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Paths to Upper Level Positions in Public Relations

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PATHS TO UPPER LEVEL POSITIONS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

by

Patrick J. Bishop

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Educational Leadership, Research, and Technology
Advisor: Jianping Shen, Ph.D.

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PATHS TO UPPER-LEVEL POSITIONS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Patrick J. Bishop, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2010

Preparation for a career in the field of public relations (PR) is based on a set of unique core competencies typically found in liberal arts. Though PR professionals rarely gain business degrees, they acquire knowledge, skills, perspectives, and strategies well-suited to executive-level positions in business. Additionally, managerial positions in PR offer greater potential for influence than task-oriented roles with limited strategic opportunity.

This study examines the advancement of PR practitioners into upper-level management positions in business. The purpose of this research is to identify factors and behaviors that contribute to, or hinder, PR professional’s attainment of top-management positions. This study is important because of the size, scope, and growth of the PR industry and the service it provides society.

This empirical phenomenological study examined the actual, lived experience of PR trained professionals who attained top-level management positions in business. By exploring the career advancement experiences of PR practitioners who have achieved such positions, this study sheds light on the ways in which PR professionals draw upon the training and expertise gained throughout their career.
A conceptual framework was created for this study based upon an extensive literature review process revealing three categories: (a) career path patterns, (b) facilitating factors for success, and (c) barriers to career advancement. Several factors were identified within each category, providing a coding scheme to analyze data. 90-minute interviews were scheduled with an elite sampling of twenty upper-level PR professionals throughout West Michigan. Descriptive statistics and direct quotes from participant narratives were used to demonstrate key findings. Mention frequency patterns were used to identify major themes, as were co-occurrence rules from a card sort ranking activity. Resumes were used to support the data and storytelling was used to demonstrate and flesh out concluding results.

The findings reveal 17 factors of influence for career advancement in PR among the twenty participants. Nine factors are within the career path patterns category, six are facilitating factors, and the final two are barriers to career advancement. There were several findings for this study in regards to these factors individually, as well as their inter-relatedness to a universal career path progression.
DEDICATION

It is with deep affection and appreciation that I dedicate this dissertation and doctoral work to my wife, daughter, and parents.

To Mom and Dad. Thank you for giving me a great early education at LC and MSU. Thank you for the non-stop, fun-loving days of Camp Bishop Ha-ha. Thank you for always being there, even when I took the more difficult path. Thank you for your generosity and encouragement. You two are the best and I love you.

To my Carlie. You were four when the seeds of this journey were first planted and you alone walked this path with me day-after-day, year-after-year, from start to finish. Thank you for being my upbeat, happy companion and greatest inspiration. You gave me hope in my toughest hours. Carlie-o! You are my joy and the reason my childlike spirit still burns. You give me ginormous, immeasurable happiness; no father could be more pleased. I am so proud and grateful to have you as my daughter. As you continue your journey, have courage and let the still small voice be your guide.

To my Paulie. Words cannot express the love and gratitude I feel for you. You believed in me (everyday, everyway) and never questioned my resolve or motivation. You have been my most ardent fan and best friend. Thank you for your unwavering support through the many hours, late nights, long drives, and endless work. Thank you for listening, for your kind words of affirmation, warm affection, hot tea and coffee cake, for making me laugh, and for reaching the deepest places of my heart. You make me a better man and my soul delights in the knowledge of growing old with you. Grab the wine my baby-cutie and let’s enjoy the sunset... at the cottage!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you God. It all belongs to you; help me be a good steward.

To the twenty; my sincere thanks! Without you, there would be no dissertation.

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Thank you to my colleagues and administrators at Ferris State University, particularly Dr. Michael Cooper and the myriad of friends and contemporaries who showed support. Thanks also to my part-time RAs Joey and Beth.

Sending a big, heartfelt thanks to all my wonderful family, friends, and students who walked this road with me the past several years. Sláinte!

Patrick J. Bishop
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CHAPTER I
OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This study examines the careers of public relations (PR) professionals in business settings with particular focus on their experience in managerial and executive positions. Given that most public relations practitioners are degreed through liberal arts programs rather than business schools, some professional sources are raising questions regarding the role of specific business preparation in the career development of PR professionals (Cobb, 2008; Drake, 2006; Guiniven, 2009; Kerr, 2008; Oestreicher, 2009; Rousch, 2006). In the current economic climate, public relations practitioners (like other career professionals) are finding themselves in a rapidly shifting employment and career environment.

It is unclear how the evolving economy either does or does not favor the professional preparation typical for public relations graduates. Additionally, it is not clear how the absence of specific business coursework in the majority of public relations degree programs does or will emerge as a noteworthy element in career development experience for people with those degrees (Auffermann, 2009; Cobb, 2008; Galloway, 2007; Sweeney, 2008). This study delves further into these issues by examining the real-life, lived experiences of public relations professionals in business management positions.

Study Background

Shift Happens is the title of a popular YouTube video created by educators and bloggers Karl Fisch and Scott McLeod in 2007. Among other things, these authors state that we are living in a dynamic, ever-changing, innovative, technological, information
age. Fisch and McLeod claim that there is more data in one week’s worth of the *New York Times* than in the knowledge a person accumulated during an entire lifetime in the eighteenth century. One of Fisch and McLeod’s more frequently referenced statements is that educators are preparing students for jobs that do not yet exist, using technologies that have not been invented, in order to solve problems which are currently unknown.

According to Fisch and McLeod, many of today’s college majors did not even exist ten years ago and the projected top ten in-demand jobs for 2010 did not exist in 2004. Clearly, as Fisch and McLeod’s work demonstrates, this generation is living in exponential times.

Not only are new job markets requiring new skills, but people are not staying with the same job over time. The U.S. Department of Labor (2008) states that today’s graduates will have ten-to-fourteen jobs by the time they are thirty-eight-years-old. People entering the work place are not only changing jobs quickly, they are also changing employers. Twenty-five percent of the workforce has been with their employer less than one year and fifty percent of employees have been at their current workplace for less than five years.

On the other side of this, many older professionals are staying in their occupations longer. As reported by Katie Sweeney in the Spring 2008 edition of *The Public Relations Strategist*, “The oldest members of the 78 million-strong baby boomer generation are already in their early 60s and nearing typical retirement age” (p. 10). Sweeney adds, as many as 70 percent plan to continue working because of want or need. Change is coming however. In her article about baby boomer retirements, Sweeny interviewed Carol Orsborn, global PR executive and author, who states that American businesses will face a
labor shortage of more than 35 million workers by 2030. This is partly due to an expanding talent gap created by less Gen Xers and Millennials entering the work place.

J.R. Hipple and Felix Verdigets (2008) agree, pointing to a significant event happening right now in the work place, “By some estimates, 76 million workers will retire by 2020, accounting for approximately 40 percent of the current work force” (p. 16). Elise Waxenberg (2007), author for the leadership magazine *Fast Company*, states that workers often have four or five different occupations, and many more job changes over the life of their career. The changing work force, combined with other external factors, will continue to challenge nearly all professionals with changes in job responsibilities throughout their careers.

In public relations, practitioners are used to change. It is quite often at the heart of one’s responsibilities. A primary function of PR professionals is to help mediate organizational change whether in crisis, through media relations, event planning, or in numerous situations which are at once, urgent and important (Broom, 2009). Change is inherent to public relations.

The field of public relations itself has seen many changes in the past ten decades since its inception as a profession and social science. It has evolved significantly from its days of press agentry, growing in sophistication, gaining respect, and becoming a valued player at the corporate table (Brown, 2004). With the increased need and speed for information, customers and organizations are requiring more skilled communicators who understand the new environment of communication technology, public opinion research, and business insight (Cobb, 2008).
Key Concepts of the Study

This study looks at the origins of public relations and how it became its own distinct and growing discipline of theory and practice. Today, preparation for the field of PR is based on a set of unique core competencies that are usually aggregated into liberal arts degree programs (The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006). Though PR professionals are rarely prepared in business school degree programs, they do acquire knowledge, skills, perspectives, and strategies that are well suited to executive-level positions in business, e.g., communication and strategic planning (Cobb, 2008; Jacobs, 2008). In fact, for PR professionals to work at the peak of their professional preparation, mid-and-top-level managerial and executive positions offer greater potential for influence and contribution than entry, or low-level managerial positions with limited opportunity to influence the organization at a strategic level (Kerr, 2008; Weiner, 2008).

This study examines some issues currently under discussion within the public relations field regarding advancement into mid-and-upper-level management positions in business. Specifically, this study will address assumptions that suggest public relations professionals may experience career development, advancement, performance, and/or compensation challenges in business management positions (Cobb, 2008; Gillen, 2008). Further, this study explores assumptions that the absence of explicit business coursework in the planned program of study for most public relations professionals plays a role in their access to and advancement in business management positions (Elsasser, 2008). Ultimately, the purpose of this research is to identify factors and behaviors that contribute to PR professional’s attainment of top management positions. Before looking at specific research questions, let us explore more background material on the purposed study.
A Young Profession

Public relations is generally considered the practice of influence, particularly as it relates to shaping public opinion (Bernays, 2004). While this is a crude generalization of PR (which will be refined further in this study) there is no argument that the roots of public relations date back to some of the first-recorded writings of historical significance (Seitel, 2007). One of the most famous, and relevant works of public relations, was written approximately 2,500 years ago, when Aristotle delivered his masterpiece called *Rhetoric*. In his work, Aristotle identified tactics of persuasion and public speaking which are still taught today.

While there are points in history when some core concepts of public relations were used or developed, the actual practice and social science of PR is relatively new. The term “public relations” was not used until 1897 (Seitel, 2007). The first public relations firm opened in 1900 in Boston, Massachusetts and the first lobbying firm (considered a subset of PR) started in Washington in 1902. It was not until 1923 that Edward Bernays wrote the first book on public relations. In the same year, Bernays also taught the first course on public relations at New York University (Broom, 2009).

Related, Yet Distinct Field of Study

Early public relations practice was closely aligned with several related fields such as journalism, advertising, marketing, and promotions. Public relations began its trek to becoming a distinct field of study through the efforts of Sigmund Freud’s most famous nephew, Edward Bernays. Bernays, long considered one of the great fathers of modern public relations, was appointed by President Woodrow Wilson to the Creel Committee in 1914 to help mobilize public opinion in support of the war. He was the first to call
himself a public relations counselor (Doorley & Garcia, 2007) and considered himself an applied anthropologist. He taught the first class on public relations in 1923 at New York University and published the first book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. Bernays described public relations as the vocation of the social scientist who advises clients on social attitudes and on the actions to take to win support of the public upon whom the existence of the client depends (Bernays, 2004). Bernays was a pioneer and his work is the foundational benchmark that established public relations as a distinct field of study and practice.

Indeed, United States Census data demonstrate that public relations is now one of the fastest growing fields of employment in the United States. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007), employment of public relations specialists is expected to grow faster than average (18-26%) for all occupations through 2014.

*Public Relations and Liberal Arts*

While the number of people entering public relations continues to grow rapidly, the barriers to entry in public relations are relatively low (Ovaitt, 2006). Nearly anyone with a communication, graphic design, creative writing, advertising, journalism, marketing, or other related liberal arts degree, can find a job in public relations (Seitel, 2007). Author and well-known PR practitioner, Michael Levine (2008), states that “most colleges and universities offer degrees in communications and public relations” (p. 3). He adds that this is because “P.R. is a respectable calling. The money’s good, the status is high, the demand for services is strong” (p. 4).
As a result, most PR professionals have little-to-no formalized business qualifications. In an article by Dr. John Guiniven, for *Public Relations Tactics* (2006), Noam Gelfond, senior vice president for the world-renowned public relations agency Ketchum located in Washington, D.C., states that there are only a few PR programs that are academically challenging. According to *The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education* (2006), public relations education is in the infant stages, still searching for a home, and often its legitimacy, in academe. In a review of 297 universities who host a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter, 266 (89.5%) of these PR programs are based in communication, journalism, or similar departments and colleges. Further review of the remaining 31 PR programs indicates scant business focus, with only one program in the nation offering a PR degree in business (PRSSA, 2009).

**Competency in PR Linked to Core Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities**

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is the world’s largest membership organization of PR professionals. There are more than 32,000 practitioner and student members in over 100 chapters across the United States (PRSA, 2009). PRSA offers Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) which measures demonstrated competency in core PR knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). The list is extensive and includes relevant material in public relations such as ethics, law, history, theory, research, management, technology, media relations, and communication skills. The accreditation process is quite rigorous, including an exam, an interview with three accredited industry professionals, and a review of career production examples.
The knowledge and skills measured by the APR process are also promoted by *The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education* (2006). This report includes a detailed list of knowledge and skills to be taught in undergraduate public relations curriculum. The extensive list is consistent with the accreditation process and includes items such as law, ethics, history, theory, management, research, writing, and public speaking. Oddly, although business competencies are expected by the public relations industry and membership organization, there are little to no required formal business focused courses for PR students.

**PR Tactics Versus Strategy**

The wide-ranging list of core knowledge, skills, and abilities identified for effective public relations can be categorized into two primary functions of task and management (Seitel, 2007). PR tasks are usually done at the tactical level and include responsibilities such as making phone calls, writing press releases, designing flyers, and setting up events (to name a few). While these functions are critical to the success of PR initiatives, it is the strategic planning behind the tactics which ultimately determines success (Wilson & Ogden, 2008).

In *Public Relations Today: Managing Competition and Conflict*, the authors state that today’s practitioner must understand how communication efforts affect the competitive position of the employer (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008). The question of why a particular tactic is implemented is significantly more important than the tactic itself. Strategy is proactive preparation and it sets the direction for the company. Strategy determines goals, measurable objectives, targeted publics, and follows this all up with unbiased evaluation (Harris & Whalen, 2006). Strategy serves to integrate all
activities to the accomplishment of the goals and objectives. Strategies are results-oriented, and they are the primary responsibility of managers. The authors of *Public Relations Today* add that this “earned influence leads to greater respect and better rewards in everything from salary to personal satisfaction” (Cameron et. al., p. 28).

Consistent public relations research has demonstrated that for PR professionals to be most effective, PR must move beyond the tactical functions and be performed at the strategic, management level (Harris & Whalen, 2006). Public relations educators and industry leaders have long advocated for PR professionals to be elevated from task to management as a critical executive function. The role of public relations at the management level is to act as the conscience of the company. In other words, as exemplified by early practitioners like Edward Bernays and Ivy Ledbetter Lee, the PR professional should be the right-hand person of the president or CEO, consulting him or her on the right course of action based in high ethical standards and public expectations (Cobb, 2008).

Experienced practitioner Neva Dixon Rountree says PR practitioners must forge successful outcomes with decision makers and key stakeholders. She says that successful PR people must understand balance sheets, income statements, budgets, and identify what is most important for the business. Rountree adds that leaders in public relations “have a vision, set the direction, and inspire others to take the journey with you” (2004, p. 15). Dr. Robert Heath, a University of Houston professor of public relations with more than 35-years of experience, states that PR professionals must be willing to challenge the actions of executives when it is wrong. Public relations should be “the first and best source of information on all matters relevant to their organizations” (Elison, 2007, p. 8).
A Lack of Representation at the Executive Level

Industry leaders and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) have high standards for public relations managers, particularly those who have reached the pinnacle of the profession. In 2007, the Public Relations Society of America celebrated its 60th anniversary. In her state of the society report, national PRSA chair and CEO Rhoda Weiss, states that it is the practitioner’s role to be the first source for expertise on issues affecting business, education and society (Weiss, 2008).

There is significant discussion in the field of public relations that there are not enough PR practitioners in top management (Cobb, 2008). In 2008, Chrysler Corporation moved the PR function under human resources, renewing a hotly contested debate regarding the location of PR in a business’s organizational chart. In the summer of 2008, The Public Relations Strategist magazine devoted an entire issue to the topic of where PR belongs in the organizational hierarchy. One article asks, “Why aren’t more chief communicators reporting to the CEO?” (p. 8). Another article indicates that, through research, the PR function is stronger when reporting to the CEO. Interestingly, the article goes on to state that, “the correlation doesn’t prove causality…” (p. 9). In other words, it is unclear if moving public relations closer to the CEO is the primary reason PR is stronger.

Industry Notes a Lack of Business Skills Among PR Professionals

“The need for the PR profession to deliver value and drive positive return-on-investment has never been greater” (Weiner, 2009, p. 29). For years, industry has been reporting a lack of business skills among public relations practitioners. Alan Kelly, president and CEO of Applied Communications Group in Washington, D.C. states that
the current perceptual characteristics of PR “will not adequately guide public relations to the business-critical consulting position” (Brown, 2004, p. 31). Public relations professional, Julie Brown (2004), says that success in public relations requires increased flexibility in an ever-changing business environment. Brown states, “Today’s professionals and recent graduates are expected to not only understand communications, but also know the business and how their role affects the bottom line” (p. 31). National PRSSA president Jeremy Bridgman agrees, stating that PR professionals must learn to speak the language of business, not just of communication (Brown).

*Lack of Business Skills Equals Lack of Executive Representation*

There is an assumption in the field of public relations that a lack of business skills is the primary reason for impediments to career advancement (Elsasser, 2008). According to business writer and author, William Holstein, in an interview for *The Public Relations Strategist*, “The communications people have to be much more trained and steeped in the business so they will be able to engage CEOs about the direction of the core business. A lot of PR people have not been able to do that” (Ellasser, 2008, p. 15). Holstein goes on to say that only 10 or 15 percent of companies understand and require competency in business skills for communication specialists.

Also in an interview for *The Public Relations Strategist*, Travis Parman, General Motor’s Northeast region public relations manager said, ultimately, PR is about business (Cobb, 2008). He states that “however creative a PR strategy might be, it won’t be greeted warmly by any employer if it doesn’t offer a good return on investment” (p. 15). It is assumed that this lack of business savvy is what holds PR professionals back in their career advancement. “Know the business” is the main bullet point in a 2008 article from
The Public Relations Strategist on how to be prepared for career advancement in PR (p. 8). Communication skills are becoming more and more important to the executive suite, but it appears that CEOs lack the confidence in communication professionals to understand business in general, and more specifically, their company. In seeming acknowledgment of this point, The Public Relations Strategist recently released an entire issue titled The Business Case for Public Relations. The goal of this new initiative is “to drive industry recognition and growth by helping professionals educate key stakeholders about public relations’ functions and outcomes, demonstrate its strategic value and enhance its reputation” (Elsasser, 2009, p. 1).

Focus of the Study

The field of public relations has a short history as a profession, but it has a long and rich history in the shaping of public opinion dating back more than two thousand years to the Greek era. The profession is growing rapidly; however, most PR professionals do not have formalized business training. It is has been determined that public relations is most effective as a management function, with communication, influence, and strategy important considerations for executives. However, to be fully recognized as a player at the executive level, public relations professionals must understand the language of business. The following section continues to frame the purpose and significance of this study, leading to the research questions and methodology for data collection and analysis.

The Problem

This study is interested in the lived career paths of public relations practitioners who have gained top-level positions within the business industry. Because most PR
programs in higher education are located in liberal arts, there are questions regarding the role of business preparation in career development.

It is unknown if PR practitioners are under-represented at the executive level in business. It is also unknown if PR professionals are handicapped in their ability to perform in mid-and-top level executive positions due to deficits in business knowledge or skill. If PR professionals are experiencing performance challenges in executive level positions due to limited or no explicit business preparation, it is unknown how that is associated with challenges in career advancement. It is clear that public relations professionals aspire to top management positions, but uncertain how people who attain these levels get there and how the issue of their professional preparation plays out in their career advancement experience.

The Purpose

While this study does not assess the issue of under-representation, or test the assumption that PR professionals who serve in mid-and-upper-level management or executive positions in business manifest specific performance deficits due to lack of explicit business coursework in their professional degree preparation, this study does examine the actual experiences of PR trained professionals who attain top-level management or executive positions in business settings. By exploring the career advancement experiences of public relations practitioners who have achieved such positions in business, this study sheds some light on the ways in which PR professionals draw upon their PR training and offset their lack of degree in order to work in business management.
To explore these issues, this study identifies, describes, and categorizes conditions, strategies, and behaviors that contribute to the attainment of top management positions in business by PR professionals. Additionally, this study describes challenges PR professionals encounter in their career advancement or their performance in executive or top-level management roles. Finally, this study describes how PR professionals respond to challenges and achieve success in their positions.

**Research Questions**

In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions were developed:

R1: How do public relations professionals who advance to top-level management positions in business prepare and promote themselves for those positions?

R2: What facilitating factors do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?

R3: What challenges and barriers do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?

**Conceptual Framework of the Study**

Previous research has uncovered three emerging categories in the advancement to upper management in public relations. While these concepts are examined in further detail in Chapter Two, the over-arching concepts are career patterns, facilitators for success, and barriers to success. The diagram in Figure 1 represents how these factors influence the path to a top-level position in public relations.
Career path patterns are significant events, activities, or situations that a professional experiences throughout his or her employment. Research of career path patterns demonstrates the importance of factors such as entry-level positions, cross-function training, job mobility, and education level as key indicators of success (Ellis, 1984; Frydman, 2006; Reitman & Shneer, 2003). Internships, employment in larger organizations, and a traditional career path round out the components of significant career path patterns (Brandon, 1997; Casado, 1991; Chen, 2005; Kim, 1995; Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006; Yee, 2007).

*Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Paths to Top Management in Public Relations*
The factors that enhance advancement are called facilitators. These are the traits that help a professional gain a position in upper management in public relations. The facilitators that are most influential are personal traits, skills such as writing, management ability, ethics, business knowledge, experience, and role models (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Berger, Meng, & Heyman, 2009; Berger, Reber, & Heyman, 2007; Blum & Tremarco, 2008; Boynton, 2006; Meng & Heyman, 2009; Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006).

Barriers to advancement are just as they sound; they are impediments to attaining an executive-level position in public relations. From the research, the key barriers to success are poor education, poor skills, negative perceptions of PR, gender, and lack of business skills (Aldoory & Toth, 2004; Auffermann, 2009; Budd, 2000; Callison, 2004; Cole, 2009; DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2006; Elsasser, 2009; Fall & Hughes, 2009; Gower & Reber, 2006; Grunig, 2006; Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006; Kim & Johnson, 2009; McClenehan, 2006). These three over-arching categories and the relationship among them form the conceptual framework for this study.

Significance of the Study

This study is important because of the size, scope, and growth of the public relations industry, the service it provides to society, and its influence on public relations education. There are more than 200 public relations programs in higher education nationwide (Guiniven, 2006) and over 250,000 public relations practitioners in the United States (Broom, 2009). U.S. businesses spend more than $10 billion annually on public relations and roughly another $4 billion globally (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth,
The U.S. Department of Labor has identified public relations as one of the fastest growing industries (2007).

In addition to the sheer volume and growth opportunity of PR, the field is also in the process of defining itself. It is still a relatively young field and further research is needed to determine parameters. This study helps address some common assumptions and identify areas of potential for effective education and career advancement. Additionally, by better understanding the challenges of elite PR professionals and identifying how they secure, manage, and adapt to positions in business leadership, we can better determine the needs of students and entry-level practitioners to further enhance their career moves.

**Methodology Overview**

For the purpose of this study, I used a phenomenological qualitative research approach. The goal of this method is to more fully understand the experiences of the individual (Creswell, 2003). This method was chosen to identify the essence of an individual’s actual experience in attainment of a top management position, the challenges faced by these elites, the response to those obstacles, and ultimately, their achievement of success. Twenty participants were selected from a pool of public relations professionals in West Michigan who hold positions in upper management. Data collection consisted of in-depth interviews, career path mapping, card sorting, and artifact gathering. Data were examined using content analysis of prepared coding schemes based on the literature review, as well as rank order and frequency distribution where applicable.

The goal of this study is not to test a hypothesis; rather it is to look at lived experience and career development, which may lead to the generation of some heuristics.
I wanted to understand this unique experience from the perspective of the PR professional and what role, if any, business knowledge and savvy played. In other words, what were the participants’ lived experience in gaining a mid-or-upper-level position and what experiences do they encounter in performing their role?

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, public relations will be defined as the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of stakeholder and organizational relationships (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). A secondary, and perhaps more easily understood definition of public relations, may also be kept in the mind of the reader which, simply stated, is -- “the truth told well” (Curtis, 2006, p. 143).

**Chapter One Summary**

This chapter provided a brief historical look at the field of public relations and outlined some core assumptions in the current literature. It hinted at the importance of public relations as a management function and called to light the perceptions of business savvy combined with the desire for an enduring seat at the executive table. Furthermore, this chapter outlined the problem, purpose, and significance of the study. Three research questions were posed and the methodology was identified as a phenomenological qualitative research approach. Finally, a conceptual framework was established based upon the current research, which will be examined in great detail in the following chapter.

