelong learning*. The *preparation* theme included recommendations fitting into the KSA competencies categories. New hires should know the difference between the classroom and the boardroom. One interviewee said, “Have a broad sense of the future, of what is going on in the business world.” This comment was reflected in recommendations to learn business, finance, and strategic planning. One participant wanted new hires to “be very focused on media and the business of media, how media is covered,” specifically, “read the news to understand how coverage gets pulled together.” Participants were of the opinion that new hires should know change management, reputation management, how to operate in a crisis, and knowing what research looks like. Participants encouraged preparing for new and newer digital, such as AI, and continued to reinforce the need for writing skills: “writing, writing, writing.” In the categories of abilities, in addition to “think strategically,” participants spoke of the need for prior experience. One participant said, “agency experience.” Another argued for the “right balance: experience, knowledge, and confidence.” A third participant argued that a new hire should have a degree and real-life experience. “I think any kind of degree complied with some real-life experience is the killer combination.”

Participants made recommendations for how to achieve competency *on the job*. Three categories of recommendations fit the KSA categories of knowledge, soft skills, and hard skills. We used the “knowledge” label for recommendations when participants’ comments started with the word learn, although their advice suggested that the learning was directed toward improving skills and abilities. Participants advised learning the corporate voice or assuming the brand voice. They advised learning and “doing things specific to your situation. Context is always changing.” They advised learning how to participate in a meeting

and understanding the need to modulate. They advised learning the culture of the workplace. One participant said,

What is the culture like? Do we talk around the water cooler? Are we expected to respond to emails after work? I don't think we can assume that new PR pros will understand them because they are coming to the workplace after [the COVID-19] lockdown.

Soft skills participants directed new hires to include being willing to learn new things and to ask a lot of questions. One participant said, "stay curious and adaptable. Be curious. You have to ask questions." Participants advised new hires to "deliver quality and take advantage of opportunities. One participant encouraged, "get the types of assignments that get closer to the core business." Also mentioned was to continue to improve skills. One participant said: "keep working on communication skills, presenting to clients, colleagues, journalists, and stakeholders.

Finally, a third category of on-the-job actions was *lifelong learning*. Rather than learning to succeed by developing workplace knowledge, skills, and abilities, this category represented a willingness to grow, to be a lifelong learner. One participant said, "soft skills continue to be important and continue to grow throughout your life, if a person is diligent and willing to grow."

Conclusions

In the practitioners' sampled conversations, three key elements stood out: KSAs, workplace behavior, socialization, and experience. In the qualitative interview format, the foundation of public relations education, as represented by KSAs, is still critical. One of the questions raised was the degree of writing skills present, with some indicating the new hires could write, and others suggesting they were not as impressed with the writing. This is a part of public relations professional education preparation that educators can take on most readily. Although teaching how to write is challenging, there are metrics against which to assess writing competencies. Additional areas to consider in teaching writing are

discussions of organizational styles and brand voices, and the continued relevance of AP style, as these were mentioned specifically.

The second area of conversation found in discussions seemed much less a part of the public relations curriculum than of new hires' abilities or workplace behaviors, such as willingness to learn, ability to advocate for themselves professionally through asking questions, taking direction, understanding, and adapting to the workplace culture. Stage One of Professional Identity highlights what one learns from family and college that prepares one for the workplace. Practitioners noted everything from manners to speaking out – appropriately – to participating in discussions. These are elements that one would classify as soft skills, situated in a broader context of interpersonal communication, areas not usually considered in program assessments and course student learning outcomes. Soft skills, also described as social intelligence, include practitioner comments about being curious and being an early adopter, elements the practitioners had inculcated within themselves, with some choosing additional degrees to further develop their strategic planning and research/data analysis.

Based on the authors' experience, faculty generally focus on the KSAs, self-limiting the full spectrum of what it means to be work-ready. The practitioners here highlighted social intelligence, more than emotional intelligence. Many educators may feel unprepared to teach social intelligence as a part of professional public relations preparation, and some may consider "soft skills" as less important. Stage 1 includes parental and college foundations for Professional Identity, and we clearly cannot assume parents are providing the needed levels of social intelligence within the professional public relations context. Waymer et al. (2018) recommended more immersive socialization opportunities, which could help address this area of soft skills, and would be beneficial to students.

Outside of KSA foundations and soft skills, experience was another common thread, whether that experience came from internships,

and/or extracurricular, or volunteer experiences. The experience was important in providing a better sense of how “work works.” The application of KSAs and the development of one’s Professional Identity were critical to developing the “work-ready” candidate. But KSAs have a built-in bias toward rationality that is generally agreed upon. We propose, then, that Work Readiness in public relations is more than the KSAs and the degree. As important as what we call “Work-Readiness Intelligence” is that it represents KSAs, Social Intelligence, and Application/Experience. Simplified, the formula would be: $\text{Work-Readiness Intelligence} = \text{KSAs} + \text{Application/Experience} + \text{Social Intelligence}$.

From our assessments of the practitioner interviews, the current public relations degree prepares graduates more for the foundational KSAs. But if students don’t take the opportunities to get experience or apply those foundations, practitioner expectations will likely not be met. At the same time, perceptions of the “performer,” the graduate, and his or her abilities could clearly be mitigated by perceptions of their abilities to fit in and adapt to the workplace more quickly. While the practitioners did not name Gen Z specifically, their suggestions related to “new hires” indicated the need for increased attention to the socialization process to build upon the tactical skills they acquired prior to their employment. Building up student Professional Identity means giving them a strong platform represented by Work Readiness Intelligence. Educators are encouraged to continue their work in integrating the KSAs through the coursework, to further develop the immersive classroom socialization experiences as part of public relations programs, and to continue to help students identify opportunities for experience beyond the classroom. As one participant said, “know what public relations looks like in practice.”

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