Chapter Two is a review of the literature. It begins by examining the emergence of public relations as a profession. The chapter takes an in-depth look into the current state of the industry including: scope, global factors, sectors, practitioners, and traits.
Chapter Two transitions into a detailed review of the concepts for this study, ending with a summary of findings that comprise the final conceptual framework.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter begins by examining the industry of public relations and its claim as a profession of applied science. Arguments are presented that highlight PR as a significant industry critical to a society interested in free speech and expression. Traits of the industry are presented based on scope, components, and characteristics of those who make up the profession. It is important to fully understand the context of the profession in order to fully appreciate the ensuing conceptual discussion.

Following this comprehensive description of the public relations industry is a detailed examination of the proposed conceptual framework, namely: career path patterns, facilitators for success in PR, and barriers to advancement in PR. Each of these categories is examined and the factors therein identified through current research. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings, establishing the final conceptual framework on which this research study will be based.

Public Relations as a Profession

An Emerging Profession of Applied Science

Edward Bernays, considered the founding father of public relations, stated that a profession is an art applied to a science which puts public interest ahead of personal gain (Bernays, 1986). The essence of the public relations profession is to build trusting relationships with key publics to motivate positive behavior. While the practice of relationship building dates back to early civilization, the measurement, analysis, and evaluation of this behavioral science is relatively new. There are many signs however, that public relations is an emerging profession. “The scholarly body of knowledge of
public relations has grown significantly in the last 25 years and continues to evolve toward establishing itself as a strong discipline” (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003, p. xxv).

Practitioners of public relations strive to influence societal values and affect behavioral modification among target publics. Authors W. Timothy Coombs and Sherry Holladay (2007) offer a thorough analysis of the microlevel and macrolevel outcomes of the practice of public relations in their book, *It’s Not Just PR: Public Relations in Society*. A portion of their study examines how PR influences law, values, and actions of society. Through multiple cases studies, Coombs and Holladay demonstrate how public relations efforts exert influence on individuals, opinion leaders, organizations, governments, and global perspectives. The authors clearly demonstrate the effectiveness and necessity of public relations as a tool of influence and education among key constituents. Coombs and Holladay conclude from their in-depth analysis that, “Public relations provides valuable societal benefits; it helps to maintain the relationships necessary for the effective functioning of society” (p. 127).

Renowned authors Allen Center, Patrick Jackson, Stacey Smith, and Frank Stansberry (2008), state in their book *Public Relations Practices: Managerial Case Studies and Problems*, that public relations is a profession based on the following seven accounts: (a) a codified body of knowledge and growing bank of theoretical literature; (b) insight into human behavior and the formation and movement of public opinion; (c) skill in the use of communication tools, social science technology, and persuasion to affect opinions, attitudes, and behavior; (d) academic training, including the Ph.D.; (e) a formal code of ethics; (f) a service that is essential in contemporary society, and; (f) nobility of purpose.
Scope of Public Relations

In November 2006, the Institute for Public Relations published a paper by Toni Falconi presenting arguments for PR as a profession “not just a service industry of practitioners for hire, not just a management function of the staff variety” (p. 2). Falconi argues that previously, public relations was measured solely as a service industry to the private sector, ignoring its role in the public and social sectors. In agreement with Falconi’s assessment, is a study performed by Coombs and Holladay (2007). They examined resources used in public relations education, finding that historically, PR has almost exclusively been viewed from the corporate perspective.

Falconi goes on to say that in most countries, the public sector accounts for more than 50 percent of PR practice and that the social sector is experiencing the quickest growth. Falconi compared the function of public relations to the labor intensive activities of accounting and legal. He proposes that the size and impact of public relations be measured similarly to these professions, and not simply as a capital expenditure or service industry to the private sector.

Falconi performed extensive analysis of public relations cases in Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. He also examined how other labor-intensive functions are measured and applied the same process to public relations. His conclusion is that the field of public relations is significantly larger than previously estimated. Using his conceptual framework of including PR in the public sector and PR as labor intensive activity, Falconi proposed what he considers to be a conservative estimate of the size of the global public relations profession: 2.3-to-4.5 million worldwide public professionals with an annual international economic impact of $130-230 billion.
Global Factors in Public Relations

In examining the traits of the public relations profession, it is important to note what is occurring internationally in PR. In *The Global Public Relations Handbook* (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003), thirty-five contributing authors performed thorough and extensive research in the field of global public relations. In this work, the authors research, analyze, and discuss the many contributing factors of public relations both globally and within a multitude of countries.

One interesting finding was the relationship of public relations and culture. According to the authors, there are several cultural factors which affect the scope and impact of public relations within each country. The seven dimensions of societal culture linked with public relations are: (a) power distance, (b) collectivism, (c) gender, (d) uncertainty avoidance, (e) long-term orientation, (f) interpersonal trust, and, (g) deference to authority.

Power distance describes the levels of importance and status of individuals in society. Typically, the greater the power distance, the greater the authoritarian structures of the country. Collectivism reflects the extent to which the culture values the needs and wants of the individual over those of the general society. Gender is simply the extent to which there are gender-based roles in society. This is becoming increasingly important as more women enter the field of public relations. Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the people of the culture can handle ambiguity. High context cultures, like the United States, can handle more ambiguity than low context cultures. Long-term orientation is just as it sounds; a view to long-term rewards versus short term gain. Change occurs more slowly in cultures with greater long-term orientation. The value of
interpersonal trust is the propensity of people to place trust in others. Deference to authority is the extent to which subordinates readily accept a superior. All of these factors seem to play an important role to the acceptance and impact of public relations within a specific culture.

Transition of PR in the United States

But what has the transition of public relations been in the United States? The authors of *The Global Public Relations Handbook* (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2003), state that public relations in the United States has gone through a fairly major transition in the past 25 years. They state that the original focus was primarily on mass media in the form of television, newspaper, and radio. More recently, the profession has placed more emphasis on interpersonal communication approaches. In their study, the authors found four primary changes in this transition: (a) a growing emphasis on internal publics, such as employees and stockholders; (b) widespread development of segmented publics; (c) use of strategy and tactics applied to targeted publics, and; (d) growth of the Internet and technologies that facilitate interaction among small, specialized groups.

Sectors within Public Relations

An important distinction to make in examining the traits of the PR industry is in its structure. Author Leonard Mogel, in his book, *Making It in Public Relations: An Insider’s Guide to Career Opportunities* (2002), offers the following general sectors in which public relations is practiced: (a) corporate, (b) agency, (c) government, and, (d) non-profit. Furthermore, he offers the following 11 components, or practice areas, of public relations: (a) media relations, (b) employee relations, (c) speech writing, (d) public affairs and lobbying, (e) community relations, (f) entertainment PR, (g) health care
communication, (h) crisis management, (i) social media relations, (j) investor relations, and, (k) consumer relations.

“…public relations operates within the web of relationships that binds organizations and various stakeholders and stakeholders with one another” (Coombs & Holladay, 2007, p. 49). According to Coombs and Holladay, the historical analysis of the role of public relations has traditionally focused on the corporate-centric view, while practically ignoring the role PR plays within other organizations. For example, Coombs and Holladay note that in a review of six introductory public relations textbooks, 76 percent of the historical figures are from corporate, compared to 13 percent activists, and less than one percent from government or education. The authors add that, in reality, social activists were practicing public relations long before corporations existed; and in some fashion, activists spurred the need for corporate PR.

Coombs and Holladay (2007) propose that “Any actor in the complex web of relations that includes organizations can practice public relations. We should examine the full realm… not just the more traditional communication tactics organizations use to manage their mutually influential relationships” (p. 75). To this point, Coombs and Holladay offer the following list of potential public relations practitioners: (a) activists, (b) customers, (c) community, (d) corporation, (e) investors, (f) government, (g) suppliers, and, (h) media.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Bacon’s Information partnered in 2006 to conduct a survey of 15,000 public relations professionals with the purpose of identifying demographics and areas of interest among practitioners. After eliminating duplicate responses, 1,493 participant responses were used, constituting a
high response rate representative of the field. In 2007, PRSA and Bacon’s released their findings in the *2006 State of the PR Profession Opinion Survey*. Following are key findings from this report.

In response to the type of organization they worked in: 34% public-or-privately held corporations; 19% nonprofit; 17% PR agency; 10% government; 8% independent consultants; 8% academics; 2% other, and; 1% healthcare. In terms of the size of the organization: 33% worked in organizations with 1001-5,000 employees; 24% worked in organizations with 101-1,000 employees; 24% had 11-100 employees, and; 19% had 10 or fewer employees. The average-size organization had 250 employees. The median number of PR employees within an organization was 3, with 30% of respondents reporting only one employee.

Thirty-eight percent of respondents stated they were senior management. 35% stated they were middle management, while 22% stated they were PR specialists, and 5% were entry-level. The median annual salary was $71,480, however, authority level directly affects salary figures. Executive-level respondents reported a median salary of $94,800. 39% of respondents report directly to the CEO or president. 32% reported to marketing or communications. There were no other clear reporting structures.

When asked how they typically spend their time, almost 25% responded media relations, with the next closest being marketing communication (12%), corporate communication (10%), and community relations (7%). Event planning, PR counseling, reputation management, and internal management all tied at 6%, with several other functions lagging behind, including research, crisis communication, and investor relations. When considering the profession’s greatest challenge, respondents ranked the
top two issues as upholding credibility (41%) and providing a clear return-on-investment (39%).

Career Path Patterns

In the previous section, the traits of the public relations industry were identified, offering an in-depth description and characterization of the field and its practitioners. In the following sections, the conceptual framework of career path patterns, facilitators for success, and barriers to advancement will be examined in detail.

Traits in Career Path Advancement

In a longitudinal study examining historical career path characteristics relating to managerial career success, Rebecca Ellis (1984) found significant correlations to executive-level status. Ellis examined educational background and work experience variables from resume data of 509 managers gathered from a national executive search firm. Her results indicate the following career path factors with attainment of executive level status: (a) market-entry position in finance, (b) cross-function mobility during their career, (c) functional emphasis on management or finance (not technical support or personnel roles), (d) regularly timed job movements, and, (e) greater mobility within the firm. In addition, Ellis found that higher salaries were related to: (a) education level, (b) market-entry positions in retail, (c) frequent and consistent job movement, (d) geographic mobility, and, (e) functional emphasis on general management.

In a longitudinal study of approximately 900 executives in large corporations from 1936-2003, Carola Frydman (2006) found that mobility, formal education, and a move from specific to general skills appear to be significant factors to obtaining an executive-level position. Turnover of executives has significantly increased over the past
30 years. According to Frydman, more than half the executives in the 1950s climbed the corporate ladder through interfirm mobility compared to only 18 percent currently. The study also indicates current trends for greater movement in the latter part of an executive’s career. According to Frydman, “The increase in external mobility during the past 30 years, coupled with the higher likelihood of moving later in the career, are consistent with an increase in the importance of general skills (and with the rising trends in executive pay)” (p. 115). Frydman’s study also demonstrated a significant increase in formal education at the executive level. She states that the percentage of executives with a business degree has continually increased since 1970, while the number of executives with a technical degree has diminished.

Frieda Reitman and Joy Shneer (2003) performed a longitudinal study of 96 professionals with a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree from a large private northeastern university. The subjects were surveyed three times over a thirteen-year period with the purpose of identifying demographic and career factors of career advancement in traditional versus a more self-directed approach. They found that 38 percent were on a self-directed path, 34 percent were on a traditional path, and 28 percent had selected an “alternate path” (unemployed, self-employed, or part time). The later group was excluded from further analysis in order to focus only on MBAs who climbed the career ladder. Both the traditional and self-directed subjects had similar career outcomes in salary, raises, and promotion.

The trend in executive advancement is toward greater generally applicable managerial skills, rather than functionally specific skills such as engineering and accounting. Increased job mobility and self-directed career management are also
becoming more of the norm. Additionally relevant to this study, is the finding that larger organizations offer more advancement opportunity. This would be in general agreement with the previously discussed findings from the *2006 State of the PR Profession Opinion Survey* that found 57 percent of PR practitioners in organizations with more than 100 employees, with the average sized company of 250 employees.

**Internships**

In a study of 251 working journalists (Brandon, 1997), internships were examined as a predictor of career advancement. Results of the study found that internships are extremely effective for career success, particularly in gaining the first job. Internships were rated highest in series of experiential education factors for overall career success. Most participants rated their internships experience as “very” or “extremely” important for addressing career needs.

Similarly, in a study from the field of hospitality management consisting of 55 professional recruiters, 55 professional alumni, and 16 educators, the internship experience received high marks as an indicator of career success (Casado, 1991). Alumni rated internships as the number one professional course in terms of importance. Educators ranked it eighth, but still very high in importance. Recruiters rank the internship experience fourth, and also very high in importance. Alumni, who are working professionals in the field, placed a large emphasis on the internship as practical experience to determine success in the field of hospitality.

In 2007, Sharon Yee did a case study on women of color in athletic administration in NCAA I and II institutions. Yee found that internships, networking, and mentoring were the most beneficial for career success. Nearly all of the participants in the study held
internships at the beginning of their career and often they led to full-time employment. The women commented on how the internship served as a foundation for career advancement.

In the 2006 *Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education*, internships are strongly encouraged. Research conducted by the Commission found the supervised experience to be of central importance to the educational curriculum based on practitioner’s input. “Practitioners surveyed identified it (internships) as the highest-scored essential ingredient of an undergraduate education… Practical experience also was one of the top five considerations in entry-level hiring decisions” (p. 58). It appears internships are an essential starting point for career success in public relations.

**Career Succession**

It was difficult to find significant research on the notion of a specific career path, particularly in the extensive field of public relations. The general, rational assumption of career advancement is that a practitioner begins in an entry-level task position, performs well, accepts internal-or-external promotions, and, after years of practice, achieves an upper-level position. This general pattern seems to be affirmed according to extensive research by Yong-Min Kim (1995) of 1,576 top managers at 92 manufacturing firms in three industries from 1978 to 1990. According to his study, the presence of “job ladders” was supported with empirical evidence that vacancies were filled with managers at lower levels in the same job ladder in an orderly manner. Promotions to higher levels by skipping intermediate steps were rare. Firms maintain a highly stable hierarchical system to train and develop managers. Interestingly, Kim found the odds of hiring from outside into all levels of managerial positions were about one-to-two. In other words, for every
three vacancies, firms filled one with external personnel. Another finding, consistent with previous literature, is that organizations significantly favor cross-functional managers with a broad range of experience and skill.

Li-Yu Chen (2005) surveyed 500 women in leadership positions to determine which strategies had most positively affected their advancement to senior executive positions. Chen’s study identifies a strategy called “Opportunity Seeking” which is about finding better job opportunities throughout one’s career. The strategy suggests the women in this study proactively pursued promotional opportunities when facing barriers to advancement. The study found the women had worked for approximately 20 years before being promoted to their executive position. The women in the study climbed the traditional career ladder, starting in entry-level positions and, throughout the course of 20 years, achieved upper-management status. Interestingly, the women in the study identified the greatest facilitating factor to career advancement as formal mentoring.

Facilitating Factors for Success in Public Relations

The first category from the conceptual framework, career path patterns, was discussed in detail in the previous section. Now let us turn our attention to the second component of facilitators, those factors that help advance the career of a public relations professional to an executive level.

Core Competencies in Public Relations Education

In 1951, 12 colleges offered major programs in public relations. In 2002, more than 22,000 students at approximately 300 colleges were either majoring in PR, or taking at least one PR course (Mogel, 2002). In 2006, The Commission on Public Relations Education released the results of a massive nationwide study of PR education.
Table 1

*Competencies Required by the Commission on Public Relations Education*

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<tr>
<th>Knowledge Competencies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication and persuasion concepts and strategies</td>
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<td>Communication and public relation theories</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships and relationship-building</td>
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<td>Societal trends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethical issues</td>
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<td>Legal requirements and issues</td>
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<td>Marketing and finance</td>
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<td>Public relations history</td>
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<td>Uses of research and forecasting</td>
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<td>Multicultural and global issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>The business case for diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Various world social, political, economic and historical frameworks</td>
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<td>Management concepts and theories</td>
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<tr>
<th>Skill Competencies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Research methods and analysis</td>
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<td>Management of information</td>
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<td>Mastery of language in written and oral communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem-solving and negotiation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Management of communication</td>
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<td>Strategic planning</td>
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<td>Issues management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audience segmentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informative and persuasive writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community, consumer and employee relations and other practice areas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technological and visual literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managing people, programs and resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensitive interpersonal communication</td>
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<td>Critical listening skills</td>
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<td>Fluency in a foreign language</td>
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<td>Ethical decision-making</td>
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<td>Participation in the professional public relations community</td>
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<td>Message production</td>
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<td>Working with current issues</td>
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<td>Environmental monitoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public speaking and presentation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Applying cross-cultural and cross-gender sensitivity</td>
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The study involved five “waves” of research, including multiple surveys and several personal interviews of PR practitioners and educators across the United States. Among the findings, the results demonstrated significant agreement among educators and practitioners on the core competencies required of PR undergraduates. According to this industry report, the top rated competencies required for recent graduates are: (a) writing skills, (b) critical thinking and problem solving skills, (c) a good attitude, (d) the ability to communicate publicly, and, (e) initiative. Additionally, in order to foster these five competency areas, the Commission identified 14 areas of knowledge and 22 skills that should be taught in undergraduate PR curriculum (shown in table 1).

**Personal Traits**

While the previous section looked at the core competencies in public relations education, this next segment examines some of the relevant personal traits as facilitating factors for success in advancing to an executive level in public relations.

“Assuming the personal chemistry is right, CEOs look for three things in a PR counselor: judgment based on deep business knowledge… creativity applied to solving business problems… and the integrity to stand up for what is right, even at high personal cost” (Martin, 2005, p. 20). In 2007, the Arthur W. Page Society completed an in-depth interview of CEOs from 31 U.S. and international companies with more than $2 billion in revenue. The purpose of the research study was to assess CEO’s perception and expectations of communication officers. In its executive summary, researchers found that the skills and attributes CEOs are looking for in top communication officers have expanded. First on the list of the new requirements is a desire for business savvy communication executives who fully understand the organization. Additionally, CEOs
want communication executives to be proficient in three key modes of operation: reactive, proactive, and interactive. CEOs now see the communication officer as an integral part of the team. Continuing with the Arthur W. Page Society report, CEOs look for the following attributes in an ideal communications officer: (a) detailed knowledge of the business (they also feel this is a hurdle where some professionals fall short); (b) extensive communication background is necessary, but not sufficient; (c) understanding of public opinion, particularly in anticipating reactions of key publics; (d) credibility with the executive team; (e) extensive internal relationships; (f) team players, and; (g) an educator in basic communication skills. In order to stay at the executive table, CEOs in the study stated that chief communications personnel must demonstrate personal credibility, results orientation, and long-term vision.

In 2008, Pamela Blum and Vanessa Tremarco performed an analysis of the Holmes Group’s Satisfaction Survey, which included more than 4,000 employees from more than 100 public relations firms. They used their findings to create two other follow-up measurements: a survey of PR firm employees and in-depth interviews with human resource executives. The purpose of the study was to identify the factors that contribute to employee turnover in public relations. According to their study, high performance PR professionals crave challenge and responsibility and feel fulfilled when being pushed to their limits. These upwardly mobile PR practitioners expect flexibility and opportunity in return for the high pressure and hectic workload.

Juan Meng and William Heyman (2009) surveyed 222 public relations executives in order to assess the participant’s knowledge and perceptions of excellent leadership in public relations. Characteristics of the participants generally matched the
overall characteristics of the industry. The purpose of the study was to understand how leadership in public relations has been defined and to determine key factors of leadership within the field of public relations. Meng and Heyman’s study concluded that personal attributes and some superior capabilities are essential to effective leadership in public relations. The personality traits important for success appear to be self-insight, shared vision, and team collaboration. Self-insight includes the traits of being dependable, trustworthy, proactive, strategic, and the ability to be a change agent who uses diverse approaches. Shared vision is described as forward looking, managerial, enlisting other’s support, flexible in changing times, and a clear understanding and ability to communicate the role of PR. Team collaboration is defined as the ability to work with others to define PR strategy, coping with crisis, developing a proactive team, facilitating positive interdependence, engaging diverse groups, and motivating others. In addition to these personal traits, the authors also suggest that capabilities are complex and varied. Meng and Heyman propose that excellent leadership in public relations encompasses not only the three personality traits listed previously, but also the skills of ethical consideration, relationship building, communication competence, strategic decision making, and influence.

Bruce Berger partnered with Juan Meng and William Heyman for another study in 2009 to examine the perceptions of 222 PR practitioners on qualities of excellent leaders. The data used was collected in a national online survey from a sample of 1,000 full-time, experienced practitioners with diversity of gender and organizational type. Berger, Meng, and Heyman’s study found a majority of respondents cited role models and mentors as the most influential source on their beliefs about excellent leadership.
Additionally, the study suggests that the most important sources of leadership development are role models, on the job experience, initiative, and desire. Berger, Meng, and Heyman state that their findings support the notion that leaders communicate values through behavior.

Michelle French (2006) performed a phenomenological study of executives within the music industry examining synchronicity between executive’s personal mission and the organization’s purpose. French identified a concept she called “meaning-mission fit,” which she defined as the alignment of personal meaning with that of the organization’s mission. According to French, the findings of the study indicate there is a relationship between meaning-mission fit and happiness and job satisfaction. The results also seem to indicate that alignment of personal values and organizational mission provides assistance in career advancement. In other words, people who love their job appear to advance quicker and achieve greater success.

Skills and Abilities

Now, turning to another aspect of facilitating factors, this section looks at specific skills and abilities of PR practitioners. The findings of a five-part research study cited in *The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education* (2006) found that, among advance professionals, the most sought after skills are: (a) research, (b) an ability to handle the media, (c) work experience in PR, (d) knowledge of the role of PR on the management team, and, (e) knowledge of issues management.

In 2007, Bruce Berger, Bryan Reber, and William Heyman presented a study at the International Communication Association conference regarding the executive traits for success in public relations. Their study consisted of 30 minute telephone interviews
with 97 senior public relations executives in the spring of 2004 to examine factors contributing to success in the field of public relations. Most (82.5%) of the senior professionals defined success in terms of managerial or strategic traits such as being part of the decision making team, helping the business grow, and being a trusted advisor. Interestingly, the study suggests that communication skills do not define success. The authors add that this may be that excellent communication skills are assumed. The authors state that success in public relations is trending toward a business framework. Executives in this study noted the importance of business skills and an understanding of the business field, along with gaining varied experience. In this study, PR executives stated that, while experience counts, the diversity of the experience counts even more. The authors suggest that diverse professional experience helps to develop key skills such as interpersonal communication, strategic decision-making, tactical implementation, and problem-solving abilities.

*Power in Public Relations*

As a facilitating factor, power in PR must be considered. “The practice of public relations involves the negation of power. Those with power can exercise coercion to mandate change. Those without power must be persuasive to evoke change” (Patterson, 2009, p. 14). Dr. Marianne Sison (2008) interviewed 30 public relations practitioners from Melbourne and Sydney, Australia to examine perceptions of power and influence with their organization. Sison found that expertise, access to the dominant coalition (President / CEO), and personal attributes contribute to power and influence of the PR practitioner. However, it is the practitioner’s perception of his or her role in management (versus task) whether he or she exercise their power. Also, personal power is deemed
more valuable than position power. Further, this study illustrates the characteristic of courage. Courage, as stated by Sison, is not only needed to identify potential issues, but also to articulate these views while maintaining the persistence to present the right action as the conscience of the company. According to Sison, courage is one of the most important characteristics for a PR practitioner to have in order to confront one’s boss on issues of ethics and right action.

Innovation may be linked with power in public relations. Jennifer Hughes (2006) interviewed twenty public relations practitioners in high-tech and low-tech professions. Her study suggests that “innovative environments and proximity to innovators do benefit practitioners in terms of power, influence, and access to exclusive tools” (p. 74). Practitioners who are in close proximity to innovators in technology-rich environments adopt technology earlier than their peers. Considering the rapid rate of change for communication technology, it would appear this factor is also relevant to career advancement in public relations.

Ethics

Ethical traits have long been cited as an important facilitating characteristic for public relations professionals, particularly with the ethical misconduct seen in the past decade in examples from Enron and Martha Stewart. To this point, Lois Boynton (2006) conducted three-tiered Delphi study with 25-28 public relations practitioners and academics with a minimum of five years experience. A primary purpose of the study was to determine what values are most important to ethical practice. Honesty was the most cited value, with respect and fairness, as close seconds.
The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) states that “ethical conduct is quintessential” (p. 21). The Commission’s most recent research suggests that ethics are a key issue for success in public relations, “…no public relations practice should exist in contemporary society without a full commitment to ethical practice” (p. 24). To this point, the following core values have been identified for the advancement of the profession and professional: (a) advocacy, (b) honesty, (c) expertise, (d) independence, (e) loyalty, and, (f) fairness. In addition, the following code provisions have been identified to further promote ethical actions: (a) free flow of information, (b) respect for competition, (c) disclosure of information, (d) safeguarding confidences, (e) conflicts of interest, and, (f) enhancing the profession.

In this section, we examined the facilitating factors for success in advancement to an executive level in public relations. Previous research provides a surplus of information as most studies focus on this important factor for success. Now, let us turn our attention to the final over-arching category in the conceptual framework, the barriers to advancement to an upper-level position in public relations.

Barriers to Advancement in Public Relations

Public Relations Education

In 2006, Karla Gower and Bryan Reber administered an online survey to 209 junior and senior public relations majors at nine U.S. universities in order to gage student perceptions about requirements and preparation for careers in the industry. The results indicate that students have a fairly strong sense of their capabilities. On a five-point Likert scale, students ranked themselves between 4.46 and 4.74 in the areas of credibility, basic computer skills, ethics, role of PR, duties of PR practitioners, group process skills,
leadership skills, written communication, and social responsibility. However, categories with the lowest mean scores included revenue and expense profiles, finance and budgeting, new technologies, crisis planning, labor relations, and staff development. Among the ten highest means, only three related to communication skills, while basic business skills ranked among the ten lowest means. In general, students feel prepared, with the notable exception of traditional business skills, where 31% stated they feel “not very prepared” or “unprepared.” According to the authors, this study affirms previous criticism that PR students (by their own admission) do not have some of the basic business skills for the practice.

Recent graduates of public relations programs perceive their skill levels to be much higher than what their employers perceive. Eunseong Kim and Terri Johnson (2009) surveyed 117 public relations practitioners and employers in Indiana and Illinois to measure perceived competence in 22 public relations skills. These skills are identical to the ones identified previously by the Commission on Public Relations Education. Beginning PR practitioners indicated they were “quite competent” in 12 skill areas, and “more than somewhat competent” overall with a rating of 3.7 out of 5.0. PR industry employers disagreed, rating new employee skills as “acceptable,” rather than “good” or “very good,” with mean scores ranging from 2.0 to 3.7. For example, 94% of new PR practitioners believe they are quite or completely skillful in their writing competency, compared to only 45% of employers. In 10 of the skill areas, employers rated new hire skills as “less than acceptable.”

A survey of 312 PR executives and educators examined the curriculum in preparing students for the practice and found that public relations is fast becoming a
highly educated field (DiStaso, Stacks, & Botan, 2006). Additionally, the study found that, while writing skills are still the top-ranked outcome, they are also the top-ranked hiring problem. The authors also found increased emphasis on areas such as research, media relations, strategic decision making, ethics, and global understanding.

A 2008 study of 800 PRSA members across the U.S. by professors at Michigan State University found similar results, indicating poor writing skills among entry-level practitioners. The study found that only 14 percent of PR supervisors believe their subordinates are “good writers,” while 31 percent disagree with this characterization. The researchers converted their findings from a standard Likert scale into a college grade point and found that an average entry-level public relations professional failed to make a 2.0 grade point in three of the four writing constructs measured (Cole, 2009).

New Mexico State University published the results of a survey of 116 public relations executives regarding their perceptions of the competency of recent public relations graduates. The PR executives identified writing and critical thinking as the two most powerful skills necessary for success in public relations. Interestingly, in highlighting the results, the author quotes one of the participants for context and perspective, stating, “Today’s new graduates have little business aptitude, no entrepreneurial aspirations, they’re low on critical thinking and terrible at deadlines” (McCleneghan, 2006, p. 46).

External Perceptions of Public Relations

Following the discussion of perceptions regarding students, we now turn our attention to the overall perceptions of public relations as a barrier to advancement. In 2009, Lisa Fall and Jeremy Hughes examined perceptions of public relations among non-
public relations majors. In a survey of 106 students from 30 different states, Fall and Hughes found that overall perceptions about public relations are significantly more favorable after non-majors participate in a PR course. Additionally, the study found that students who are non-public relations majors are misinformed about the nature of public relations. The subjects also generally associate negative emotions to public relations. However, results indicate that greater awareness of the industry increases positive regards toward public relations practitioners and the profession.

Coy Callison (2004) says that recent public opinion surveys have not revealed a positive perception of public relations. In Callison’s study, trained interviewers called 4,712 random telephone numbers, reaching 2,125 respondents, completing 593 interviews. The purpose of the study was to examine perceptions of public relations practitioners and spokespersons. Callison found that public relations professionals are viewed negatively and no better than other company sources. It appears, from this study, that the public generally distrusts the company spokesperson. Callison states, “…any attempt to communicate on an organization’s behalf from the organization’s own pulpit is doomed” (p. 384). The results suggest that an independent source is viewed as more credible because an affiliated source is perceived as less likely to tell the truth and less ethical than the independent party.

In September 1998, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) partnered with the Rockefeller Foundation to measure the credibility of numerous occupations and authorities. Fifteen hundred hours of in-depth interviews of 2,500 individuals nationwide produced a 5,000 page report on the credibility of approximately 45 leaders and public figures (Budd, 2000). The list consists of a wide range of public figures from governor
and famous athlete, to TV talk show host and Wall Street executive. The news is not good for PR as public relations specialist appears third from the bottom, with a National Credibility Index rating of 47.6 out of 100. Incidentally, supreme court justice ranked first with 81.3 and teachers second with 80.7.

Harris Interactive conducted a survey in 2005 on behalf of PRSA to measure executive, congressional, and consumer attitudes towards media, marketing, and public relations. The study consisted of three sample groups: (a) 1,015 adults over the age of 18 with demographics proportionate to the U.S. population, (b) 150 executives in a broad range of Fortune 1000 companies, and, (c) 150 senior staff and aides of members of Congress. Following are results from this study.

When asked how much they trust people who work in the public relations industry, respondents net distrust levels were fairly high among all three groups: adults 40%, executives 45%, congressional members 49%. In comparison, however, distrust of advertising ranged from 54% to 62%. Trust was highest for public television and public radio ranging from 61% to 75%.

When asked if people in the PR industry take advantage of media to present misleading information, all three groups had a net agree score: adults 85%; executives 67%; congressional members 85%. Additionally, all three groups had very high net agree scores to the statement that PR people are just another tool companies can use to market products or state positions, ranging from 83% to 89%. There was some mild agreement among these groups that PR professionals do disseminate important information, particularly with issues that would otherwise fail to get the attention they deserve (71% to 81% agreement).
Gender would appear to be an obvious barrier to advancement in public relations. However, according to The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) females now comprise nearly two-thirds of the entire field of PR practitioners, and as much as 70-to-80 percent of undergraduate enrollment in some university programs.

Linda Aldoory and Elizabeth Toth (2004) employed a mixed method of surveys and focus groups to examine leadership and gender in public relations. 864 completed questionnaires were returned from PRSA members throughout the nation (the sample had similar characteristics to the PRSA membership). In addition, six focus groups were conducted following analysis of the surveys to add detail to the interpretations. The study indicates that the best leaders in PR are transformational and collaborative. The quantitative survey results indicate that respondents do not agree that men make better leaders than women. They agreed that both genders can be equally capable, however, the women in this study ranked themselves lower in leadership ability than did the men. The focus groups, on the other hand, indicated a stronger preference for women leaders. Participants responded that women appear to have some more natural transformational leadership traits; “The characteristic of empathy was often brought up as a feminine trait useful for leadership” (p. 176). The focus groups also stated that women’s opportunities for leadership are more limited than men.

Larissa Grunig (2006) performed an in-depth literature review of more than 530 articles over a 20-year period, 24 research reports over 6-1/2 years, and three massive grant projects with the purpose of reviewing women’s role in public relations. Grunig reports a movement toward a “feminist phase” where women are no longer ignored, but
empowered and productive. According to Grunig, females do more with less and blend their multiple personal and professional roles exceedingly well. Grunig recognizes a lack of females in senior positions, but she also predicts inevitable change. She identifies a primary issue for women will be the integration of the workplace, family, and community.

**Business Savvy**

Continuing with the barriers to advancement in public relations, let us look at business savvy. As indicated by previously examined studies of the industry, business savvy is becoming an increasingly important trait for public relations practitioners (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Berger, Reber & Heyman, 2007; Ellis, 1984; Elsasser, 2009; Frydman, 2006; Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006). However, examination of the public relations curriculum in higher education clearly points to a lack of training in business skills among public relations graduates (Fall & Hughes, 2009; Gower & Reber, 2006; Kim & Johnson, 2009; McCleneghan, 2006). Author and executive director of PR for Dow Jones Enterprise Media Group, Diane Thieke says that business executives will rarely accept PR practitioners as strategic partners without demonstrating impact on the bottom line (2009). Thieke references a recent Gallup Poll, stating that executives spend 24 percent of their time on measurement and monitoring, second only to strategic thinking and planning. Thieke adds, in another recent study, executives had trouble expressing the value of public relations contributions. PR professionals will not get a seat at the executive table without business savvy. One of Thieke’s key points of advice for PR professionals is to speak the language of business.
Ron Culp, partner and managing director at Ketchum, agrees and sums it up best, “The ability to understand business, business operations and technology overrides everything else in this profession today… what you have to really bring is a deep understanding of both business and technology.” Culp continues, “I want to encourage people, if they are sincerely interested in working in any corporate business environment that a business degree is going to help them tremendously” (Auffermann, 2009, p. 8).

Summary of Findings

**Conceptual Framework**

After extensive literature review, three foundational categories emerged in the advancement to an executive level position in public relations, they are: career patterns, facilitators for success, and barriers to success. As stated previously, these categories and the relationship among them form the conceptual framework for this study. Following is a summary of each category and the specific factors that were used in this research study. See Table 2 for a complete listing of the three categories and their respective factors.

*Overview of career patterns.* The resulting traits of success in career patterns include: (a) entry-level position in finance; (b) cross-function experience; (c) job mobility, particularly later in the career; (d) advanced education with an emphasis in business; (e) employment in larger organizations; (f) supervised experiential internship, and; (g) traditionally sequenced career progression over time.

*Overview of facilitators for success.* Positive catalysts for career advancement in public relations have the advantage of being more richly researched and therefore, more easily identifiable and greater in number. The facilitating factors for career advancement in PR are: (a) personal traits, including positive attitude, initiative, flexibility and passion;
(b) task skills, such as writing and communication competence; (c) managerial skills such as critical thinking, research, and strategic decision making; (d) positive ethics; (e) business savvy; (f) diversity of experience, and (g) use of role models and mentors.

Table 2

**Conceptual Design Factors on Career Advancement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Factors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Patterns</td>
<td>Entry-level position in finance</td>
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<td>Cross-function experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Job Mobility, particularly later in the career</td>
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<td>Advanced education with an emphasis in business</td>
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<td>Employment in larger organizations</td>
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<td>Supervised experiential internship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Traditionally sequenced career progression over time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitators</td>
<td>Personal traits (positive attitude, initiative, flexibility, passion)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Task skills (writing and communication competence)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Management skills (critical thinking, research, strategic decision making)</td>
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<td>Positive ethics</td>
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<td>Business savvy</td>
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<td>Diversity of experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Use of role models and mentors</td>
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<td>Barriers</td>
<td>Substandard education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Substandard skills, particularly writing</td>
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<td>Negative perceptions of public relations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of business savvy</td>
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*Overview of barriers to success.* Barriers for advancement in the field of public relations start with shortfalls in higher education programs across the nation. Recent graduates were found to have significant deficits in writing skills, basic business knowledge, research, critical thinking, and ethics. Another issue for public relations practitioners is the poor perceptions among the general public and government officials. Gender is a barrier to achieving a top-level role in public relations. The significant
majority of PR practitioners are women. While women are increasingly perceived as competent, there still seems to be limited opportunities for advancement. Lastly, there appears to be growing evidence that a general lack of business savvy among current PR practitioners limits prospects for promotion to the executive suite. The final, consolidated list of barriers to career advancement in PR is: (a) substandard education; (b) substandard skills, particularly writing; (c) negative perceptions of PR; (d) gender, and; (e) lack of business savvy.

Using these three over-arching categories of career patterns, facilitators, and barriers as the foundation for researching paths to an executive level position in PR has never been done before. Typically, as shown in the literature review, research has focused almost primarily on personal traits, knowledge, or skills as factors of success. There is little known about the specific career patterns of PR executives. There is also little focus on the barriers to success, other than gender and the obvious traits opposite of known success factors (for example, deceit). In the following section, the methodology of this study, which incorporates all three key components, is explained in detail.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter offered an extensive literature review of the public relations industry, concluding with a conceptual framework based on previous research. Chapter Three looks at the research methodology used for this study. This chapter outlines the specific procedures of data collection and analysis.

Research Design

Author and researcher, John Creswell (2003), states there are three basic strategies of inquiry: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. The following is a brief synopsis from Creswell on each of the types. Quantitative strategies typically collect data through experimentation or surveys. Quantitative often employs the methodology of closed-ended questions and data collection. Qualitative strategies are less about numbers and more about experiences such as, ethnography, case study, and narrative research (to name a few). Qualitative methods employ open-ended questions and text or image data. The third approach is called mixed methods and it has characteristics of both quantitative and qualitative in a single study. For the purpose of this study, qualitative methodologies will be used to answer the research questions.

According to Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman (2006), one of the strengths of qualitative methodology is its ability to elicit inferred knowledge and subjective understandings and interpretations. Qualitative methods are used to look into deep, complex problems regarding little-known phenomena, particularly where relevant variables are yet to be identified. The study of how and why PR practitioners have made it to the peak of their career has never been done and little is known about the process.
In a qualitative approach, the researcher often makes knowledge claims based on the multiple meanings of personal or social experiences (Creswell, 2003). In this framework, the inquirer gathers information from open-ended, emerging data in order to identify themes or patterns. Qualitative research often takes place in the natural setting, where the participant does not need to leave his or her normal surroundings. The role of the researcher as interpreter is highly significant and forces the researcher to reflect on his or her role in the study through introspection and acknowledgement of potential bias (Creswell). In some qualitative research, the researcher is considered the co-creator because of his or her role as recorder and interpreter (Rudestam & Newton, 2001).

Specifically, the research methodology used for this study was a phenomenology. According to Rudestam and Newton (2001), “When phenomenology is applied to research, the focus is on what the person experiences and its expression in language that is as loyal to the lived experience as possible” (p. 38). The goal of this method is to listen for the essential nature of the idea; to understand at a deep level the unique events and occurrences experienced by the individual. Creswell (2003) describes phenomenology as identifying the “essence” of human experiences concerning a phenomenon involving small numbers of participants. Moustakas (1994) states that phenomenological research analyzes the use of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of an “essence” description.

Moustakas (1994) identifies two distinct forms of phenomenological research: empirical and heuristic. The heuristic approach begins with a personally meaningful problem or question that seeks to explain the relationship between oneself and the world in terms of social significance. Heuristics has a much broader scope than the empirical
approach and may go beyond dialogue to include journals, diaries, and artwork (Moustakas, 1994). Empirical phenomenology collects “naïve” descriptions of an event from open-ended questions and dialogue, then the process continues with reflective analysis and interpretation of the individual’s story to describe the structured experience (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). For the purpose of this study, an empirical phenomenological approach was used.

**Sampling, Subjects, Access, and Setting**

“A phenomenological study usually involves identifying and locating participants who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon that is being explored” (Rudestam & Newton, 2001, p. 92). In a phenomenology it is important that all subjects have experience in the phenomenon being studied. In this case, the phenomenon is achievement of a top management position in public relations. Moustakas (1994) states that a phenomenology involves studying a small number of subjects to develop patterns and relationships of meaning. Creswell (2007) adds that criterion sampling works well with a phenomenology when all individuals studied are representative of people who have experienced the phenomenon.

The human subjects review board at Western Michigan University granted access to participants of this study (see Appendix A). Prospective participants were fully aware of the study purpose, content, risk, and potential benefits through letters sent via United States Postal Service. This process is described in further detail later.

The sampling process began by selecting pool participants using the criterion of membership in the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). As previously stated, PRSA is the world’s largest membership organization of public relations professionals.
Membership in PRSA requires a person to submit an application and pay an annual membership fee. To apply, a person must have two or more years experience in public relations. The five-page application states that a person must devote a substantial portion of time to the practice of public relations and adherence to the PRSA Code of Ethics. Membership is not automatic; an application must be approved by the National PRSA organization. Membership in PRSA is the context in which the sampling process occurred.

The sampling approach used in this study was an elite sampling. Marshall and Rossman (2006) say that interviewing elites is a specialized type of interviewing that focuses on individuals who are considered influential, prominent, and well-informed. They are selected based upon expertise and position. Elite interviewing has many advantages. According to Marshall and Rossman, valuable information can be gained because of their position. Participants can offer unique perspectives and provide a broader vision of their role within an organization. They typically have experience with all facets of the business, including experience with external constituents. Of course, there are disadvantages. These subjects can be more difficult to access, and they may have time constraints due to their responsibilities. Due to their roles, they may also be use to controlling the interview process, and it is important for the researcher to establish credibility and expertise in order to gain the informant’s respect. The subjects for this study are elite participants because they were selected based upon their experience and position in the field of public relations, particularly their role in an upper-level position.

In order to create the first pool of participants, I utilized the West Michigan PRSA database and two criteria. The first criterion was title and the second was proximity. Title
was important in identifying current upper-level managers in public relations. Acceptable titles were any executive position such as principal, CEO, CFO, vice president, communication officer, and the like. In addition, titles with the distinctive terms of director, manager, or specialist were also accepted. For proximity, the pool was narrowed to a distance within 60 miles of the author’s residence in Muskegon County, Michigan.

The sample pool created was further refined through an introductory qualifying letter and consent form (see Appendices B & C). Sample pool subjects were mailed an introductory letter, along with the consent documentation. The letter briefly introduced the researcher, purpose of the study, and participant criteria. The introductory letter asked pool subjects to self-select their participation by reading the qualification criteria and then completing and returning the consent form in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided. All sample pool participants were tactfully notified that they may not be selected for the final study. Subjects with a current, relevant executive title, who expressed interest by responding with a complete consent form, were immediately accepted into the study (for example, an owner, president, CEO or vice president).

Once the completed consent form was received, a follow up e-mail survey was sent in an attempt to confirm the participant’s name and e-mail address and request the following additional information: (a) number of years experience in a direct supervisory role, (b) number of years in a decision making role, (c) number of years in an upper-management or executive role, and (d) approximate annual revenue of their organization. In the e-mail, all participants were tactfully reminded that, depending on the number of replies, they may not be selected for the final study.
Upon return and compilation of the e-mail survey, criterion sampling was applied in an attempt to refine the pool to elite participants who had: (a) at least three years of direct supervisory experience, or (b) at least two years of upper management experience, and (c) worked for an organization with an annual revenue of at least $500,000. Once this final pool was compiled, purposeful sampling selection was done on this elite pool to obtain twenty informants. In order to obtain the greatest diversity among participants, the criterion used for purposeful sampling was gender, age, years of experience, and industry.

Data Collection Methods and Procedures

As stated previously, the empirical phenomenology method was employed because I was interested in the unique, lived experience of the individual. This approach was the best one to use in order to answer the research questions which, briefly restated, ask: How do PR executives prepare and promote themselves for those positions? What facilitating factors do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles? What challenges and barriers do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?

The empirical phenomenological approach seeks uncontaminated explanations of events from open-ended questions and conversation (Moustakas, 1994). “The primary advantage of phenomenological interviewing is that it permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experience combined with those of the interviewees. It focuses on the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 105).
Procedural Explanation

Following is my procedural account of the data collection. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), prior to interviewing, it is important for the researcher to write an epoche. The epoche is a full description of the researcher’s experiences. “The purpose of this self-examination,” states Marshall and Rossman, “is to permit the researcher to gain clarity from her (his) own preconceptions” (p. 105). My epoche was completed in January 2010, well in advance of interviewing and can be found in Appendix D.

Prior to scheduling the appointments, subjects received a brief confirmation e-mail explaining the study in greater detail and notified them that the interviews were going to be digitally recorded using a voice-activated audio device. The letter also requested that the interviews take place in the subject’s office. In the letter, participants were asked to have one copy of their resume on hand for the researcher to keep as part of the study. Following the confirmation letter, I contacted the subjects via their preferred communication mode and scheduled a 90-minute meeting. I also sent a follow-up e-mail of confirmation prior to the scheduled appointment.

Upon arrival at the appointed location, I followed common professional etiquette by checking in with the subject’s secretary or receptionist if he or she had one. If they did not have a receptionist, I patiently waited for them to arrive. Following a brief introduction with the subject, we proceeded to the participant’s office or nearby meeting room, as determined by the subject. In two cases, the best location was determined to be a fairly quiet restaurant. Once situated, I offered a brief overview of the research study and procedures. At this time, I also introduced the audio-recording device and began recording. To sow the seeds of trust, I attempted to exhibit patience, friendliness, and a
genuine interest in the subject and his or her experience (Creswell, 2007). Brief observational field notes were taken during the interview process to help me remember key phrases or important points. After the interview, I explained the continuing process of the study, asked for potential future contact, and thanked the subject for his or her participation. Lastly, I followed up the meeting with a thank you note within one week of the appointment.

**Interviews**

*Data collection of in-depth interviews.* The data regarding the participant’s lived experience in career advancement to an upper-level position in public relations was collected in four ways: (a) interviews, (b) career path diagram, (c) card sorting, and, (d) artifact collection. Following is the detailed explanation of the data collection for the interview.

The data collection was done using an open-ended, in-depth interview process. Phenomenological researchers typically use interviews or extended conversations as the source of their data (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), “Qualitative researchers rely quite extensively on in-depth interviewing” (p. 101). They add that in-depth interviews are more like conversations than formal events. “The overall strategy of in-depth interviews is to be elegant in design, relying on a single primary method for gathering data” (p. 55). Creswell adds that the interviews generally involve unstructured and open-ended questions that are few in number that are intended to draw out views and opinions from participants. The purpose of this approach is to be conversational and to have subjects tell their story. The interview was semi-structured. There were some questions prepared in advance to draw out the participants to reflect on...
their experience, while at the same time allowing for elaboration and follow-up questions (Rudestam & Newton, 2001).

The Interview Protocol (see Appendix E) was partitioned into three sections in order to address each research question on topics identified through the literature review. The sectioning of interview questions was not made apparent to the participants; this was done simply for organizational purposes. The first section included three questions aimed at career path pattern experiences. The second section was composed of one question focused on facilitating experiences, with several repeating prompts. The third section also consisted of one question on barriers faced in their career advancement, with several repeating prompts. When necessary, subjects were asked semi-structured probe questions. These probes addressed issues of importance to the study only when the subject did not broach the topic. The probes sought further understanding into the lived experience of the subject in particular areas relevant to the study.

Data analysis for in-depth interviews. Upon completion of the interview, the audio-recordings were transcribed in full by the researcher using the voice recognition software, MacSpeech Dictate. The recordings were typed as recorded, using punctuation as accurately as possible to translate the spoken word to written.

For data analysis of interviews, Moustakas (1994) recommends the following steps: (a) read for understanding, (b) analyze the data for significant phrases, (c) develop and cluster meanings, and (d) present an exhaustive description of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. Following this general approach, I began with the individual case analysis, reading and re-reading the transcripts of one case in order to gain an overall understanding of the data (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). Because I
performed my own transcription, I was able to fully engulf myself in the data. As I reviewed the data, I used memoing to capture initial thoughts and reactions. Memoing was done for two reasons. First, it helped me identify and set aside any immediate bias. Second, I evaluated these initial memos against the final findings of the individual case to see how they compared (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Marshall and Rossman (2006) state that the researcher should plan a system that eases retrieval. They add that there are times when very focused data techniques can be employed using “lists of predetermined categories for data coding” (p. 152). This coding system, done prior to the research, allows for both structural and textural descriptions that include the “what” and “how” of the phenomenon. The coding schemes used for this study pertained directly to the lived experience of attaining a top-management position in public relations. According to Namey, Guest, Thairu, and Johnson (2007), “from the outset, researchers need to delineate the boundaries of a given analysis with a comprehensive analysis plan. This plan can include guidelines for data set reduction…” (p. 3). Data reduction is part of the analysis that helps to focus, sharpen, and organize data in order for relevant conclusions to be made and verified. Patton (2002) describes this as deductive analysis, where the categories are identified beforehand according to an existing framework. The conceptual framework in this case was identified through the literature review as career patterns, facilitators, and barriers.
### Table 3

**Code Schemes**

#### ONE: CAREER PATH FACTORS CODING SCHEME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Meaning of the code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CP-ENT</td>
<td>Entry-level position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP-FUNC</td>
<td>Cross-function experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP-MOB</td>
<td>Job mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP-ED</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP-IN</td>
<td>Internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP-SEQ</td>
<td>Career sequence progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP-OTH</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### TWO: FACILITATING FACTORS CODING SCHEME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Meaning of the code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F-PER</td>
<td>Personal traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-TASK</td>
<td>Task skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-MGNT</td>
<td>Management skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-ETH</td>
<td>Ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-BUS</td>
<td>Business savvy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-DIV</td>
<td>Diversity of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-ROLE</td>
<td>Role models or mentors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-OTH</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### THREE: BARRIER FACTORS CODING SCHEME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Meaning of the code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B-ED</td>
<td>Substandard education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-SK</td>
<td>Substandard skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-NEG</td>
<td>Negative perceptions of PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-GEND</td>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-BUS</td>
<td>Lack of business savvy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-OTH</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three-tiered structure of the in-depth interviews created three data sets; each a direct link to a corresponding conceptual design factor and research question. Data set one relates to career patterns and research question one. Data set two is facilitators and
research question two. Data set three consists of barriers regarding research question three. Each relevant response within the related interview question was line coded to improve reliability, representing the coding scheme constructs for each conceptual factor, as shown in table 3. For example, in interview section one, only data regarding career path pattern factors was gathered. The same holds true for section two on facilitating factors and section three on barriers. It was important not to force data into previously identified categories, but to be open to new emerging factors within each section, which was the purpose of the “other” category (Patton, 2002). As the coding proceeded, some new understandings emerged, offering additional insight as reported in the findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The coding acted as a grouping of significant statements into larger units of information called meaning units or themes. This clustering allowed for the emergence of themes common to all of the participant’s transcripts (Crewell, 2007). After completing the individual case analysis, co-occurrence was used in a cross-case analysis to understand how these thematic concepts were distributed within the data set. Namey et al., (2007) state that patterns in data sets can be identified by examining co-occurrences such as correlations among specific code schemes. The following decision rules were established for the mention frequency of each code by factor: (a) 70 percent mention frequency equaled a theme, and; (b) 50-69 percent mention frequency equaled an emerging theme.

A textural and structural description of the experience was written by integrating the results into an exhaustive description of the actual individual phenomenon factors by major category. The textual description also included verbatim examples by the
informants (Creswell, 2007). This structural portion reflected on the setting and context in which each phenomenon was experienced. The result was a full, composite description of the phenomenon which incorporated both the textual and structural descriptions. This is considered the “essence” of the experience describing what the participants experienced and how they experienced it (Creswell).

Creswell (2007) says that member checking should be utilized to determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings. Therefore, subjects were given written transcriptions to make notes and expand on their original thoughts. This member checking technique provided further verification of the data, but did not result in much additional data. Only minor changes were made in most cases, such as the correct spelling of names. Lastly, although follow up phone interviews and e-mails were an option, they were unnecessary.

Creswell (2007) states that the researcher is the instrumentation in qualitative studies; this required the researcher to identify personal values, assumptions, and biases. As described previously, the epoche was written as the first procedural step. The epoche, along with the memoing, helped identify the researcher’s experience and assumptions related to the topic and helped bracket any bias. Moustakas (1994) says that this bracketing helps isolate the researcher’s experiences and values in order to better understand those of the participants, so as not to confuse or entangle potential personal issues with the collected data.

According to James Wood (2007), Cohen’s Kappa is an index of inter-rater reliability commonly used to measure the level of agreement between two sets of ratings. In other words, Cohen’s Kappa measures how well two raters agree on a set of alternatives. This inter-rater reliability measure was applied to the coding scheme of each
category to assess the reliability of the coding schemes. A random sample of 20 units of data for each of the three categories was given to a colleague with knowledge of the coding schemes. Woods states that the Kappa reliability should be at least .60 to .70, however in data for specific individuals, ratings of .80 or .90 are expected. For this study, a Cohen’s Kappa of .80 or higher was required. For career path patterns, .902 was achieved. For facilitating factors, the score was also .902. For barriers to advancement, a perfect score of 1.00 was attained.

**Career Path Diagram Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Following the in-depth interview session, participants were asked to complete a career path diagram, beginning with their educational career through their current position. A blank, yet outlined diagram (see Appendix F) was provided to the participant to chart their path. Following this, participants were asked to place stickers on this chart to identify the most influential time period of career facilitators and barriers. The content of the stickers were taken from the literature review, however several blank ones were available and participants were encouraged to write their own factors.

The three-tiered structure of the career path diagram created a visual flow of lived experience and inter-connectedness among the three sets of data. This visual representation offered additional insight as to the relationship among the categories along the career path progression. These data sets were used in a final analysis discussion regarding the inter-relatedness of the categories.

**Card Sorting Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Following the career path diagram and labeling, informants were given three sets of component cards, one at a time, and asked to rank order the importance of key factors
found through the literature review in each area of career path, facilitators, and barriers. In each set, there were three blank cards on which the subject could write their own factor if they felt compelled to do so. Both the career path diagram and sorting tasks were done near the end of the interview process in order to remove participant’s potential identification of the components during the question-response session.

The findings of the card sorting resulted in a rank order of factors within the three conceptual categories as deemed most important based upon their lived experience. These rank orders were compared across all participants using frequency distribution analysis. Similar to the rules of cross occurrence, rules were established to identify the importance of each factor: (a) a rank of 1-2 by 70% of participants was considered an important theme, and; (b) a cumulative rank of 1-4 by 70% of participants was considered an emerging theme.

**Artifacts Data Collection and Data Analysis**

Lastly, informants were asked to relate a story that represented a significant turning point in their career. After the telling of the story, participants were asked to share any physical artifacts they deem important as a representation of their career. As part of this process, participants were asked to share a copy of their resume to be used to further observe their lived experience. The story and artifacts were coded using the previously identified coding schemes and used for further support of identified themes.
Table 4

Cross-walk of Research Questions, Data Collection, and Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Collection</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 1: How do public relations professionals who advance to top-level management positions in business prepare and promote themselves for those positions?</td>
<td>1. Interviewing on career pattern topics such as: entry-level job in finance; cross-functions; job mobility; advanced education; internships; organization size; sequence. 2. Career Path diagram 3. Card Sorting on the Career Path Factors 4. Collection of Artifacts on Career Path Factors</td>
<td>Content analysis using the Career Path Coding Scheme. Cross analysis using the Career Path Coding Scheme Rank order of factors; frequency distribution analysis Content analysis using the Career Path Coding Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 2: What facilitating factors do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?</td>
<td>1. Interviewing on facilitating factors such as: personal traits; task skills; management skills; positive ethics, business savvy; diversity of experience; use of mentors and role models 2. Facilitating Factors as mentioned in the Career Path Diagram 3. Card Sorting on Facilitating Factors 4. Collection of Artifacts on Facilitating Factors</td>
<td>Content analysis using the Facilitating Factors Coding Scheme Content analysis using the Facilitating Factors Coding Scheme Rank order of factors; frequency distribution analysis Content analysis using the Facilitating Factors Coding Scheme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 3: What challenges and barriers do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?</td>
<td>1. Interviewing on barriers such as: substandard education; lacking skill sets; perceptions of PR; gender; business savvy 2. Barriers as mentioned in the Career Path Diagram 3. Card Sorting on Barriers 4. Collection of Artifacts on Barriers</td>
<td>Content analysis using the Barriers Coding Scheme Content analysis using the Barriers Coding Scheme Content analysis using the Barriers Coding Scheme Content analysis using the Barriers Coding Scheme</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cross-walk of Research Design

In order to address the research questions, and in consistency with the literature review analysis, the data was collected based upon the conceptual framework previously identified by the categories of career patterns, facilitators for career advancement, and barriers to career advancement. As described previously, data related to the career paths to top positions in public relations were collected in four ways: (a) individual in-depth elite interviews, (b) career path diagram, including the placement of noteworthy facilitators and barriers when they were most influential, (c) card sorting, and, (d) storytelling and artifact observation. See Table 4 for a cross-walk of the study’s research questions as they relate to the methods of data collection and analysis.

Limitations and Delimitations Overview

In in-depth, elite interviews, personal interaction and cooperation are essential. Creswell (2007) states that, for one reason or another, interviewees may be unwilling to share at the time of the interview. Additionally, Creswell states that the interviewer may not ask the right questions or the interviewer may not fully comprehend responses for a variety of reasons. Interestingly, the participant may have good reason not to be honest or fully disclose information. Elites are often difficult to gain access to and the author may need to rely on a sponsor to gain access. Elites also may be sophisticated in managing the interview process, so this will require great ability of the interviewer to establish competence and credibility.

Let me address these issues brought up by Creswell. It appeared to me that most, if not all participants were ready and willing to share at the time of the interview. As a “member of their tribe,” I was made to feel welcome and offered kind cooperation.
Participants seemed eager to share their experience. At times, there was some confusion regarding the questions, but the rapport was good and participants asked for clarification when necessary. The level of trust appeared to be great. Several people disclosed significant personal information, however the topic did not require great personal disclosure. I believe there was little need for subjects to avoid sharing information. Being in public relations, all subjects were easy to contact and each one followed up in a timely manner. I did rely on a sponsor introduction in one case. There were no power struggles during the interview process as we followed the protocol; each session went smoothly.

Another purposeful limitation of this study is the fact that I did not specifically examine the many assumptions being made in the public relations industry today. The primary assumptions identified previously are as follows: (a) it is unknown if PR practitioners are under-represented at the executive level in business, (b) it is unknown if PR professionals are handicapped in their ability to perform mid-and-upper-level executive positions due to deficits in business knowledge or skills, (c) it is unknown if the perceived lack of business skills is indeed a challenge in career advancement.

A delimiting factor is simply that this research was only inclusive of twenty participants from the restricted region of West Michigan. The results cannot reliably be applied to the larger context of the public relations industry. In combination with this is the delimiting factor of participants being located within 60-miles of my location. This places constrictions on the study as a regional project.

The Researcher

According to Creswell (2007), one purpose of the research design is to demonstrate the capability of the researcher in conducting qualitative research. I
attempted to display the following desired skills of excellent qualitative researchers: (a) asking good questions, (b) interpreting answers, (c) being a good listener, (d) being adaptive and flexible, (e) understanding relevant issues, (f) being unbiased, and, (g) sensitive and responsive to contradictory evidence (Yin, 2003).

I am an assistant professor, program champion and program coordinator in the field of public relations higher education. I have four years of full-time teaching experience in public relations, marketing, advertising, and retail at Ferris State University. Additionally, I have three years of experience as an adjunct instructor at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) and Baker College. In 2005, I received accreditation in public relations (APR) and graduated summa cum laude with a master of science in communication from GVSU. In 2005, I began work on my doctorate in higher educational leadership where I have finished my coursework summa cum laude.

Prior to my career in higher education, I spent 16 years in various corporate roles related to public relations. Early in my career, I held positions as a graphic designer, writer, and task practitioner of marketing and PR tactics. For approximately eight years, I held positions in middle management, including five years as a corporate retail buyer responsible for a 45 million dollar category. Following this, I spent seven years in an executive role in both manufacturing and the non-profit sector. In 2000, I was offered and declined, the presidency of a work glove manufacturing company with annual revenue of approximately $5 million. In 2001, I accepted a position as the community relations officer for one of the largest community foundations in the nation, where I worked for more than five years before becoming a full-time, tenure-track professor at Ferris State University (FSU). Under my leadership, FSU was recently awarded Certification for
Education in Public Relations (CEPR) from the national Public Relations Society of America, becoming one of approximately 24 programs in the nation to attain this status and the only one in the state. Additionally, FSU is the only program in the nation to award a bachelor’s in public relations as a business degree, based out of the College of Business, requiring more than 30 hours of business credits. In April 2010, I was awarded the Sytsma Award for Faculty Excellence, an honor presented annually to one faculty member in the College of Business.

Chapter Three Summary

This chapter explained the methods and procedures used to collect and analyze the data regarding the phenomenon of achieving an upper-level position in public relations. The researcher described the sampling process to find and meet with informants who have the lived experience of this event. The study is a qualitative empirical phenomenology using in-depth interviews, career path diagram, card sorting, and artifact collection to better understand the essence of this lived experience. Chapter Four will detail the results of this research and Chapter Five will offer the implications of the findings.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study is to examine the lived experience of those who have achieved an upper-level position in public relations. This chapter offers the results of the interpretive analysis obtained from twenty in-depth interviews done with elite research participants over a period of two months. Detailed descriptive information of the sample group is covered later in this chapter (Table 5).

I chose to bracket my experience before the study to help set aside bias and let the reader know my experience, values, and preconceptions. According to Ponterotto (2005), it is understood that a researcher is not without bias in a phenomenological approach. It is important to be aware of any predisposition to minimize influence on the study, particularly the research analysis and findings. The procedures explained in the methodological section, such as, memoing, member checking, coding, and writing an epoche, helped to isolate bias and limit the influence of any preconceptions on the findings.

The coding schemes (see table 3) used for the results analysis were created based upon the literature review and segmented into three categories of career path patterns, facilitating factors, and barriers to advancement. To further validate the accuracy of the coding schemes used in the analysis, a Cohen’s Kappa was performed for each category with the resulting scores of .902 for career path patterns, .902 for facilitating factors, and 1.00 for barriers to career advancement. This demonstrates a high level of agreement between the raters in terms of the application of codes, which contributes to the reliability and validity of the findings. Additionally, the following decision rules were established
for the mention frequency within each interview section of each code by factor as follows: (a) 70 percent mention frequency equaled a theme, and (b) 50-69 percent mention frequency equaled an emerging theme. Lastly, for the card sorting, the following rules were established: (a) a rank of 1-2 by 70% of participants was considered an important theme, and (b) a cumulative rank of 1-4 by 70% of participants was considered an emerging theme.

Participants

Participants were selected from a database of 90 PRSA members who held a title that signified upper management status and who lived within a 60-mile radius of the researcher. From this initial group of 90, 25 people returned the consent form indicating interest and agreement to participate in this study. Of these 25, four subjects with a senior executive title such as vice president, president, owner, or CEO were immediately included in the final sampling. Others received an e-mail survey and were narrowed down using the criteria described in Chapter Three. The final sample pool consisted of twenty participants from West Michigan. Their identities have been protected in keeping with the confidentiality agreement. Random numbers were assigned to each subject and do not correlate to any identifiable pattern. Other details, such as employers, titles, location, previous occupations, and situations, have been masked to further protect each participant’s anonymity.

Descriptive Statistics

Eighteen of the twenty participants are from Grand Rapids, Michigan (the second-largest city in the state), one is from Kalamazoo and one is from Grand Haven. Eleven subjects (55%) are female and nine are male. While two participants own and operate
their own agency, these individuals recently worked for larger organizations and their previous employer record was used in all of the following statistics. Half (ten) of the participants are employed in a corporate setting, six are at an agency, and four are at a non-profit organization (see Figure 2). Sixty-five percent (13) of the subjects are members of the executive team with direct access to the president or CEO, with a role in significant organizational decision-making.

Figure 2. Participant Industry Employment

Figure 3 illustrates years of direct supervisory experience. As you can see, four of the participants have 16 or more years of direct supervisory experience; another two have 11-to-15 years; six have 6-10 years; while another six have 1-5 years, and; two have no direct supervisory experience.
To protect participant’s identity, revenue was sectioned into three categories of (a) less than $1.5 million, (b) $1.5 million to $100 million, and (c) more than $1 billion (note: there were none between $100 million and $1 billion). The smallest organization any particular participant worked for is a PR agency with annual revenue of approximately $500,000. 11 people work for organizations with annual revenue, or operating budget, ranging from $1.5 million to $100 million. The remaining six subjects worked for organizations with revenues of more than $1 billion, the largest being $8 billion (see Table 5).
Table 5

*Participant Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Revenue or NP Budget</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Executive Team Member</th>
<th>Direct Supervision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>&gt; $1 billion</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16 or more years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>&lt; $1.5 million</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Non-Profit</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Non-Profit</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Non-Profit</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>&gt; $1 billion</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11-15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>&gt; $1 billion</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>16 or more years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>&lt; $1.5 million</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Non-Profit</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1-5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>&lt; $1.5 million</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>11-15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>&gt; $1 billion</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>&gt; $1 billion</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>16 or more years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>&gt; $1 billion</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16 or more years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Corporate</td>
<td>$1.5-100 million</td>
<td>Executive</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6-10 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was evident early on that titles were misleading in determining responsibility. For example, one participant is considered a manager, but works for an organization with revenue of more than several billion with access to senior management and global responsibilities. Compare this to another subject who is a director for a company within a small geographic region with annual revenue of about $50 million. To help clarify this point, I removed titles and made the distinction of roles as follows: (a) an executive makes decisions regarding the entire organization and has direct supervisory responsibility; (b) a director makes departmental management decisions and has direct-or -indirect supervisory responsibility, and (c) a manager makes day-to-day functional management decisions and may, or may not, have direct supervisory responsibility. Based on this scale, 40% (8) are at the executive level, 45% (9) are directors, and 15% (3) are managers. See table 5 for a complete listing of the descriptive statistics (note: some data, such as location and gender, has been removed to protect identities).

As previously identified by the research, three foundational categories emerged in the advancement to an executive-level position in public relations; they are: career path patterns, facilitators for advancement, and barriers to success. These categories and the relationship among them form the conceptual framework for this study.

Participants in this study were asked to complete a 90-minute interview that included: (a) interviews, (b) career path diagram, (c) card sorting, and, (d) artifact collection. The interview questions, card sorting, and artifacts were coded to identify themes in career path patterns, factors that facilitated career advancement, and barriers to career advancement. The career path diagram was used to identify and discuss inter-related patterns among the three categories. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the
findings of the research for each category and factor as they related directly back to the research questions. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the inter-relatedness of the categories.

Research Question 1: Career Path Patterns

Research question one asked, how do public relations professionals who advance to top-level management positions in business prepare and promote themselves for those positions? To answer this question, the research study examined career path patterns, which are identified as major events or repetitive behaviors exhibited throughout the entire career of a participant. Based upon the literature review, seven factors were identified and researched as a part of this study, they are: (a) entry level position, (b) cross-function experience, (c) job mobility, (d) education, (e) internship, (f) career sequence progression, and (g) a general “other” category to capture potential additional insights from the subject’s lived experience. Following are the findings for each of these factors within the career path pattern category. Each section begins with an overall description of the findings with direct participant quotes, followed by tables that highlight the findings. Please note, once again, some identifying information has been masked to safeguard the participants.

1.1 Entry Level Positions Are External to PR Field

Interestingly, one of the first themes to emerge from this study is that a significant majority of practitioners did not begin their career in public relations, “My very first job was in sales… (007).” Seventy percent of the subjects (14), started in an industry outside of PR, like participant #012, “And I started in the engineering department drawing maps… (012).” Four people started in education, like participant #016, “And for about
three-to-four years, I taught English, and speech, and American history, and world geography, which I had never had a class in, in my life (016)! Three participants started in marketing, “I went to work for [NAME] as a marketing analyst, right out of school (005).” Several others had independent starts in fields such as journalism, graphic design, data analyst, engineering technician, billing clerk, television production, and sales. “So I was a client administrative representative, a billing clerk (020).” Only six participants (30%) had an entry-level position that could be considered as directly in public relations. See Figure 4 for a breakdown of entry-level positions by industry and Table 6, Career Path Progression, for a complete listing of all participants and their entry-level position.

Figure 4. Entry Level Positions by Industry
Table 6

Career Path Progression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry Level Position</th>
<th>Career Progression</th>
<th>Comm Specialist</th>
<th>Comm Director</th>
<th>Comm Manager</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PR Writer</td>
<td>Freelance</td>
<td>PR Director</td>
<td>PR Director</td>
<td>PR Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>001</td>
<td>Assistant Account Executive</td>
<td>Account Executive</td>
<td>Senior Account Executive</td>
<td>PR Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>002</td>
<td>Marketing Coordinator</td>
<td>Account Executive</td>
<td>PR Director</td>
<td>PR Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>003</td>
<td>Marketing Analyst</td>
<td>Analyst 1-3</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>PR Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>004</td>
<td>International English Teacher</td>
<td>Comm Coordinator</td>
<td>PR Specialist</td>
<td>PR Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>005</td>
<td>Direct Sales</td>
<td>Product Coordinator</td>
<td>PR Manager</td>
<td>Director of PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>006</td>
<td>Graphic Designer</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>Comm Manager</td>
<td>Comm Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>007</td>
<td>Assistant Account Executive</td>
<td>Comm Specialist</td>
<td>Comm Manager</td>
<td>PR Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>008</td>
<td>News Assistant</td>
<td>News Reporter</td>
<td>Associate Producer</td>
<td>PR Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>009</td>
<td>Elementary Teacher</td>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Comm Manager</td>
<td>PR Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>010</td>
<td>Engineering Technician</td>
<td>Marketing Rep</td>
<td>Comm Manager</td>
<td>Senior PR Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>011</td>
<td>PR Account Manager</td>
<td>PR Coordinator</td>
<td>Senior Consultant</td>
<td>PR Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>012</td>
<td>Retail Copywriter</td>
<td>Advertising Manager</td>
<td>Marketing Instructor</td>
<td>Freelance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>013</td>
<td>Assistant Account Executive</td>
<td>Comm Coordinator</td>
<td>Comm Manager</td>
<td>PR Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>014</td>
<td>Junior High English Teacher</td>
<td>Resource Technician</td>
<td>Comm Specialist</td>
<td>Campaign Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>015</td>
<td>Editor &amp; Reporter</td>
<td>Comm Specialist</td>
<td>Account Executive</td>
<td>Senior Account Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>016</td>
<td>Document Analyst</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>017</td>
<td>International Education Teacher</td>
<td>College Instructor</td>
<td>Administrative Supervisor</td>
<td>Administrative Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>018</td>
<td>Billing Clerk</td>
<td>Technical Writer</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>PR &amp; Marketing Manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

= co change
= co & geo change
= geo change
Another theme from the entry-level position factor is the seeming ease with which all participants found a job, “I worked for an advertising and marketing, like business-to-business PR firm in Grand Rapids. And they were the ones that first gave me a chance (013).” Immediately upon graduation, 85% of participants were employed, and within two months, the remaining 15% were employed. “I was very blessed to, immediately upon college graduation… be employed, have a job, in hand. A recruiter came to campus and all that, and I was selected for this position… (005).”

Only three people mentioned it took a couple months to find a job and four subjects (20%) had jobs before they even graduated from college, “So, six months before I graduated, I went to [NAME] on contract…(001),” and, “My first job was with the [NAME] while still in college (008).” Here’s an example from participant #010 who was hired full-time before his/her senior year of college:

Do you want to work here? And I’m like, but I’m not even done with school yet. I was only a junior. I mean, I was wrapping up my junior year and I still have one year of school left (010).

Some participant’s even landed fairly major jobs while still in college, making good money, “I started working there while I was still a student… I made like sixteen grand a year (017)!"

Based on the card sort ranking, the entry-level position is not strong enough to be an emerging theme with only 25% of subjects ranking it as a 1-2 in importance to their career and only 50% ranking it between 1-4. The entry-level position would appear to be important from a general life experience perspective, but not necessarily in getting a job or advancing the subject’s career in public relations. The entry-level job is an important
starting point that put subjects on the path to success, but not strong enough to rank among the top factors for career advancement.

1.2 Cross-function Experience Gains 100% Mention Frequency

The cross-function experience is about the depth and breadth of practice in performing the many public relations functions such as media relations, employee communications, or investor relations, along with all the myriad tasks that accompany these various roles. It is about the variety of training, practice, and expertise within the full spectrum of public relations. Here’s an example from participant #004, “I mean, I did everything, some advertising stuff, public relations, writing, media, I did graphic design for a while, and not only that, I got to really learn the whole business environment (004).” And this from participant #012, “And I think it's just getting all of the, all of the experience you can. And for it to be as varied as possible. I think that really helps you and makes you more marketable (012).” The variety of experience expressed by the participant’s varied greatly too, “It was an even mix of internal communications, external communications, marketing, advertising, community relations. I mean, I did everything from their brochures and newsletters to media to donation drives and event management, fundraising, yeah (015).”

The cross-function experience factor received the most significant and frequent mentions of any factor during this portion of the interviews. Participants placed great importance in having varied practice for greater flexibility, “To keep your skill set well rounded and to have the ability to think outside the box… To have enough knowledge for you to be as open as possible (020).” Additionally, this factor easily tops all factors in the career path patterns section for the card sorting activity. One hundred percent of the
participants talked about the importance of the cross-function experience for advancing their career in public relations. Here is one of the most telling quotes from this section:

I have written press releases before. I have laid out a brochure before. I have sat at a printer and done press checks before. I have set up audio at an event before. I have put up a trade show booth, physically, myself. I haven’t been part of a team that did it. You know, it’s not that I learned about it in school. I have done those things. So, yes you are hiring me… and you are asking me to think strategically, but I know at some point things just have to be done and I am not beyond pulling up Photoshop, you know, pulling up Vocus myself. Writing a press release, building a distribution list, and putting the damn thing out myself. And I think more people need to have that. So, that was one of the, one of the things that has helped me advance is just that good foundation of actually doing stuff. That’s helped me a lot (008).

Among the card sorting, 70% ranked it as 1 or 2 in importance and 95% ranked it among the top four factors for advancement, with only one abstention. Many people got quite animated about this topic and seemed to really enjoy talking about their cross-function experience. “I love planning events. I love that organization, the invitation, the, you know, deciding who your speakers are going to be, where the location or venue or the menu… (006).” Clearly this factor emerged as a strong theme in career path patterns.

1.3 Job Mobility is Experienced but Inconsequential

Job mobility refers only to geographic moves that were done specifically for the career, as demonstrated here by participant #007, “We had a couple dogs and thought, you know, let’s look at somewhere else where the economy might be a little bit better or
where there is an opportunity to continue to do global PR which is really what I wanted to do (007).” It is interesting to note, that nine interviewees (45%) were originally from another state or country, ending up in Michigan after starting in far away places such as Canada, California, Illinois, Ohio, Minnesota, South Carolina, Washington D.C., Washington, and Wisconsin. Some of these transitions are not counted in job mobility however, because they were not done for the career. For example, one subject who was born in Canada moved to Michigan for educational reasons and therefore the move was not considered relevant for this section. Others moved for family, like this participant:

Yeah, we lived in [CITY] for 14 years and when… [SPOUSE] said, you know, I would really like to go back and be closer to the kids. And they're here… So, thus our decision to come back to snowy Michigan as opposed to sunny, beautiful [CITY] (016).

Job mobility becomes a strong theme with fifteen (75%) participants making at least one geographical move for a job throughout their career (Table 6, Career Path Progression, illustrates this point). Some participant’s started in Michigan, left, and then came back, “Went to Chicago for about four months, worked for company and came back to Grand Rapids where they had an office… (008).” Interestingly, however, this factor is barely worth mentioning from the card sort activity perspective, with only 10% of the subjects placing job mobility in the top two, and only 30% placing it in the top four factors in importance for advancement. Oddly, although 75% of the participants moved for a job, half of all participants considered job mobility such an irrelevant factor to the advancement of their career that they did not even include it in the card sort ranking.
In reading through the interviews, those who move readily acknowledge the transfer and some even planned for it. Participant #020 even comments on how other’s perceived his/her geographic career move as unusual, “It's funny, when you come to West Michigan people say, so you just decided to up and move? …this just shocked people (020).” Some, on the other hand, moved prior to getting into the field of PR and did not consider job mobility important to advancement within this industry. Others, however, seem to downplay the importance of job mobility or maybe even seem a little resentful of the moves themselves. The fifteen who relocated for their job moved a total of at least 28 times; nearly twice for each person. Another individual (who will remain anonymous to protect his/her identity) made several horizontal moves within the same company, as many as six-or-seven times:

I actually started in Saginaw and then I think I went to Bay City, then to Saginaw, then I went to Mount Pleasant. Then I went back to Saginaw (chuckles). Then I went to Flint. In 1990, I moved here.

Job mobility appears to be one of those factors that nearly all subjects experienced, but most do not consider important in advancing their career in public relations. “So, we ended up moving here and I wasn’t going to do that commute. I had done it for three months and it was just too much (017).”

1.4 Education: Master’s an Emerging Theme, APR Falls Short

All participants earned a bachelor degree, but only three (15%) of the twenty participants hold a bachelor degree in business, with one other having a minor in business. Eight of twenty (40%) have a degree in communication, three in journalism, three in advertising, and several independent degrees in various fields such as sociology,
English, business administration, elementary education, public affairs, and speech and theater. See Table 7, Educational Traits, for a complete listing of participants’ academic credentials. The participant’s identification number was removed from this table and the order of the listing was randomized to protect identities.

The starting of a master’s degree is a theme, with fifteen of twenty (75%) participants beginning the journey. “Getting my master’s degree was huge… I’ve had to stay on top of my toes… So I really need to be on top of my game all the time and that definitely helps me (010).” Interestingly, though, three participants have not completed their degree, bringing the total number of participants who have attained a master’s degree to 12 (60%), making the completion of a master’s degree an emerging theme. One participant holds two master’s degrees. While there were some minor mentions of gaining a doctoral degree, no one has initiated this process.

Nine people (45%) completed their master’s in communication, one in public relations, one MBA, and the dual master’s participant holds degrees in counseling / personnel and management. All of the higher education degrees, bachelor’s and master’s, were from institutions like Michigan State University or Western Michigan University. Eight of the twelve who hold a master’s degree went to graduate school, while also working full-time, “…the major step was the master’s program at [NAME]. It’s like I said, I was able to take things that I learned that night to work the very next day (013).”
Table 7

*Educational Traits*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Degree</th>
<th>Bachelor’s Degree</th>
<th>Master’s Degree</th>
<th>APR</th>
<th>Internships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>BA Business Administration</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Speech / Theater</td>
<td>MA Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BS Communication</td>
<td>Started MA Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA International Communication</td>
<td>MA Public Communication</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>BA Advertising / PR</td>
<td>MA Counseling &amp; Personnel MS Management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BS Public Affairs</td>
<td>MS Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Advertising / PR</td>
<td>MA Organizational Communication</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Journalism</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Sociology</td>
<td>MS Communication</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Journalism</td>
<td>MS Communication / Started MBA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BS Communication</td>
<td>MS Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Advertising</td>
<td>Started MBA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA English</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Broadcast Journalism &amp; Spanish</td>
<td>MS Communication</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>BA Communication</td>
<td>MS Communication</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Elementary Education</td>
<td>Started MA Education</td>
<td>x</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BA Communication</td>
<td>MA Public Relations</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several participants stated that they pursued their master’s because their employer offered tuition reimbursement. “I got my bachelor’s from there and then, a few years later, because my employer offers tuition reimbursement, went back and got my master’s
from [NAME] in communications as well (009).” One participant received a stipend, while also getting his/her master’s paid for, “I could essentially fast-track the master’s program and also quit my job and I would be earning a little bit of a stipend. The key was that they would pay for your master’s program (015).” Others completed a more advanced degree because they said it only required one more year of college following their undergraduate degree:

I did my Master’s in public communication in one year. Like I said, I already had enough courses already, and it was kind of like a no-brainer; I’d only have to go to school for another nine months and I’d have a Master’s degree (006).

Once again, however, the card sort ranking does not place a master’s degree as an important or emerging theme. Only 30% reported an advanced degree worthy of a 1-2 ranking, with 40% ranking it among the top four factors for advancement. The bachelor’s degree is clearly a given expectation, but while 60% of participants have a master’s degree, the card sort ranking did not place the master’s degree as important for career advancement.

Also included in the education section were discussions regarding all other types of formalized training, certification, and accreditation. The only significant area that received much attention beyond a degree in higher education was Accreditation in Public Relations (APR):

A step forward in public relations was perhaps when I went and got my Accreditation in Public Relations. I really jumped into the profession of public relations and got a better understanding of the profession and better practice of the
profession… Again, the accreditation process was very good in advancing me and giving me some good underpinnings (018).

Even then, only eight of the twenty participants (40%) have received their APR through the national Public Relations Society of America (see Table 7). Those who have their APR, found it to be highly important, but they are in the minority of achievers. “I decided that I should become accredited in PRSA as an APR and I should do that while my company would reimburse me for it (001).”

Four subjects mentioned that they are planning on getting their APR, “And, there is an independent study opportunity and I think I’m going to take advantage of that and try to, you know, take the test and see what happens (007).” At the time of the interview, none had taken this step primarily due to lifestyle issues such as time away from family.

1.5 Internships Lead to a Job for Only 10%

Of those interviewed, less than half (45%), nine of twenty, had a college internship (see Table 7), and surprisingly, only two (10%) of these went on to gain full-time employment at the company with whom they interned. Those who did intern had an average of two interns (the median is also two), with one participant having as many as four internships. In the card sort ranking, only two people (10%) placed internships among the top two factors for advancement and only 30% placed it among the top four factors. Those who had internships seem to regard them highly, “It was phenomenal. It was a fun job. And I did really well, and I loved it (002).” Some even stating that they were critical to their success, “I think they’re so important, especially for today’s youth because you don’t necessarily know what kind of career path you want to take. And for me, the internships are what sealed the deal, basically (006).” Some who had internships
boast impressive experience at some highly influential corporations such as AT&T, McDonald’s, U.S. News & World Report, National Education Association, and Fleishman Hillard. Perhaps participant #013 sums it up best by stating that not doing an internship was the biggest mistake, and yet, this participant was able to find a job and climb the corporate ladder:

   It was the biggest mistake that I made. You know I should have, I still was able to get really great jobs and was able to work my way up, but I think from an experience standpoint I would’ve been a lot better off in my first position if I would’ve had an internship (013).

1.6 Career Sequence Progression Shows Easy Entry into PR Field

   This was a difficult factor to analyze due to the fact that it is a fairly nebulous and “hard to hold” dynamic. Of course, everyone has a career sequence; however, not everyone has a traditionally sequenced career pattern over time. An example of this factor would be to start at a company performing tasks well which gets you promoted to greater responsibility, leading to a job in management, and then ultimately, after 15-20 years, a job in the executive suite. The two-decade title progression might look something like this: starting off at an entry level position as a task coordinator, with a promotion to event planner, to community relations manager, then communications director, and ultimately, vice president of public relations.

   In the card sort ranking, eight participants considered this factor completely irrelevant, removing it entirely from the activity. Only 15% considered career sequence progression among the top two most important factors, with 40% considering their traditional career sequence in the top four of important factor for advancement. While
this section takes up considerable space within the compiled coding scheme document, it reads more like a recipe of an individual’s job progression. “And what you’re going to see is a slow transition from design, graphic design into marketing and from marketing into public relations (008).” In general, it certainly holds true that participants progress from lower levels of responsibility to greater ones:

And then, they asked if I would consider becoming director of running development for the whole company. And it started out with running the sales department, running the sales training, design training, product training globally. And I did that. And then I was asked to take on the director of compensation and benefits, because they wanted to redesign all of their compensation programs, and get all of their benefits to move from a culture of being paternalistic to one of self-sufficiency, so that was a really great project. And I did that for a couple of years. Then, my last job there was director of customer service (019).

This steady advancement seems to be a matter of straightforward common sense; rarely is anyone ever hired as an executive right out of college. That said, it is unclear how or why this progression happens from a career path pattern perspective. One might more easily state from a facilitating factors perspective (the next major section) that the career sequence is simply the result of personality or task skills.

One interesting facet that may be gleaned from this section is the overwhelming transition of participants from other fields into public relations. “And from there, I had some freelance jobs in TV. And then I went down to southern [STATE]. And then, had a radio gig for a while. And then, did some TV news with the PBS station there. And then… (012).”
As stated previously, only six people held entry-level positions in public relations; 70% did not. How did the other 14 come to gain upper-level positions in a field they did not start in? If you take a look at Table 6, Career Path Progression, I have outlined each participant’s career path and there are some interesting items worth noting. First, of the 14 who did not start in public relations, 11 of them were able to enter the PR or communication field within the next one or two job changes. It seems that making the move early in the career may have helped participants advance. A second item of interest is the total number of company changes participants made; at least 71 in all, more than three per person. All participants but one (95%) made at least one company change (and that one made six-or-seven geographic changes). The pattern does not seem to indicate that moves early or later in your career are important, just that participants do change companies.

1.7 Other: External Organizations, Freelance, and Agency Work

This category represents all the other relevant mentions by participants; which were not immediately identified by the literature review. One of the first patterns that began to percolate to the top of the other category was involvement in external organizations, particularly PRSA. Obviously, based upon the sampling criteria, all participants are PRSA members, however it is noteworthy that nine (45%) mention PRSA directly as a factor for advancement of their career. “PRSA definitely has been a big help because of all the professional development opportunities, the international conferences, which I try to attend as many as possible (009).”

Other external organizations that are mentioned include being a member of a local board or volunteering for a non-profit organization such as United Way, March of Dimes,
or Rotary. “The other thing was getting involved in different organizations; PRSA and [ORGANIZATION] and then I did some things for the [NON-PROFIT] and really getting experience there too… (013).” Also, the discussion around external organizations was about getting experience and training. It was not just about adding a line item to the resume; these participants saw their involvement as proactive ways to further their expertise and learning:

She got me involved in community service. I mean, I’m on boards. I’m on the [NAME] board. I’m on the charity board for the [NAME]. I’ve been on the [NAME]… which is kind of a business driven group. I did the marketing committee there. I did the [NAME] campaign for [NAME], and was the chair for the PR group (017).

While the involvement in external organizations was the major pattern to come out in the “other” category, there are a few more worthy of mention.

One factor that seemed common to several participants was self-employment as a freelance PR person, “So, eventually I was able to get a foot in the door as a freelance writer for a couple of companies including [NAME] (001).” Many subjects do not include this job on their resume, but by digging a little deeper into the career diagrams and interviews, I was able to identify 12 participants (60%) who had done freelance work or started their own agency at some point in their career. “So, I decided to go on my own. It was a tough decision. It was January, a little over two years ago and I still do a lot of work for [NAME] (004).” Most of the participant’s seemed to pick it up during down times or for experience, “But, kind of did some contract work before that with them; to get a start, to get a feeling for what it would be like to work here (007).”
An emerging theme, which came from the card sort ranking activity, is employment in a large organization. 25% of the participants placed employment in a larger organization in the top two factors of importance for their career advancement. However, 75% of participants placed employment in a larger organization among the top four most important factors in advancement of their career. While this topic was not discussed during the interviews, there is clearly an emerging theme related to career progression in a larger organization. Taking a look at the descriptive statistics (Table 5), 70% of participants (14) work in an organization with revenue, or an operating budget, of more than $5 million; and half work for organizations of more than $50 million.

A couple other interesting commonalities are, half of the participants had worked at a PR agency at some point in their career, and seven people (35%) have been an adjunct instructor at the college level. There were no other major or minor patterns that emerged from the career path patterns category.

Research Question 1: Summary

By taking a look at Table 8, Career Path Pattern Characteristics and Card Sort Rankings, we can see a summary of this section. The factor that stands out the most is the Cross-function Experience. This factor had 100% mention frequency during the interviews and 70% of the participants ranked it as the first or second most important factor for advancing their career. Working in a larger organization was a surprise factor. Seventy-five percent of participants placed it among the top four most important factors for advancement of their career. Additionally, 70% of those interviewed work for organizations of more than $5 million.
### Table 8

**Career Path Pattern Card Sort Ranking and Mention Frequency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is by Top 2, Top 4, Theme</th>
<th>Card Sort Ranking Results</th>
<th>Interview Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ranked Top 2</td>
<td>Ranked Top 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-function Experience</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>95.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Education</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Employment in Larger Organizations</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry-Level Position</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionally Sequenced Career Progression Over Time</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Mobility</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervised Experiential Internship</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factors</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other factors, like job mobility and advanced education were important interview themes, but did not rank high in the card sorting activity. Similarly, 60% had gained a
master’s degree, but the importance of an advanced education in career advancement did not pan out in the card sort ranking. Interestingly, 95% of all participants have changed companies at least once throughout their career. And, at some point, 50% of the participants worked at an agency and 60% had run their own agency or worked as a freelancer.

Research Question 2: Facilitating Factors

Research question two asked, what facilitating factors do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles? To answer this question, the research study examined facilitating factors that help advance a career in public relations. These factors were identified through the research to be: (a) personal traits, (b) task skills, (c) management skills, (d) ethics, (e) business savvy, (f) diversity of experience, (g) role models or mentors, and (h) an overarching “other” category to gather unknown or unidentified factors from the subject’s lived experience. Following are the findings for each of these features within the facilitating factors category. Like the previous section, each segment begins with an overall description of the findings with verbatim quotes and a table highlighting the results. Some identifying information has been masked to safeguard the participants.

2.1 Personal Traits Perceived to Help Advancement

Personal traits are characteristics like passion, personality, flexibility, initiative, drive, and other mostly intangible factors that seem to set us apart as individuals. “You know, you’re always good-natured. I figure, I wouldn’t be any other way. I think that’s just the way you do business (005).” Participant #001 also demonstrates this trait well,
You have to make it work out. You’ve got to set a schedule. You’ve got to hold people to it. You’ve got to follow through on it… You’ve got to find that ability to create consensus. I think that’s part of it. I guess that’s just part of my personality (001).

This factor had some mixed results. Its mention frequency was only 45% from the interviews;

I’ve always been, and this is going to sound so conceited, but being an over-achiever, you almost kill yourself to do so well. You need other people to know that you're just doing your best. And that's always been people's opinion of me (015).

However, it scored the strongest among all facilitating factors in the card sort ranking activity. 70% of participants ranked it in the top two and 100% ranked personality traits in their top four most important facilitating factors for career advancement. There was not one single trait that was singled out, but more the idea of this entire package of personality traits that help drive career advancement. “That if I had more focus and was passionate about what I was doing and tried to look at things above and beyond my job responsibilities that that would facilitate that velocity and those opportunities would come (007).” Passion was certainly a part of it, “I need to be doing something I really care about (006).” But it was also a mix of other traits such as follow through, determination, personal drive, and a clear understanding that reputation precedes you, which makes sense, because this adage is the foundation for excellent public relations work.
I think it has a lot to do with your drive, right? I’m not a rocket scientist. I’m not
the smartest person in the room. But I am very detail oriented, very committed,
follow up, very proactive. I think you have to be. You have to show interest… I
feel, it’s a lot of different things but, a lot of it is not, it’s not necessarily being
intellectual or been a 4.0 student. It’s being those things and also being passionate
and being detail oriented and being proactive and careful and thorough and
responsive (017).

2.2 Task Skills Gains Emerging Theme Status

Part of advancing through one’s career is simply about doing good work, “I think
I have a lot of personal power that has been given to me because I’ve been willing to get
in front of a microphone (019).” That is what this factor is about; performing the tasks of
public relations, “I think there’s still a place for good solid written communications. And
I think, having that skill that I’ve practiced and honed over the years, I don’t claim to be,
you know, an excellent writer, but I think that’s important (005).”

In the card sort analysis, this facilitating factor ranks as an emerging theme. 45%
of the respondents ranked task skills in the top two, but a large 90% ranked it among the
top four most important facilitating factors for advancing their career in public relations.
In the interviews, however, task skills only attained a 45% (9) mention frequency.

Three of the nine specifically mention writing skills, “I’m all about spelling and
grammar. Those things… you could be a rocket scientist and write something with tons
of errors and it makes you look like you’re stupid (017).” Four specifically mention
technology as a factor for advancing their career, “But for me, who was a nerd and loves
and embraces this stuff, the advent of social media and using things that I love like
Twitter and Facebook for my career is significant as well (002).” Again from participant 009, “You know, just being interested in technology and that sort of thing is huge in my whole career (009).” Here’s another from participant #018 who was able to take advantage and be one of the first practitioners in the world on the Internet:

I think the senior PR practitioners did themselves a disservice by just sort of, punting this off to a junior person in the staff because they did not want to put a lot of stock into the Internet. As a result, I gained most of the learning that came from being the first person in our team, probably the first person in [NAME] business unit to actually have access to the World Wide Web.

2.3 Management Skills Receive 10% Mention Frequency

The management skills facilitating factor turned out to be moderately weak. In the card sort ranking, it barely qualified as an emerging theme with 50% placing it among the top four most important facilitating factors. It was significantly weaker in the interviews, with only a 10% mention frequency, “And even within my department I don’t micromanage and I don’t like to be micromanaged. So I like to practice what I preach (005).” Participant #007 goes a little further by discussing the big picture:

I wanted to be more of a solution provider on things, you know, and I’m not talking about just questioning everything that goes on in the company, but trying to think of different ways to solve problems; how to communicate something that was new, on the horizon, thinking ahead (007).

2.4 Ethics Possibly an Assumed Trait

This issue has received significant attention in recent years as a critical factor for success in public relations. However, in the card sort ranking, only 15% rated it among
the top two factors, and only 25% ranked it among the top four most important facilitating factors for career advancement. In the mention frequency, only one participant (5%) talked about ethics as a facilitating factor to the advancement of his/her career, “And I think, you know, frankly, with that, there’s a place for, honesty. There’s a place for humility… You know, treat others like you want to be treated (005).”

It occurs to me that the reason this factor lags the others is not because people are unethical; clearly this is not the case. I believe it is a situation where this factor is considered so important, it is an assumed trait and it therefore is perceived as having little bearing on career advancement. I will talk more about this factor in the conclusion, but it seems to be a factor that is implicit and it is certainly not considered to be a facilitator in advancing one’s career.

2.5 Business Savvy is Least Cited Factor Among Top Two

This is another facilitating factor that has received significant attention from the industry, education, and professional membership organizations in recent years. But again, it only received one mention (5%) in the interviews:

I think I mentioned I worked at a bank and a radio station and lots of different businesses. I think that broad background helped me think like a business person and not just like a creative person. And so, I think that was pretty helpful (001)

This factor was the least cited factor among the top two (5%), and attained only a 30% ranking when accounting for the top four most important facilitating factors.

2.6 Diversity of Experience Gains Emerging Theme Status

Diversity of experience refers to the variety of life encounters a person has had. Diversity of experience goes beyond the job and industry and into more psychographic
traits of language, travel, culture, and exposure to a multitude of dissimilar activities and interests. Participant #016 sums it up perfectly:

Oh boy, that's a tough one, because I moved around so much and so, maybe each little move offered something new... And, so you know, I might say that, each place I went added another piece of the puzzle; another component that made me a stronger practitioner, manager, whatever (016).

This factor received five mentions (25%) in the interviews, but gained emerging theme status by attaining a 50% ranking among the top four most important facilitating factors for career advancement. Participant #006 puts it succinctly, referring to greater diversity of experience as opportunity because of a geographic location:

So it’s a different experience. So, I guess opportunity would be one of them...

Spending about 10 years there [BIG CITY] I probably did get an opportunity, or exposure to things that maybe I wouldn’t have if I had been in a smaller city or where we grew up in a really small town in [STATE]. Like, I would’ve had no opportunities compared to what I had there (006).

Participant #012 also celebrates his/her wide-ranging cultural opportunities and states them as a key factor for success:

It was the key step because...but the experiences and things I had from high school, because, you know, it was nothing for us to jump up on a bus to go on a field trip to go see a Broadway show or even when I was out of high school, in junior college I would sometimes just, when working for TV, I would take the train down and go and be in the audience of all these TV shows... It's all this odd
kind of stuff, so I really think I kind of took advantage of it, of the city, when I
was there. And I think that was really key. I think it was every aspect of it (012).

2.7 Role Models or Mentors Receives Moderate Ranking

This facilitating factor received a 55% mention frequency from the interviews,
which is one of the higher marks for this section, putting it in the emerging theme
category. Participant’s directly referred to having good mentors as a factor for
advancement, “Two things: mentors, find a good mentor, especially if you’re in a large
organizations. They will, they will build opportunities for you (008).” Again, “I think
having a mentor, finding a mentor who has a great level of expertise and patience (007).”

Having a mentor or role model was something many participant’s sincerely
appreciated, “You know, mentors… I have access to a lot of people that had worked in
the community or worked in various areas and a lot of great advice and a lot of great
people to draw on (009).” Not only did they offer help, but mentors and role models
challenged participant’s to grow, “I think, having really good tutelage, I mean, really
good bosses and supervisors that pushed me (006).” As participant #012 points out,
sometimes mentors are unsung heroes, “I mean, mentors are a big thing too. And
sometimes you have them and don’t even know that you have them. But there are certain
people that will recognize your talents… and they will tend to push for you (012).”

However, from the card sort ranking, role models and mentors fell short as a
theme, with only 15% ranking it in the top two and 40% ranking it in the top four most
important factors. Those who talked about role models and mentors during the interview
did so with great enthusiasm and gratitude for the help they received, “I was really lucky
that I had one person that hired me into different jobs. I was lucky in the sense that that person saw something special in me and decided to take me with her (002).”

2.8 Other: Relationship Building

There were no other consistent or significant factors that came out of the card sort ranking activity in this section. From the interviews, there were several potential discussion points for consideration. The first one earns the status of an emerging theme with a 50% mention frequency; it is the importance of building and maintaining relationships, particularly with industry colleagues, co-workers, and even businesses, “It’s about the organization… building relationships with those you work with other than just looking at them as a means to an end (005).”

Several participants relayed the importance of building and maintaining rapport over time, “You realize the relationships you build early on have, pay off throughout your career… I’ve always had a commitment to never burn a bridge and always try to keep relationships (002).” A few participant’s even mention doing this deliberately, “But again, those are all relationships and we all looked at that intentionally… There is a whole, you do right by people and they will say nice things about you (003).” This emerging theme is all about building a network and having support, “A lot of what I do is to create relationships, so if somebody has a problem they know they can call me and I'll see what I can find out or what I can do (011).” Building relationships is a core tenant of this profession, revolving around trust, “But I think it’s all about, yeah, those pivotal things are really meeting people and in relationships with people that I can go to for advice and that trust me (019).” Lastly, the following quote is from participant #009, who talks about a web of people whose paths cross often as partnerships are formed:
The network of people that I’ve built up is just great. It’s like, just about every week or multiple times a week, I run into people that I know through my education or working on other projects and that’s where a lot of the collaboration gets done (009).

There were no other significant, consistent mentions from the interview portion that were noteworthy in regards to the themes, although there were certainly some interesting individual insights. One person said, “Okay, well, I think my race, the fact that I’m white has been very helpful in this community (011).” Another talked about the support from home, “And you know, having a partner, a life partner that can really challenge you and say, hey, you can do this (007).” A last comment from another participant simply said a facilitating factor was, “Being in the right place at the right time with the right qualifications (006).”

*Research Question 2: Summary*

Personality traits was the only factor to reach the theme level from the entire list of eight facilitating factors (see Table 9). Personality traits attained a 70% card sort ranking among the top two factors and 100% of participants placed it among their top four most important facilitating factors for career advancement. 90% ranked task skills in the top four most important facilitating factors, making this an emerging theme.

However, an opposite trend occurs from the previous section; the facilitating factors showed up stronger in the card sort ranking, but were weak in the interview mention frequency.
Table 9

Facilitating Factors Card Sort Ranking and Mention Frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is by Top 2, Top 4, Theme</th>
<th>Card Sort Ranking Results</th>
<th>Interview Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ranked Top 2</td>
<td>Ranked Top 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Traits</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Skills</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
<td>90.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of Experience</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Skills</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Models or Mentors</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Savvy</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factors: Relationship Building</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other facilitating factors that attained emerging theme status were management skills, diversity of experience, role models or mentors, and relationship building. The greatly touted ethics and business savvy both received low marks in both card sort ranking and interview mention frequency. To conclude this section, let me use a quote from participant #006, who summed up his/her list of facilitating factors this way, “So, I
guess, networking, opportunity, definitely good tutelage, and my own desire to just do it and get out and do it and recognize that it’s… no one’s going to do it for you if you don’t do it for yourself (006).”

Research Question 3: Barriers or Challenges

Research question three takes a look at the other side of the coin of career advancement and asked, what challenges and barriers do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles? To answer this question, the research study examined barriers and challenges faced by the research members through their actual, lived experience. These barrier and challenges to career advancement were identified through the research to be: (a) substandard education, (b) substandard skills, particularly writing, (c) negative perceptions of PR, (d) gender, (e) lack of business savvy, and (h) a broad “other” category to capture unknown factors from the subject’s lived experience.

Following are the findings for each of these aspects within the barriers and challenges category. Like the two previous sections, each factor discussion begins with an overall description of the findings with word-for-word quotes, followed by a table of results. Some identifying information has been masked to safeguard the participants.

3.1 Substandard Education Considered Irrelevant by 85% of Participants

Only three people (15%) during the interview mentioned a lack of education as a potential barrier to their career advancement. All three mentioned a lack of a master’s, with two specifically stating an MBA, “I don't know that it's been a barrier to my career necessarily, but having more of that, you know, MBA background would be helpful. As
far as barriers, that's it (004).” The card sort ranking of this factor was even weaker, with only 5% ranking it a 1-2 and 15% ranking it in the top four most important barriers to their career advancement. Perhaps more telling is the fact that 17 participants (85%) felt this factor was irrelevant, leaving it out of the card sort ranking altogether.

3.2 Substandard Skills Considered Irrelevant by 70% of Participants

Lack of skills only received 5% and 25% respectively in the card sort rankings. Seventy percent (14) determined this factor as irrelevant, leaving it out completely in the card sort ranking. Only one person (5%) mentioned a lack of skills during the interview, and he/she did not think that had really been a barrier:

One other thing that comes to mind is that I really don’t like public speaking. In this job I’ve been asked to do some and it’s not been a barrier to me or my career and I’m better at it now than I was three years ago (001).

3.3 Negative Perceptions of PR Gains Emerging Theme Status

Combined with the negative perceptions of PR, I added any comments or cards that addressed a misunderstanding of the role PR as well. For example, here’s a statement from participant #010 highlighting this distinction:

I would say another barrier is general confusion about what marketing and PR is and what it isn't. What it can do and what it can't... you're not in the parade behind the elephants to just clean up. You need to be part of the strategic planning that planned the parade route (010).

With this expanded definition, this factor was regarded by 60% in the card sort ranking as the number 1 or 2 barrier to their career advancement. Seventy percent ranked it among the top four barriers. It only received three mentions (15%) in the interviews,
however, so there appears to be some disparity. I believe this is because negative perceptions of PR, or misunderstanding of the role of PR, is not “top of mind” in awareness in regards to being a barrier to one’s advancement. It was not until they saw this card, which was after the interviews, that there was a strong reaction to it. Also, in reading the comments from participant #016, you can sense some emotion; this person almost seems to feel they are bad-mouthing a former employer by mentioning this:

But I think that the lack of knowledge by management of just what PR is, and I'm not saying they make tons of mistakes, but I could have done more to advise my CEO had he been more open to that (016).

3.4 Gender Not Perceived as a Barrier to Career Advancement

In talking about gender, I think it’s helpful to keep in mind that 55% of the participants in this study are female and 45% male. It is worthy to note that females were not the only participants who identified gender as a barrier. Four participants (20%) mentioned gender as a barrier to career advancement during the interview (participant numbers have been removed to ensure confidentiality), “Being [GENDER] is, was a challenge and in some cases was a barrier, and even still is today.” Again, another participant expressed a similar sentiment:

I had a really difficult time and that's when I realized that being [GENDER] and relatively [AGE] was probably a barrier. There have been a lot of good mentors and leaders that have paved the way a little bit, but I think it's still a challenge.

Only 25% placed it among the top 1-2 in the card ranking and only 35% ranked gender in the top four most influential barriers to success. This next quote revealed sexual discrimination, which, as you can see, caught me off-guard, “And, the person that got the
job actually is my boss today. (Author: Wow.) And [HE/SHE] came back from that venture. Another time or two, I probably should have been the person, but they brought in a [GENDER].” Based upon the literature review, gender is certainly an issue, however, it did not turn out to be any kind of a theme for this study.

3.5 Lack of Business Savvy Barely Gains Emerging Theme Status

Again, this factor has received a great deal of press within the industry over the past several years, however, it barely makes it as an emerging issue with 50% ranking it among the top four barriers to advancement in their career. Forty-five percent (9) considered this factor irrelevant and did not include it in the card sort ranking activity at all. What this seems to indicate is that people either considered this a fairly major barrier or completely extraneous. Only one person (5%) mentioned business savvy during the interview, and even then, the person downplays this factor as a real barrier to advancement:

You know, possibly, the fact that maybe I didn't have a stronger business background. I mean, I consider myself strategic, a planner, and all that and yet, sometimes, and I don't know… I think it's more internally in me thinking this (004).

3.6 Other:14 Factors Gain Write-in Status

Interestingly, this category received the most number of write-in factors from the card sort ranking activity than all the other categories in the entire study combined. I think the reason for this is three-fold. One, I believe there has been little research done on the barriers to career advancement, particularly in public relations. The research that has been done has focused on obvious, but not universal experiences such as gender.
Secondly, it was interesting to note that few people pointed to any personal weakness such as a lack of education, skills, or business savvy. Maybe it is difficult for people to admit their own shortcomings, particularly when meeting with someone they do not know well and who plans to make the results public. Here’s a good example from participant #005, “So a barrier to advancement wouldn’t necessarily be my performance, it’s just going to be the structure of the organization.” Or another reason for not mentioning barriers may be that they are just too close to the issue, or they put the challenges and barriers out of their mind once they are past them. Forgetting the negative over time is a common human trait. One participant claimed he/she had experienced no challenges or barriers at all and returned the card sort activity with no rankings.

The third reason the responses in this section may be so varied and sporadic is because people are unique and no two experiences are the same, especially challenging ones. To illustrate this point, there were 14 distinct factors added to this category by participants as follows: (a) organizational structure, (b) personal value clash, (c) moving around the country for a spouse, (d) advancement ceiling, (e) PR as first component of business to be cut, (f) geographic location, (g) marital status / single income, (h) family business, (i) family and work balance, (j) lack of higher education, (k) age - too young, (l) lack of corporate political savvy, (m) economic downturn, and (n) too assertive. The family and work balance were written in by two people, as was geographic location. All others were single additions.

From the interviews, one fairly significant “other” factor arose and is worth mentioning. During the interview, six people (who will remain anonymous) mention the family and work balance issue, and they were passionate about it, “Then I think, and I
hate to say it, but my kids are a barrier because it was my choice to go part-time. But I think that, yeah, being part-time can be a barrier.” This issue has created a great deal of stress for those who have to go through it because they are trying to balance two very important personal values of accomplishment and family:

It's probably a good thing to just stop completely and focus on that time because you know it's a blip on the radar and that's all you get and then they're grown up and they are in school. But I can't... Yeah, so that's my big thing right now.

Those who mention it, talk about the stress of trying to be in two places at once and having guilt because co-workers and family members may not understand. Additionally, there’s the fear that choosing family over work will hinder one’s career:

…when you’re at work you feel bad about not being at home and when you’re at home you feel bad you’re not doing something at work. I do think that sometimes other people judge you for that. Oh, you’re going to your kid’s soccer game and I’ve got to stay here? Well, you don’t see me on my computer at night. You know what I mean? So, that’s a big one.

There were no other significant, consistent barriers or challenges that came from the interviews. There were some minor comments about the economy, such as this quote from participant #002, “The economy has been a big one. There were times when I should have gotten a raise, but I probably didn’t get one because the agency wasn’t making enough money or the economy was just bad and the budget wasn’t there.” The economy factor was expressed by a couple others, but not enough to be noteworthy.

Some other interesting quotes came out, in this section too, like participant #016 who said, “It's a lot easier to get into education from practice, than to get into practice
from education.” Here’s another interesting statement from participant #019 regarding being single:

Well, you just had to look at it and say, okay, I’m the single one. And it’s kind of like, yeah I know, and I’m pretty comfortable with that (laughs). And I’ve been comfortable with that for a long time. And those kinds of things, so those kinds of things do happen. You know, about men and the golf course, but what doesn’t happen at the golf course happens at dinner parties on Friday and Saturday evening (019).

The individual comments were insightful, like this one from participant #018:
A challenge early on I think was frustration with, doing it the way it had always been done, which is what I was kind of being forced to do. I resisted going into a big corporation, like I did at [NAME], that provided its own challenges with bureaucracy, politics, and that's always been an issue (018).

Unfortunately, some people had major barriers, like this quote from an undisclosed participant who said:

And there were some issues, especially with the sexual harassment, I mean, that was [NAME’S] dad, so… there were times when I tried to talk to [NAME] about it and [HE/SHE’S] in complete denial. And it was so blatant, I mean, I mean everybody knew.

All in all, the comments that made it into the other category were independent, singular issues that did not speak together with one consistent voice.
Table 10

*Barriers and Challenges Card Sort Ranking and Mention Frequency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is by Top 2, Top 4, Theme</th>
<th>Card Sort Ranking Results</th>
<th>Interview Themes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ranked Top 2</td>
<td>Ranked Top 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Perceptions or Misunderstanding of PR</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Business Savvy</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factor: Family and Work Balance</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substandard Skills</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substandard Education</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factors: List of 14</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 3: Summary

This category was perhaps the most widely ranging in terms of individual responses. Only one of the factors earned the rank of an emerging theme and this was due to the combination of the similar notion of negative perceptions of PR and the
misunderstanding of the role of PR (see Table 10). It gained 60% and 70% card sort rankings respectively, but only 15% mention frequency from the interviews. The only other factor that achieved emerging theme status was lack of business savvy with 50% ranking this factor in the top four of the most harmful barriers to their career advancement. In the other category, one factor, the barrier of family and work balance, reached a 30% mention frequency without any prompts. It also gained two first place rankings from the write-in card sort activity. The fact that people mentioned it and wrote this factor down without any prompting is fairly impressive.

Another interesting phenomenon to note was the large number of individual factors written in during the card sort ranking activity. In total, 14 new factors were identified (one being the family and work balance). The sheer number of write-in factors is noteworthy, although there did not seem to be any identifiable pattern. Opposite of this is the fact that, many participants considered some of the factors identified by the research as irrelevant. For substandard education, for example, 17 (85%) of participants completely removed this factor from consideration. Additionally, 70% removed substandard skills, 60% removed gender, and 45% removed lack of business savvy.

Relationship Among Factors Throughout the Career Path Progression

For this next section, I used the education and career path diagram and labeling activity to examine inter-relatedness of the categories. To review, the three main categories are: (a) career path patterns, (b) facilitating factors of success, and (c) barriers to career advancement. During the 90-minute interview, all twenty participants completed an education and career path diagram (Appendix F) by listing, in chronological order, all degrees, certifications, accreditations, and job titles throughout their entire career.
After completing this diagram, participants were asked to review a list of sticky labels consisting of career path factors and facilitating factors as identified by the research. Then, they were to place the stickers, one-at-a-time, in the left-hand column of their education and career diagram where the factor was most influential to the advancement of their career; but only if they felt like the factor was significant. Participants were told that they could use all or none of the stickers. A factor could only be used once, however, more than one factor could be placed in the same location on the diagram. Blank labels were provided for participants to write-in and use for any new factor they felt was important and not already listed.

Following this, participants were given another set of labels consisting of the barriers and challenges as identified by the research. They were asked to review these and place them in the right-hand column wherever this factor was most harmful to their career path; but again, only if this factor was significant to them. Participants were told that they could use all or none of the stickers. A factor could only be used once, however more than one factor could be placed in the same location on the diagram. Blank labels were provided for participants to write-in and use for any new factor they felt was important and not already listed.

**Findings from the Diagram and Labeling Activity**

In order to process the data from the diagram and labeling exercise, I reviewed the Conceptual Framework created for this study in Figure 1 (duplicated below). Keeping this in mind, I created a career advancement diagram (similar to the arrow illustrating the career path in Figure 1) representing a universal career path starting with the entry-level job and ending with the participant’s current job (see Figure 5).
Figure 5. Universal Career Path Progression Diagram
Shown here together, it is easy to see that the diagram in Figure 5 turns the horizontal arrow from the conceptual framework graphic vertically. This new diagram proceeds from top to bottom, with the participant’s entry-level job as the starting point and the current job as the ending point.

After creating this universal career path progression illustration, I thoroughly reviewed the education and career path diagrams that were created and labeled by all twenty research participants. I then plotted, in chronological order, all the labeled factors placed on every individual diagram. Down the middle of the diagram, I placed the significant education factors, such as attainment of a bachelor’s degree, master’s degree, or Accreditation in Public Relations (APR). I then mirrored the individual diagrams by placing all career path pattern factors and facilitating factors in the left-hand column. I did the same for the barriers and challenges column, placing them in the right-hand column.

Throughout this process, I did not consider labels such as entry-level position and education, which showed up on the diagram in their correct place already. The additional labels written in by participants were only considered if the topic was mentioned by at least three different people, which is only a 15% mention frequency. Factors that appeared within the same general timeframe in multiple participants’ career path were added together and plotted in the same location. This provided a quick quantitative view of the most influential factors across all twenty participant’s career progression.

Figure 6, Inter-relatedness of Factors Across the Career Path Progression, is the culmination of this process. This new diagram provides an exhaustive, overview
illustration of the career path pattern factors, facilitating factors, and barrier factors across all participants’ career progression and demonstrates how the factors relate to each other.

There were more than 215 factors recorded in the career diagram and labeling exercise by the twenty research participants as shown in Figure 6. In the left-hand column are more than 130 factors considered to be career advancers. Down the middle are the education factors. Along the right-hand column are 44 factors considered to be challenges or barriers to career advancement. By using the same mention frequency rules from the in-depth interview portion, I was able to identify the emerging and strong themes connecting the factors from each category to the career path progression. The findings are discussed in the following sections.

Career Path Patterns and Career Path Progression

Education. As previously mentioned, 4 of the twenty participants gained employment in their entry-level position before attainment of their bachelor’s degree. The remaining 16 (80%) finished their bachelor’s before being employed and all twenty subjects gained employment within a couple months of graduation. These findings can be viewed on the top-middle of Figure 6.

We also know that 60% of the participants obtained a master’s degree (one person received two). The diagram in Figure 6 illustrates that nearly all participants gained their master’s degree before the midpoint of their current career path. The one master’s degree shown near the bottom of the diagram is the participant who holds two master’s. Based on this, I can state that 11 of 12 participants (91.7%) who hold a master’s degree obtained it early in their career path (see Table 11).
Figure 6. Inter-relatedness of Factors Across the Career Path Progression
Table 11

**Themes of Career Path Patterns and Career Path Progression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is by Total Placement</th>
<th>Total Placement on the Career Path Diagram</th>
<th>Theme Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>Bachelor’s: 100%</td>
<td>Bachelor’s: 80% completed before entry level position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s: 60%</td>
<td>Master’s: 91.7% obtained early in career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>APR: 35%</td>
<td>APR: 100% gained at the midpoint in career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cross-function Experience</strong></td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>50% placement later in the participant's current career path</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Career Sequence</strong></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Mobility</strong></td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, all eight participants (100%) who received Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) did so in very close proximity around the midpoint of their current career progression. This makes sense as it takes experience combined with demonstrated knowledge and skill to pass both the written and oral exams. For the APR, you must demonstrate proficient use of the public relations four-step RACE plan, which can only be done after significant work experience.

*Cross-function experience, job mobility, and career sequence.* Again, after removing self-identified factors such as education and entry-level position, these three factors remain in the career path pattern category accounting for 27 total label placements across the twenty participants. Of these three factors, only cross-function experience attained emerging theme status by being placed by 50% of participants later along the career path progression. It would appear that many participants believe that cross-
function experience was most influential in advancement beyond the midpoint of their career. Again, this makes sense considering it takes time to gain this level of expertise. It is worthwhile to note that career sequence did receive a total placement of 50%, however it was not along the same place in the career path and, therefore, did not meet the minimum mention frequency requirement for theme consideration.

Facilitating Factors and the Career Path Progression

The 100-plus facilitating factors are listed on the left-hand side of Figure 6 and include a wide range of factors as discussed previously (and found in Table 12). Keep in mind, participants could use all or none of the labels provided to them. If they did use them, they were to be placed where they were most influential in helping to advance their career.

Three facilitating factors became evident as strong themes, while one factor gained emerging theme status. 55% placed task skills very early in their career path progression, which again makes sense because this is often considered the best time to gain expertise. One of the strongest themes to come from this entire exercise was the 75% placement of management skills later in the participant’s current career path progression. Again, logically this makes sense and is generally supported by the literature that people progress from task to management responsibilities. Interestingly, this is the only place management skills appeared on the entire diagram, and yet everyone who deemed it significant put it within the same vicinity on the career path. Diversity of experience received 70% placement just after the midpoint of the career path. Role models and mentors achieved 70% placement early in the career path and also had a 95% total placement percent.
Three honorable mentions that fell short of theme status were the factors of personal traits, business savvy, and ethics. All appeared strong in the general placement, however they did not score well at one specific point along the career path to justify theme status. Personal traits had a noteworthy 60% placement overall, but the highest cluster only achieved a 35% ranking. Similarly, business savvy achieved an overall 65% placement, but its highest cluster ranking was 40%, just shy of emerging theme ranking. Ethics also had a 60% placement, but its strongest cluster was a mere 35%.

Table 12

*Themes of Facilitating Factors and Career Path Progression*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is by Total Placement</th>
<th>Total Placement on the Career Path Diagram</th>
<th>Theme Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role Models or Mentors</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>70% placed this early in their current career path progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of Experience</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>70% placed this just after the midpoint of their current career path progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Skills</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>55% placed this very early, right after the entry level position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Skills</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75% placed this later in their current career path progression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Savvy</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Traits</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Barriers and Challenges and the Career Path Progression

The 44 factors of barriers and challenges were placed on the right-hand side during the research activity and can be found in this same position on Figure 6. This section was somewhat disappointing because there were no clusters strong enough among all factors to be ranked as theme (see Table 13). Even the total placement percentage for each category struggled to rank very high, with “poor perceptions in public relations” as the only factor to attain a level of 50%.

Table 13

Themes of Barriers and Challenges and Career Path Progression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is by Total Placement</th>
<th>Total Placement on the Career Path Diagram</th>
<th>Theme Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poor Perceptions of PR</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Skills</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Business Savvy</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Education</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Family / Work Balance</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>N/A - did not meet minimum mention frequency requirements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factor Relationships: Summary

Out of more than 215 individual labels placed on the education and career diagram by the twenty participants, seven factors surfaced as emerging or strong themes. Table 14 highlights all seven, with the strongest factors being the predictable bachelor’s degree at 100% and management skills at 75% placement. Following Table 14 is a revised career path progression diagram (Figure 7) with only the clusters that achieved theme status.

Table 14

Themes of Factors Throughout the Career Path Progression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is by Total Placement by category by factor</th>
<th>Total Placement on the Career Path Diagram</th>
<th>Theme Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Path Factors</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Bachelor’s: 100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Master’s: 60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-function Experience</td>
<td></td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating Factors</td>
<td>Role Models or Mentors</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diversity of Experience</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task Skills</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management Skills</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrier Factors</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 7. Inter-relatedness of Factor Themes Across the Career Path Progression
The factors that show up early in the participant’s career are education (both bachelor’s and master’s degree), task skills, and role models or mentors. Following after the midpoint of the career path progression were the two factors, diversity of experience and cross-function experience. The final factor which shows up much later in the participant’s current career path is management skills, which was also one of the strongest of all factors in this section. Oddly, no barriers made the list of themes.

Chapter Four Summary

Chapter Four offered the findings of a qualitative phenomenology of twenty elite subjects from West Michigan who had attained an upper-level position in public relations. The data collection consisted of a 90-minute meeting with four data gathering points: (a) in-depth interviews, (b) career path diagram and labeling, (c) card sort ranking, and (d) artifact collection. Using previously established mention frequency and cross occurrence rules, the in-depth interviews, card sort ranking, and artifact collection data were analyzed to directly address the three research questions. The career path diagram and labeling were analyzed to offer additional insight into the inter-relatedness of all factors identified by the research on the career path progression.

Several significant and emerging results were identified from each of the three categories identified by the conceptual framework of the study, which are: (a) career path patterns, (b) facilitating factors of success, and (c) barriers or challenges to career advancement. In addition, seven strong and emerging topics were identified in the fourth section regarding the relationship among all factors and the career path progression. According to the findings, the strongest themes from the study appear to be:

- Gaining a bachelor’s degree reached a predictable 100% theme status.
- Cross-function experience had 100% mention frequency during the interviews and 70% of the participants ranked it in the top two most important factors for advancing their career.

- Working in a larger organization was a surprise factor. Seventy-five percent of participants placed it among the top four most important factors for advancement of their career. Additionally, 70% of those interviewed work for organizations of more than $5 million.

- Ninety-five percent of all participants changed companies at least once.

- Personality traits was the only factor to reach the theme level from the entire list of eight facilitating factors. Personality traits attained a 70% card sort ranking among the top two factors and 100% placed it among their top four most important facilitating factors for career advancement.

- No barrier factors reached the strong theme threshold of 70%.

- From the fourth section of factor inter-relatedness, 80% of participant’s obtained their bachelor’s degree before gaining employment in their first entry-level job.

- Seventy-five percent placed management skills much later in their career path progression.

- Seventy percent placed diversity of experience just after the midpoint on the career path.

- Seventy percent placed role models and mentors early in their career path progression.
In Chapter Five, I will bring the study to conclusion and discuss the findings as they apply specifically to each research question. Additionally, we will take a last look at the relationship among all category factors and the career path progression. Finally, the study will end with discussions regarding implications and connections to previous research, recommendations, and final considerations.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter offers the results of my study as directly related to the three research questions presented in Chapter One. The results are examined as they pertain to the previously described conceptual framework, as supported by the literature review of Chapter Two. Chapter Five concludes with research implications and connections to previous research, recommendations for further study, and a summary conclusion.

The purpose of my empirical phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of business professionals who had achieved an upper-level position in public relations. The over-arching goal of this study was to examine the essence of an individual’s actual experience in attainment of a top-management position. In this process, the study examined the career path progression of twenty research participants from West Michigan who had experienced the phenomenon of achieving an upper-level position in public relations. Data were collected through four means: (a) in-depth interview, (b) career path mapping and labeling, (c) card sort ranking, and (d) artifact gathering. Coding schemes were used for content analysis based upon the conceptual framework stemming from an extensive literature review that identified three primary categories for research as: (a) career path patterns, (b) facilitating factors for success, and, (c) barriers to advancement.

Results of the Study

This section presents a summary and discussion of the findings as they directly relate to the three research questions. The structure of the data collection was such that the first interview question specifically addresses research question one, which is also the
first category identified in the conceptual framework: career path patterns. The second interview question directly answers research question two, which is the second category of the conceptual framework: facilitating factors. The third research question is addressed directly by the third interview question, which again, is the third category of the conceptual framework: barriers to advancement. All three of these questions are further supported in the data collection by the card rank sorting and artifact collection. Following this, there is a discussion of the relationship among all factors and how they relate to the universal career path progression. These findings are further supported using the data collection of the career mapping and labeling exercise.

Research Question One

R1: How do public relations professionals who advance to top-level management positions in business prepare and promote themselves for those positions?

As expected, the first way the research candidates for this study prepared themselves for a career in public relations was to gain a bachelor’s degree. One hundred percent of all subjects hold a bachelor’s, however it does not appear that the degree needs to be in public relations or business. Forty percent (8) have an undergraduate degree in communication and only 20% had a major or minor in business. Participant #019 made this interesting point regarding his/her undergraduate degree:

But, for me, I’ve never been a student; I’ve always wanted to work. So it was kind of like no one’s going to ever ask me my grade point, that’s not as important. And, financially, I was doing it all myself. So, I really had to make some choices between quantity and quality and those kinds of things (019).
Clearly, getting a bachelor’s degree is a prerequisite for entry into the field of PR, and it appears to help if the degree is related to PR (this will be discussed later).

Table 15

Research Question One Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 1:</th>
<th>Data Collection Methods:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do public relations professionals who advance to top-level management positions in business prepare and promote themselves for those positions?</td>
<td>In-depth Interview Question 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conceptual Framework Category:** Career Path Patterns

**Data Collection Methods:**
- In-depth Interview Question 1
- Card Sort Ranking of Career Path Pattern Factors
- Artifact Collection: resume confirms data; storytelling supports findings

**Note:** rank order priority is by Top 2, Top 4, Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Card Sort Ranking Results</th>
<th>Interview Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranked Top 2</td>
<td>Ranked Top 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross-function Experience</th>
<th>70.0%</th>
<th>95.0%</th>
<th>100% discussed the importance of cross-function experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Education</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>100% hold a bachelor degree, with 40% of those in communication; 75% started a master’s degree and 60% completed a master’s degree; only 40% are Accredited in Public Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: Employment in Larger Organizations</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>70% work for organizations of $5 million or more; 50% work for organizations of $50 million or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry-Level Position</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>70% started in an industry other than PR; 100% were employed within 2 months after graduation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditionally Sequenced Career Progression Over Time</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>95% made at least one company change; of the 70% who did not start in PR, 55% transitioned to PR within their first two jobs; 60% have done freelance work; 50% worked for a PR agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Mobility</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>75% made at least one geographical move; 15 people moved approximately 28 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervised Experiential Internship</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>45% had an internship during college; only 10% gained employment from the internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factors</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>50% worked for a PR agency during their career; 35% have been a college adjunct instructor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Continuing with the discussion on education, 60% of research participants prepared themselves for an upper-level job in public relations by attaining a master’s degree. Seventy-five percent of those who completed their master’s did so in communication and all were from a traditional public university. Achieving Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) did not rank as an important theme in this study, with only a 40% attainment level. No other formal training, certification, or business credentials were found to be significant for this study.

As seen in Table 15, and similar to the findings of the bachelor’s degree, 70% of participants received their entry-level position in a field other than public relations. Additionally, all subjects were employed within months of achieving the undergraduate degree. It appears there are other factors in play here to achieving an upper-level position in PR other than starting in PR, either in education or at the entry-level stage. It would seem that public relations is a relatively open industry, allowing people to enter with varied academic credentials and even unrelated first jobs. More will be said about these factors later.

Arguably, the strongest theme to surface in answering research question one is the role of cross-function experience. One hundred percent of research participants discussed its importance to their preparation and promotion to an upper-level position. Seventy percent ranked it in the top two most influential career path pattern factors and 95% ranked it in the top four. Here is one of my favorite stories from the artifact collection phase that beautifully illustrates the point of, not only gaining cross-function experience, but utilizing the years of cross function expertise to pull off a phenomenal, intricate, and
wildly successful event. This story is from a research participant, who will remain anonymous, along with some details being masked, to ensure confidentiality.

I worked for a man named [NAME], who later became the CEO of a large business division at [COMPANY]… just an incredible, gifted leader. And he took me under his wing and said, “You know, I’m going to let you do as much or as little as you can.” And he started going over an assignment with me that was, kind of against all odds that it could even happen. It was pulling together a sales and dealer meeting slash workshop. And I had two months to do this. And it needed to be in California. And he wanted each of these, he wanted salespeople to partner and actually deliver training sessions, about 20 of them, and wanted them, and it was all about healthcare, and we are going to invite 200 of their top clients in California to this event. And then, he wanted me to end the event by 80 people going white water rafting for two days in the mountains of California. And he’s looking at me and saying, “Okay, can you make this happen?” AND he wanted a top keynote business speaker to be there to close out the day and everything else. And it was eight weeks -- that meant finding a hotel, a speaker, getting invitations, doing this whole thing. I mean, this was with no staff support to speak of. And, so I did it. And everything worked out and by accident, and this was timing and, I got [NAME], who is like the biggest speaker, and cut a deal with him that he would stop by the hotel in San Francisco on his way to the airport and do this talk. It’s just, everything worked out beautifully. I got the dealer to pitch in and cover the alcohol, so we could have alcohol. We did the white water rafting trip and that ended with a big awards banquet in a hotel in Sacramento. So it was
just all of these pieces, putting it all together and, it’s been interesting because it’s still the stuff that myths are made of at [COMPANY]. Because people still talk about the infamous raft trip. You know looking back now, oh, it was an accident waiting to happen. I can’t believe the attorneys let us do it. But it was just this whole idea that [NAME], this guy who was seen as one of the top people at [COMPANY], just believed I could do it and never questioned it. And I remember being in the raft with him, in the middle of this river and its like 98°, hotter than blazes, and he looks at me, and says, “[NAME], this is exactly what I had imagined.” And it was like, when somebody lets you go, but he was there to support me and push me, gently, but didn’t micromanage and didn’t over-lead, just, I really had high standards and you know, given that opportunity, you rise to the occasion. So that was just one of those really incredible experiences. (Author: That’s very cool.) Yeah, it was very cool. I mean, it was huge. It was like trying to orchestrate the logistics of all this AND if it hadn’t been done well, to invite 200 major clients to be here, them presenting, I mean, it was healthcare so it was relatively…, it needed to be well done, it wasn’t…, it needed to be fact-based and really content driven. So that was one of those, and then afterwards he made sure that I got absolutely every bit of the credit for it. Yeah, so that was just one of those that you feel really, really well supported and appreciated. Yeah, so that was one of those great experiences.

This story perfectly demonstrates the cross-function expertise gained over years of work in order pull off an event of this complexity and magnitude in such a short time frame, thousands of miles away from company headquarters, involving a famous keynote
speaker, an awards banquet, days of food and lodging with hundreds of clients, and
topping it off whitewater rafting with 80 employees for two days. I get exhausted just
reading about it.

The job mobility factor was interesting from the fact that 75% of participants had
experienced a geographic move specifically related to their job, but only 30% ranked it in
their top four most important career path pattern factors. From immersing myself in the
transcripts, it seems to me that most subjects took their geographic move for granted and
only saw it as a resulting factor of their career progression, not as a driving or causal
factor. Additionally, a geographic move involves much more than just a job change, it
affects a person’s entire world including family, housing, children’s school, friendships,
organizations, religious affiliations, and more. The geographic moves people made or
considered were much more than simple job relocations. Here’s an excerpt from the
interview with participant #007 highlighting the multiple factors under consideration for
a major geographic move thousands of miles away. I think this quote demonstrates that,
while many people do make geographic moves during their career, the decision is much
bigger in scope than just a job relocation.

So, I started, I actually came back here and started looking. And, she was the
breadwinner, we moved out of our house and sold it and moved into an apartment
in [CITY]. (Author: At that point did you decide that [FAR AWAY] [CITY] was
not where you were going to go, or were you still thinking about it?) Yeah, you
know, we were thinking about it because a lot of the markets were starting to
return a little bit. There were a lot more PR jobs out there for sure. But you know,
traffic is horrible out there and the cost of living is through the roof. And, I think,
we’re pretty independent people. I think we enjoyed being away and going home and visiting and that kind of stuff. I think, we’re family people and very close with our families, but we also like to have our space and kind of living our own life. So that’s what led to that (007).

Next, in answering research question one, it was quite surprising to discover the hugely unimpressive influence of internships on my collective sampling of elite research subjects. Frankly, I believe a large part of this is due to the age of the participants and old expectations versus those of today. Participant #003 sums this up perfectly by stating:

I look now at how well prepared the kids are, in terms of multiple internships, and looking at them as a sophomore and their polish and their portfolio and things like that, and there’s no way I would’ve got a job competing against that (laughing). It was just a different time. You know, I didn’t start looking until January of my senior year. I got lucky (003).

The career sequence factor was a difficult factor for people to grasp. It had a very poor showing in the card sort ranking, however a few patterns emerged from the interviews and descriptive statistics that were interesting in preparing the participants for an upper-level position in public relations. Ninety-five percent of the research members changed companies at least once in their career (the one who did not still moved six-or-seven times). Of the 14 people who did not have an entry-level position in the PR industry, 11 of them were able to get into PR within their next two jobs. This seems to emphasize the point made earlier about PR being a relatively easy field to get in to. Regarding career sequence, it also appears beneficial to have done freelance work (60%).
Similarly, it appears to be helpful to work for a PR agency (50%) at some point during the career.

From the “other” category, a somewhat surprising factor arose in that 75% of participants rated working in a larger organization among the top four most influential factors for their career advancement. This begs the question, what is “large”? My study did not explore this subject; however, using the descriptive statistics, I can conclude that half of my research subjects work in companies with more than $50 million in revenue (or operating budget), and 70% are in organizations topping $5 million.

Summary: Research Question One

I originally wrote the following comments simply as notes to remember the important findings of research question one, but after reviewing them (and being a huge fan of being direct and to the point), I have decided to leave these remarks as originally written. So, here is the (concise and precise) summary of findings from research question one: Get a bachelor’s degree, preferably in a related discipline like communication. Consider getting a master’s degree, again preferably in communication. Gain and utilize cross-function experience; beyond the implicit bachelor’s degree, this is probably the single most important career path pattern factor. Be open to making a geographic move, but plan on making at least one company change. Be a freelancer and work for a PR agency. Get a job at a company with revenues of at least $5 million.

Research Question Two

R2: What facilitating factors do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?
Personality traits are the strongest facilitating factor successful PR practitioners perceive as they advance to an upper-level career in public relations. Seventy percent ranked this as the number one-or-two most influential factor in the advancement of their career. One hundred percent of all participants placed it among the top four factors. In my interviews, 45% mentioned at least one personality trait during the second question of the interview process. Personality traits include such items as passion, flexibility, determination, kindness, timeliness, and extroversion.

As the strongest of the facilitating factors (see Table 16), I thought it appropriate to share two stories that highlight the personality trait. This first story is from participant #009 and, although the person mentions ethics several times in the beginning, what I believe they are really intending to demonstrate is passion.

Well, I would say, coming to the [COMPANY] was a major turning point. It is, I think it… at the same time, I was reshaping my thinking and personal life events were affecting that. It solidified the importance of ethics and it was intellectually fulfilling and ethically fulfilling work. I think that, in my position now, I remember in college not being concerned with ethics at all. We would talk about ethics in class and that kind of thing and I thought well, you know, ethics are ethics, but that’s not a terribly big concern to me. But, that became really important and coming to the [COMPANY] helped solidify that. I sort of started to enjoy working for an organization I believe in. We weren’t selling happy meals to kids and promoting childhood obesity. It was, helping people to improve their lives by basically, your [COMPANY MISSION]. [COMPANY MISSION] has been a strong theme for me throughout my life. Like I said, with my parents, both
of them are [ROLES] and so that is something that is really important to me and has been a constant influence throughout my life. Yeah, that was kind of a turning point coming to the [COMPANY]. Then, having the luxury of bringing my ethics to work and not having to work a job for a paycheck because I have financial obligations and I had to support some of my, you know, personal views or values. I know many people have to do that and it’s something I’ve come to appreciate and I treat it like a luxury nowadays to be able to, you know, believe in what you do. I’m able to contribute to the [CHARITABLE FUND] for [PURPOSE] and that kind of thing. It’s great. It’s good to be able to invest in organizations like that. Before, I used to want to go the extra mile because it looks good, but that’s also in my nature to, to do that and work hard. But here, there’s a feeling that if I’m doing my job better and contributing more at work it’s helping people. It’s helping to tell the [COMPANY’S] story and if that brings more people into the door that might not have considered [MISSION] before or bringing more money and to make [OPPORTUNITIES] available, and that stuff. Like making the content more available so their [MISSION] experience is better and easier, it’s really fulfilling work… and the things I could be doing with my time, I could be making more money. But, nothing feels as good or that is as fun and intellectually challenging (009).

In the above story, when the participant is talking about an alignment to the mission statement, it is passion. It is passion when you are doing what you believe in. It is passion when you love your job. It is passion, which is considered a personality trait
within the facilitating factor category, that participant #009 demonstrates so well in this previous story.

Table 16

**Research Question Two Results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 2:</th>
<th>What facilitating factors do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conceptual Framework Category:</strong></td>
<td>Facilitating Factors for Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data Collection Methods:</strong></td>
<td>In-depth Interview Question 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Card Sort Ranking of Facilitating Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Artifact Collection: resume confirms data; storytelling supports findings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: rank order priority is by Top 2, Top 4, Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Card Sort Ranking Results</th>
<th>Interview Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ranked Top 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ranked Top 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Traits</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Skills</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of Experience</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Skills</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Models or Mentors</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Savvy</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factors: Relationship Building</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This second story is another wonderful illustration of personality, particularly determination, endurance, and grit. In this situation, I asked participant #003, a senior PR practitioner, a follow up question, trying to get to the core belief or motivation of how this person knew they could be successful at the executive level. Throughout the story you get this overwhelming presence of personality and confidence and by the end, you
are convinced there is nothing this person cannot do through sheer will power and fortitude.

(Author: So, one last question here. You've got your [HONORS] here and your awards, when you decided to [ADVANCE YOUR CAREER], how did you know you were good?) That's a good question. Some of that comes with personality traits. A strength of character slash ego, has never been a problem for me. What that is good for is for believing I could do anything. What it's bad for is running over people and not being a very loving boss. And it makes me, it's a real challenge. And that's part of why we [NAME] worked well… I was much more the vision, more the, do what I do. And so that makes me a good entrepreneur, but it makes me a poor manager. I always, I just always believed I could do it. I didn't believe it would, and I got in, and I've told this story… what was the important personal thing that you had to overcome? And, my senior year in college I got into a car accident. My senior year in high school, I got into a car accident and busted my knee and didn't go to the [EVENT]. I was a pretty good [ATHLETE] and my time in the prior year would have won the [EVENT]. So, I watched someone win the [EVENT] with a [RESULT WORSE] than I would have gone. But, instead of whining about it and crying about it I decided, okay, I'm going to walk on, be a preferred walk-on at [COLLEGE]. I had full rides to division III. I could've gone to division II with probably half-ride. But, I wanted to go to “The Show.” So, again, I don't regret it. I did it and I was really happy I did it, but some of those things were always about not really kind of looking in the rearview mirror. And so, it just seemed like it was going to work. That's really naïve. I
recognize that now, but it always felt like, okay, I'll go work at McDonald's if I have to. That's always been, I've opened doors by outworking everybody else. Confidence, I think, is one of my strengths. It can also be one of my weaknesses (003).

Ninety percent of participants ranked task skills among the top four most influential facilitating factors for success in advancing their career. Although this factor did not show strong during the interview phase (45%), it ranks as an emerging factor and its main component of writing is, according to the literature review, considered the number one skill necessary for success in public relations. Research has also born this out, so why did task skills, particularly writing, not appear as a stronger theme? I believe this is because it is an assumed factor. If you are in PR, people expect you to be a good writer, especially if you have advanced to an upper-level position. Task skills showed up very strong among the top four factors in the card ranking, but this exercise followed the interviews, which means task skills were not “top of mind” in awareness, needing some prompting before being selected. Good writing has been compared to having a clean bedroom, no one really notices anything unless it is messy. Bad writing sticks out like a sore thumb, but good writing allows people to read the content without noticing the easy, free-flow style. Following is a narrative that demonstrates this point. It is a story from participant #002 who is talking about client relations, but it also demonstrates the importance of writing skills.

I had a moment where I thought I was going to lose my job. And it had to do with a misconception in a client’s needs and not respecting, kind of, the chain of command with the editing process. I wrote a piece, I wrote a press release that I
thought was great. I thought it was a great press release, when I was at [COMPANY]. And, I submitted it directly to the client without having it reviewed by my managers. And they came back and they were really upset. The client was absolutely furious about it actually, they, they almost left. They were almost ready to leave, but they were on the fence for a while because they were very meticulous in what they wanted. They were very detailed. And in my opinion, they were doing it wrong. But, it wasn’t my place to say that. So, the release I wrote did not meet their standards AT ALL. And so they reported it back and I had a moment where it was like, I really had to start… it was a moment where I really had to start, to help myself, to help my manager understand what, why I wrote the release I did. Why I didn’t double check and give them a chance to review it first. You know, all of that. Because they were really mad (chuckles).

And I think that was an awakening moment for me where, you know, I really had to respect not only the writing and make sure that what I was submitting was free of errors, free of, meet the clients standards, but also that, go through the channels that I was supposed to. It was a big moment for me where I didn’t, people, for the first time, people questioned if my heart was in the career or if I was just going through the motions. I needed to make it clear right away and build up from there (Author: Was it a content issue, or…?). Partly content, actually it was mostly content and, and style. Style had a large part to do with it. When you have a highly technical [COMPANY] and they have very specific ways and using a great deal of jargon to explain what they do. To me, it’s our responsibility to help people understand and not use the jargon, and not use all that crap. I’ve really
believed in that for a long time. And, they don’t. That client at the time did not. And, I got in a lot of trouble because I didn’t respect their wishes. You know, I tried to push them too far too fast. Better to work within the system in some of these cases, work with the system and kind of gently take steps, in those directions. But that was a tough moment. And I took it pretty hard. Wow (002).

Management skills are a weak emerging theme in regards to PR professional’s perception of factors that facilitate career advancement. This factor barely makes the mark with the minimum ranking of 50% among the top four factors in the card sort activity. But again, in the literature review and previous research, it is clearly demonstrated that PR practitioners must proceed from task to management in order to be most effective. Why did this factor not show up stronger? The answer to this question is unclear. It may be simply that, of the many facilitating factors, management skills just did not seem to be among the most influential for career advancement. It was rarely mentioned in the interviews, with only two people referring to any type of management traits. While it can be considered a mildly emerging factor, management skills are certainly not one of the main traits perceived by successful PR practitioners for career advancement. Interestingly, as we will discuss later, management skills will arise as one of the strongest dynamics to come out of the inter-relatedness of factors analysis.

Ethics and business savvy scored equally poor throughout this study. The only reason they are even worth mentioning in the conclusion is the fact that they are so strongly discussed in the literature review and research. It is difficult to say why these factors rated so poorly. I believe ethics is another assumed trait like writing skills. Ethics and writing are so fundamental to PR, I believe they were simply considered to be an
implicit part of a successful participant’s traits. They are must-have factors that, without them, a person is unable to advance at all.

Business savvy is different. This factor has just begun to get serious consideration from the industry, profession, and educational institutions. Referring back to the literature, it is clear that most PR practitioners have no business training, degree, or background. That was a main impetus of this study, but maybe this is why it was not selected as a factor in career advancement; nearly all participants attained upper-level positions in PR without any formalized business training. Maybe business savvy is another set of skills that is picked up along the way and hardly noticed by the individual. It is difficult to state the exact reason, but it would be interesting to do further research into this factor.

Diversity of experience gained weak consideration as a perceived facilitating factor to career advancement by hitting the minimum rank of 50% among the top four factors in the card sort activity. I believe there was some confusion in the meaning of this factor: what is diversity of experience? Some participants asked for clarification, but most did not and it is an easy factor to confuse with cross-function experience from the previous section. As a weak emerging factor, it does not justify much comment, other than the results might have been slightly different with better explanation.

It was interesting to me that role models and mentors did not show stronger in the card sort ranking with only a 15% and 40% respective showing. Its 55% mention frequency in the interviews barely makes it an emerging theme. Because of this, it can be stated that role models and mentors were perceived to be a moderate facilitating factor to career advancement. I believe this factor warrants a story as the people who spoke of this
factor did so with great passion. The following is from participant #017, telling the story about a transition period when this person’s mentor and boss decided to leave the department.

Oh God. You know, I guess I would go with a more recent turning point in my career; it would be very recent. Last June, my boss took a job in marketing, here at [COMPANY]… But I remember [NAME] calling me that morning at home and then meeting with her that afternoon and telling me she was taking this job in marketing. I was devastated. It ruined my entire weekend and my [NAME] conference because she is such a great mentor and a leader. And she kept saying, this is a great opportunity for you to shine and to grow. There will be a new [TITLE]. It’ll be fine. It’ll be great. We talked about a lot of different things and seeing if we could split it, because she oversees [DIVISION]. And she was like, maybe we could get [NAME] to parcel it off and you could be my role, but over [DEPARTMENT]; because I don’t have any experience in [RESPONSIBILITY] and I’m not ready for that kind of thing. We talked about all of these different things, but I was just like (makes noise “ahh!”). Well it took probably a good couple weeks for me to be okay with that (017).

Building relationships became a weak emerging theme in the other category with 50% mention frequency. Because this was an unidentified factor, it would be very interesting to see where this would have ranked if it would have been included in the card sort ranking. A primary goal of PR is to build and maintain positive relationships for your company with targeted publics, so this factor makes sense. Following is a story
highlighting this factor from participant #011 who was going through a tough job transition and how a relationship he/she built helped him/her advance his/her career.

I guess, for a watershed event, I have to think back to [YEAR] when I was the [TITLE] and we reorganized and combined regions and there were two of us and only one job. And I didn't get the job. That was the most devastated I have ever been in my entire life… it's not often that I feel I just can't do something. But, during that time I came to question, do I even want to stay in this field? Do I want to stay in this company? What do I want to do? Do I want to go back to the [PREVIOUS EMPLOYER]? Not really. What else is there? You know all that sort of questioning thing. But, fortunately, you know, there was an opening here and so I was, saved if you will, by one of my colleagues. I heard about the opening through the internal network I guess. I called up an old friend who worked here and was lamenting and he said, well you know, there's a guy in this department that isn't really doing a good job. Maybe we could find something else for him to do and you could come over and take his job because you would be a lot better than he is. So, somehow they worked that out… But, this guy who had responsibility for [JOB FUNCTION] in this particular area did report to somebody in the operational organization. And so, then it just became a matter of, you know, finding him someplace else to transfer to. Which they did. Making an opening which could then be filled with me and my skill set. I guess the reporting relationship stayed that way for a little while (011).
Summary: Research Question Two

Successful PR professionals perceive that some facilitating factors are at play in advancing their career to an upper-level position. The strongest of these features is personality traits. There is something intangible at play with personality and the PR professional. Having the passion, drive, enthusiasm, flexibility, will power, and determination will get you a long way in career advancement. At some point, task and management skills come into play too. A person must be able to perform and, eventually, they must be able to think strategically. Following is a narrative example that demonstrates this point exactly. This narrative is the story from participant #008 during a major career transition.

People who reported to me in the past were my team members. I was the team lead and they were the team members. What I learned in this position is, that is not reporting. This job is reporting where I am responsible for my team’s career advancement. I am responsible for their pay, which you don’t get as a team lead. It’s dramatically different. And, when I accepted this position, for the first time in my career, I had two people sitting in front of me and giving me that blank stare, that I gave so many other people in my career. All right chief, what are we doing now? And, that was a huge turning point in my career. All of a sudden the shoe is on the other foot. And, in your career, you’ve always said, when I get to that position I’m going to do this and I’m going to make those changes. And I’m not going to be that guy or that girl. I’m going to do it this way. When you’ve got two people staring at you and going, okay, this is my job and I’m here today and you’ve got me until five, what am I doing? That was a big eye opener for me…. 
But, building that strategic direction and saying, we know how to steer the ship. We know how to put up the sales and I can put them up as well as anyone else around here, but you need to tell me when to put them up and where to put them up and you need to tell us where we are going. That was difficult. My career and, my [SPOUSE] is a testament to this because [HE/SHE] actually has verbally said it, [HE/SHE] knows the change in the way that, you know, you turn from a job, it’s like that old cliché, you turn from a job to a career. It was actually caring about where things are going and how things were being done (008).

Additionally, this research study finds that a diverse life experience is mildly helpful, as is the assistance of role models and mentors. Building and maintaining lasting relationships is also perceived to be a mildly helpful facilitating factor for successful PR professionals.

**Research Question Three**

R3: What challenges and barriers do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?

According to this research study, it appears the greatest challenge or barrier PR professionals perceive in advancement of their career is a negative perception or misunderstanding of public relations by others (see Table 17). The only other factor that emerged, albeit weakly, was a lack of business savvy. The remaining factors of gender, lack of skills, and lack of education did not rank as emerging themes. The work / life balance gained 30% mention frequency, but again, not enough for theme consideration.
Table 17

Research Question Three Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question 3:</th>
<th>What challenges and barriers do successful PR professionals perceive as they advance their career to executive roles?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Framework</td>
<td>Barriers and Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods:</td>
<td>In-depth Interview Question 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Card Sort Ranking of Barriers and Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Artifact Collection: resume confirms data; storytelling supports findings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is by Top 2, Top 4, Theme</th>
<th>Card Sort Ranking Results</th>
<th>Interview Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Perceptions or Misunderstanding of PR</td>
<td>Ranked Top 2</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Business Savvy</td>
<td>Ranked Top 4</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factor: Family and Work Balance</td>
<td></td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substandard Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substandard Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Factors: List of 14</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary: Research Question Three

All in all, the results of this section of the research study were relatively surprising. Based upon the literature review, it was determined that perceptions of PR and lack of business savvy are a challenge to career advancement, but they were not the only ones identified. So, why were no other factors identified in this section? It is difficult to answer this question. As mentioned in Chapter Four, it seems to me there are at least three good reasons why more challenges and barriers were not identified. First, little research has been done on barriers to career advancement, particularly in public relations.
Second, many people may not like to admit personal weaknesses to someone they do not know well. Third, people are unique (or like to think they are) and no two experiences are the same, especially difficult ones.

**Factor Relations Across the Career Path Progression**

Using the findings from Chapter Four, I combined all emerging and strong theme factors from the entire study with the chronological order of the career path progression (see Figure 8). This illustration highlights all the major findings from this research study. Where appropriate, the factor is placed upon the career path progression arrow in the position indicated by the diagram labeling activity. In the left-hand column, and also below the arrowhead, are any additional facilitating factor themes not identified in the career mapping. To the right of the arrow (and above the arrowhead) are the barriers to advancement. Certain factors, like personal traits, did not make it into the career path diagram, however this was a theme from the facilitating factor category and was placed along the career path progression nearest the greatest cluster from the career mapping exercise. The three percentages listed with the factors in the left-and-right hand column represent the two card sort rankings and interview mention frequency respectively. The percentage listed with the factors that run through the middle of the diagram represent the total placement percents from the diagram mapping activity. To the right of each of these factors is a box with cluster percentages listed.
Figure 8. Combination Factor Analysis and Career Path Progression. Note, percentages represent results from mention frequency, card sort ranking, and / or placement on the career path diagram.
Table 18

**Theme Results for Career Path Patterns**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Path Factors</th>
<th>Desc Stats</th>
<th>Ranked Top 2</th>
<th>Ranked Top 4</th>
<th>Ment Freq</th>
<th>Career Path Placement</th>
<th>Supportive Narrative Statement(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Entry-Level Position</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>70% start outside PR</td>
<td>012: And I started in the engineering department drawing maps…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed: Bachelor's</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>80% prior to entry-level</td>
<td>004: I went to [COLLEGE] and got my bachelor's degree in communication. 013: I graduated from [COLLEGE] with a public relations and advertising communications degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company Change</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>no pattern identified</td>
<td>020: So the recruiter said there was a company in Grand Rapids and I had to look on the map to see where Grand Rapids was. It was a smaller competitor to the company I was at and they were developing a marketing department.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employ in Larger Organization</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>no pattern identified</td>
<td>017: [NAME] is a [LARGE] company full of huge opportunities. You’ve got to at least talk to her. You’ve got to at least go in there. And once I came in here, that was it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Move</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>no pattern identified</td>
<td>00X: I actually started in Saginaw and then I think I went to Bay City, then to Saginaw, then I went to Mount Pleasant. Then I went back to Saginaw (chuckles). Then I went to Flint. In 1990, I moved here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ed: Master's</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>91.7% early in career</td>
<td>010: Getting my master’s degree was huge. 013: I think, other than that, the major step was the master’s program at [NAME]. It’s like I said, I was able to take things that I learned that night to work the very next day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freelance Work</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>no pattern identified</td>
<td>016: I had done some freelance work for them writing newsletters when she first left and then I was offered that job. And I found out why she left (laughs).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment in a PR Agency</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>no pattern identified</td>
<td>015: I wasn’t convinced the firm life was for me. But I knew, because so many people told me that it was looked upon favorably and that was the way to do it. You learn the fastest. You get exposed to the most. So, I did it in [CITY] just because I knew that would probably be a good thing to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Function Experience</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>70% after midpoint</td>
<td>008: I have written press releases before. I have laid out a brochure before. I have sat at a printer and done press checks before. I have set up audio at an event before. I have put up a trade show booth, physically, myself… I have done those things.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using the illustration in Figure 8, it is fairly easy to see where the theme factors from this study are most influential in the career path progression of the twenty research participants who had achieved an upper-level position in public relations. After combining common themes, this research study identified 15 total factors that were considered significant themes for success in public relations and two factors that were considered barriers to career advancement (see Tables 18-20).

Table 19

Theme Results for Facilitating Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Note: rank order priority is column statistics (L-R)</th>
<th>Desc Stats</th>
<th>Ranked Top 2</th>
<th>Ranked Top 4</th>
<th>Ment Freq</th>
<th>Career Path Placement</th>
<th>Supportive Narrative Statement(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Traits</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>017: I feel, it’s a lot of different things but, a lot of it is not, it’s not necessarily being intellectual or been a 4.0 student. It’s being those things and also being passionate and being detail oriented and being proactive and careful and thorough and responsive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task Skills</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>55% very early in career</td>
<td>005: I think there’s still a place for good solid written communications. And I think, having that skill that I’ve practiced and honed over the years, I don’t claim to be, you know, an excellent writer, but I think that’s important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Skills</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>75% much later in career</td>
<td>007: I wanted to be more of a solution provider on things, you know, and I’m not talking about just questioning everything that goes on in the company, but trying to think of different ways to solve problems; how to communicate something that was new, on the horizon, thinking ahead.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of Experience</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>85% just after midpoint</td>
<td>004: : I would think, again, I go back to the whole different experiences, just a wide range from an accounting firm with all the marketing stuff, and then working at [NAME] and being exposed to [CLIENT] and this and that. I think having a wide experience has really helped.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Models or Mentors</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>70% early in career; highest overall placement</td>
<td>009: You know, mentors… I have access to a lot of people that had worked in the community or worked in various areas and a lot of great advice and a lot of great people to draw on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building Relationships</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>002: You realize the relationships you build early on have, pay off throughout your career / I’ve always had a commitment to never burn a bridge and always try to keep relationships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 20

**Theme Results for Barriers and Challenges**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers and Challenges</th>
<th>Desc Stats</th>
<th>Ranked Top 2</th>
<th>Ranked Top 4</th>
<th>Ment Freq</th>
<th>Career Path Placement</th>
<th>Supportive Narrative Statement(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Perceptions of PR</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>010: I would say another barrier is general confusion about what marketing and PR is and what it isn't. What it can do and what it can't... you're not in the parade behind the elephants to just clean up. You need to be part of the strategic planning that planned the parade route.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Business Savvy</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>004: You know, possibly, the fact that maybe I didn't have a stronger business background. I mean, I consider myself strategic, a planner, and all that and yet, sometimes, and I don't know... I think it's more internally in me thinking this.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To recap and condense the findings from the previous tables (in the order they appear), the significant career path pattern factors for this study are: (a) Entry-Level Position, (b) Education: Bachelor’s Degree, (c) Company Change, (d) Employment in a Larger Organization, (e) Geographic Move, (f) Education: Master’s Degree, (g) Freelance Work, (h) Employment in a PR Agency, and (i) Cross-Function Experience. The significant facilitating factors for this study are: (a) Personal Traits, (b) Task Skills, (c) Management Skills, (d) Diversity of Experience, (e) Role Models or Mentors, and (f) Building Relationships. The significant barriers for this study are: (a) Negative Perceptions of Public Relations, and (b) Lack of Business Savvy.

**Summary: The Perfect Career Path Progression**

To help paint a more concrete picture of the findings, I thought it would be interesting and helpful to narrate what the perfect career path progression might look like based upon the results from these twenty research participants.

To begin, subjects would gain a bachelor’s degree, preferably in communication (although I will discuss this later). Following this, they would accept an entry-level
position immediately upon graduation, but mostly likely not in the field of public relations. While still in their entry-level position, they experience some minor discomfort from a lack of business savvy, causing them to return to graduate school and gain a master’s of communication from a traditional public university. Next, they build and maintain personal relationships, which would lead to some freelance work before accepting a job at a public relations agency. During this time, they would continue to build the toolbox of their task skills and find a wonderful role model and mentor to help guide their path. Their intangible personal traits, such as passion, determination, flexibility, and timeliness help them land a new job at a larger organization with annual revenues exceeding $5 million. While there, they experience some misunderstandings of the role of PR by their boss. They make a fairly major geographic move, accepting a promotion with an even larger organization whose annual revenue exceeds $50 million. Throughout this time, they are gaining significant diversity of life experience through a variety of means; which could be such experience as traveling, learning a new language, or enjoying the arts. Because of their previous range of work experience and company changes, their cross-functional skills are extremely diverse and well-honed. They can handle most any PR issue that comes their way. At this point in their career, they are being asked to take on more responsibility with a direct supervisory role and in making strategic corporate decisions with a seat at the executive table. Their management skills have become quite extensive due to their extensive career experience; and they are well satisfied with their upper-level role in public relations. As an aside, they continue to give back to their industry by volunteering for research projects and teaching as an adjunct instructor for the locally (certified) public relations program.
Implications and Connections to Previous Research

The purpose of this study was to understand the essence of the lived experience of public relations professionals who have achieved an upper-level position. This is exploratory research and due to the size and geographic scope of this project, I cannot make sweeping generalized statements regarding the career paths of those interested in gaining an upper-level position in public relations. That was not the goal of this study. That said, and keeping this limitation in mind, this study does offer some interesting implications that can provide further support and strengthen the still-young research capacity of the field of PR, particularly on the topic of career path progression.

One of the findings from my study is that it is fairly easy to enter the field of public relations. This topic was mentioned in Chapter Two (Seitel, 2007), and this research echoes the sentiment’s of PR executive Michael Levine who stated that it’s easy and attractive to make a career move into public relations (Levine, 2008). Consistent with Levine’s observations, not one participant had an undergraduate degree specifically in public relations, yet they managed to achieve an upper-level position in PR. Interestingly, 95% of the participants completed their undergraduate degree more than 10 years ago and 70% more than 20 years ago. Current research shows that, 20 years ago, many people did not have the option to choose an undergraduate degree in PR. It would be interesting to know whether the situation is different now due to the existence of more than 200 undergraduate programs in public relations (PRSSA, 2009).

Along these same lines, 70% of my research participants accepted an entry-level job in an industry other than PR. Within two job hops, nearly all of them were employed in PR. While I commend people for finding their passion, it raises similar concerns about
the expertise of people performing public relations functions. Just because you know how to set up a tent or make room reservations, this doesn’t mean you know how to plan, coordinate, and execute a successful community relations event. The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) comes to this same conclusion, which is why they created the 36 areas of knowledge and skills necessary for competence in public relations (see Table 1).

Another implication of this study is how quickly the master’s degree is becoming fairly standard. Seventy-five percent had started a master’s and 60% gained one. Contrast this with only 40% attaining APR status. What makes this even more interesting is the content learned from each of these designations. The APR is strictly focused on knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in public relations. The master’s degree could be anything, but in this case, 9 of 12 had an MS in communication, where there is little focus on the KSAs of PR.

In close alignment with education is the supervised experiential internship, which received some of the lowest marks in this study. As stated previously, I do believe this is a generational changing of expectations and age was a large factor in my results. That said, educators and industry control the outcome of this factor. PRSA has gone on record highly recommending internships (Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006) and many educational programs are mandating internships. It will be interesting to see what happens with this factor over time, but I suspect it will continue to receive a great deal of emphasis from academia and the profession.

One positive implication from this study is the transition from task practitioner into management. This has been a hot topic in PR research for several years due to the
fact that PR is best done at the managerial level (Cobb, 2008; Elison, 2007; Harris & Whalen, 2006; Seitel, 2007; Wilson & Ogden, 2008). In this study, there was significant talk about gaining task skills early in one’s career, followed by a general diversity of experience, cross-function experience, and then management skills. This is a great general career path and can offer a guide to those looking for ways to increase their likelihood for promotion. The fact that the cross-function experience ranked as the highest factor of influence for career advancement could be a great source of information for public relations education as well as those starting in the field. The message here seems to be, get as much of a variety of experience performing PR tasks and functions as possible because it will offer significant paybacks down the road. Educators may want to look at these implications and ensure they are offering ample cross-function training in all the aspects of public relations.

The high percentages for geographic moves and company changes were a little surprising, but should also reinforce the fact that PR expertise is in high demand and there are many opportunities for growth (United States Department of Labor, 2008). This information can also help a young practitioner mindset oneself for a career with multiple companies. Combine this with the knowledge that freelancing and PR agency work are mild facilitators for success and this could provide the opportunity to tie right back in to the cross-function experience, particularly early in the career, followed up with employment in a larger organization.

Another inference coming from this research is the importance of not only having a role model or mentor, but being a role model or mentor. In 2009, Bruce Berger, Juan Meng, and William Heyman found a strong connection among 1,000 practitioners in
regards to the influence of mentors on career advancement. They state that role models are one of the most important sources for leadership development. Nearly all participants from my study would agree. Ninety-five percent of the research participants placed role models and mentors on their career diagram. This was the highest placement percentage of any factor, signifying its importance. In talking with participants, it was clear that the formalized, forced process used to generate role models and mentors does not work very well. The best and most effective way to implement this is through genuine caring, availability, and openness on the part of the mentor and mentee. The message seems to be, if you do not have a mentor or role model, get one. If you are not acting as a role model or mentor, be ready and willing to step up when called upon.

As seen in Chapter Two, my study’s primary connection with previous research is in the creation and use of the conceptual framework as the foundation for the study. The three core categories of career path patterns, facilitators for success, and barriers to success, emerged after an extensive literature review. While these three categories are prolific in the research, combining them is unique to my study. By doing this, I was able to examine all three, not only as separate categories of influence on a participant’s career, but also as they inter-relate. This relationship among the category factors significantly enriched the implications, offering insight into the occurrence and timeliness of relevant factors.

The industry still has a long-way to go in addressing the negative perceptions of public relations, particularly with publics external to the field. PR professionals are viewed negatively (Callison, 2004). In fact, the entire industry is viewed negatively (Budd, 2000; PRSA, 2005; Fall & Hughes, 2009). In my study, this perception was not
immediately identified. It was not until the card sort ranking that participants name this as a factor. Holding a negative perception, or misunderstanding the role, of PR, is not a “top-of-mind” issue. While there is some discussion on this topic in previous and current research, more must be done to separate public relations practitioners from the self-proclaimed spin doctors.

Participants did not classify ethics or business preparation as factors for advancing their career. This result is telling in itself. Certainly both issues have received significant attention in the research. As cited in Chapter Two, *The Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education* (2006), clearly states that ethics are a primary factor for advancement in public relations. The profession, lead by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), even created a comprehensive ethical code of conduct and provisions for ethical decision-making.

Similarly, business savvy has been identified as a key trait for success in upper-level public relations positions (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Berger, Reber & Heyman, 2007; Ellis, 1984; Elsasser, 2009; Frydman, 2006; Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education, 2006). Previously, I cited author and executive Diane Thieke (2009), who firmly stated the importance of PR practitioner’s knowledge of business in order to get a seat at the executive table. The business case for PR is a major and frequently discussed topic in public relations research and publications. However, neither business savvy nor ethics were “top-of-mind” for participants of my study. It appears there is significant work within the industry to either, increase awareness of these issues, or, as will be discussed next, offer more research into why this is the case.
Recommendations for Higher Education Leaders

As leaders in higher education in public relations, there are several relevant findings in regards to curriculum and program structure. One of the strongest findings of my research study suggests that cross-function experience with public relations tactics is important for advancement of one’s career. To this point, students should be encouraged to work on a myriad of project-based assignments that have real-world implications. For example, instead of writing mock press releases, students could write stories regarding real clients and submit them for publication. Similarly, although exams do help measure the capacity for facts and procedures, experiential learning from assignments such as planning and hosting events helps students see exactly what is required for success.

In conjunction with the exposure to cross-function experience, it is clear that diversity of life experience is helpful to career advancement as well. Academic advisors would be doing students a favor by strongly recommending programs such as study away, language minors, international travel, and participation in cultural events. Students entering the field would find it helpful to generally increase the variety of their life experience. By starting this in college, an exposure to diverse life experience can be a life-long practice that will pay dividends in building professional and personal networks.

The management skills factor was one of the strongest themes to come from the career path diagram activity. We must give students not only the knowledge of management theory, but also the critically important practical practice in handling management issues. How do you reprimand an employee? How do you handle conflict? What are the best ways to reward people? What if an employee does not follow-through on a commitment? Incorporating more role-play situations into the curriculum would be
one way students could experience these tough management issues. Additionally, it would be of great benefit to students to combine management skills application with leadership theory in order to gain a deeper perspective of human relations.

As educators, we not only need to be good role models, but we have to find ways to encourage students to seek out mentors. PR programs should help students build and maintain a strong network of working professionals. One way to assist this process is to invite professionals as guest speakers. By doing this, you could also make a conscious effort to tap into the important factors identified in this research regarding PR in freelance, large organizations, and agency work. Along this same theme, it is important to build relationships early in one’s academic career. An excellent way to do this is through informational interviews, job shadows, conference attendance, and appropriate social media connections. These associations are rich in experience for students to learn more about the industry while increasing their circle of influence. Ninety-five percent of my study participants placed role models and mentors on their career path diagram. Furthermore, during the interview portion of my research, several participants discussed the importance of role models and mentors on career advancement. Clearly, this is a factor that will benefit students early and often throughout their career.

Recommendations for Further Research

This section is condensed into three categories: structure of the study, factors of the study with counter-intuitive results, and related topics for further study.

Structural Recommendations

In regards to the structure of the study, my number one recommendation for further research would be to either reduce the scope of the research in order to focus on
one category in depth, or to more clearly explain each section of the interview process so people better understand the categories. However, this expanded explanation would push the boundaries of an already taxing 90-minute session.

Basically what I am referring to here is what I would consider to be potentially lost data due to structural imperfections in the interview protocol. When asking participants about the most important steps in their career path, which addresses research question one and the career path pattern category, some interviewees would begin talking about facilitating factors or barriers. In my attempt to keep the data clean and free from bias, I excluded myself from using any information about these factors unless they were discussed within the parameters previously established by the interview protocol. I do not think this had any major implications on my study and certainly not on my overall results, however it is a little disturbing to know there is untapped data out there simply because of how the protocol is structured. So, my first recommendation for further study would be to narrow the focus a bit more and, instead of looking at all three of these major categories and how they inter-relate on career path progression, pick one and go in-depth.

Factors with Counter-intuitive Results

I would recommend taking a look at some of the factors that, based on the literature review, scored differently than anticipated. For example, is it truly the case that ethics and writing skills are such an intricate and implicit part of a PR professional’s makeup that participants simply did not perceive them to be influential factors for career advancement? Or is something else going on here? Similarly, it would be interesting to take a look at some other factors like internships using a different sample group, maybe a younger cohort to find out what their lived experience is. Age was never considered as
part of this study. The same younger sample group could be used to examine the different types of bachelor’s degrees gained by entry-level employees in PR since the offering of PR degrees has been increased. The same could be said in taking a look at entry-level positions as well.

Another critical recommendation for further study would be on the barriers and challenges of career advancement. This research study did not reach its goal in shedding much light on this important area of consideration. As stated earlier, one recommendation would be to limit the scope of the study to only barriers. I believe this scope could be large enough to support its own study and it would provide excellent insight into a critical factor for achieving an executive position in PR.

Business savvy and public relations make for wonderfully strange bedfellows. I was not surprised that this study did not find a stronger tie between this critical factor and the industry. First, we are still in the infant stages of realizing how important it is for the communications expert to have good business sense. Secondly, who says he or she does not have good business sense already? This is one of the great assumptions in public relations today, that public relations practitioners do not have enough business sense. I look forward to reading a great deal more on this topic over the span of the next few decades. For those looking for research topics within the field of public relations, you would not have to look much further for a more influential and significant factor to add to the knowledge base in public relations.

*Related Topics for Study*

I would love to see a study that compares and contrasts the knowledge and skills gained from Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) versus a master’s in communication
or similar field; maybe even a master’s in PR. It would be fascinating (to me anyway) to see the commonalities and differences and then compare them to what is required by industry and academia.

The study of personality is huge and exhaustive. I referenced several research studies in my literature review and, while I find them fascinating, I’m not sure we will ever be able to create an exhaustive list of intangibles such as the perfect personality traits of PR professionals. First, the field is so diverse you could have a different personality for each component area. Second, people are so unique, I think it would be difficult to identify all the aspects of passion, flexibility, determination, and such. If someone were interested in this however, I would recommend starting with a connection to the Enneagram. An interesting study would be to use the Enneagram system to “type” the best personalities for PR.

Another wonderfully juicy topic for further research consideration would be the combination of job mobility and the traditionally sequenced career path over time. You may have caught my struggle with these two distinct, yet oddly similar factors in my findings. Job mobility was strictly about making a geographic move for the job. The traditionally sequenced career path over time offers some insight and overlap. Combine these with the career path progression and there would be some interesting data that could come from this. My guess is that some strong statements could be made about the number of job changes, geographic moves, and timeliness of those moves within the career sequence. Another twist on this could also be to tie in the factors of employment in larger organization (what is large?), as well as, employment in a PR agency and freelancing. As I said, there is some wonderfully rich research to be done here.
Final Conclusion

This empirical phenomenological study examined the actual, lived experience of PR trained professionals who attained top-level management or executive positions in business settings. By exploring the career advancement experiences of public relations practitioners who have achieved such positions, this study sheds some light on the ways in which PR professionals draw upon the training and expertise gained throughout their career path progression.

To explore these issues, a conceptual framework was created based upon an extensive literature review process. Through this, three categories emerged which guided this study, they were: (a) career path patterns, (b) facilitating factors for success, and (c) barriers to career advancement. Several factors were identified within each category, providing a coding scheme with which to analyze and sort data collected through (a) in-depth interviews, (b) career mapping, (c) card sort ranking, and (d) artifact collection. 90-minute interviews were scheduled with an elite sampling of twenty professionals throughout West Michigan who had attained an upper-level position in public relations. Direct quotes from participant narratives were used to demonstrate key findings. Mention frequency patterns were used to identify major themes, as were co-occurrence rules from the card sort ranking activity. Resumes were used to support the data and storytelling was used to demonstrate and flesh out the concluding results.

Because the purpose of this research was exploratory and descriptive in nature, results cannot be generalized due to the limited size and geographic scope of the sample group. That said, the findings of this study suggest that there are 17 factors of influence for career advancement in public relations. The significant career path pattern themes for
this study are: (a) entry-level positions are frequently taken outside of the PR industry, (b) obtainment of a bachelor’s degree is a given, (c) 95% of participants made a company change, (d) 75% are employed in a larger organization, (e) 75% made a geographic move, (f) 60% gained a master’s degree, (g) 60% worked as a freelancer, (h) 50% had been employed at an agency at some point in their career, and (i) 100% mentioned the importance of cross-function experience.

The significant facilitating factor themes for this study are: (a) personality traits, like passion and determination, (b) task skills gained early in the career, (c) management skills gained later in the career, (d) a wide diversity of life experience, (e) 70% of participants placed role models or mentors as a factor early in the career, and (f) overall relationship building throughout one’s career.

The significant barrier and challenge themes for this study are: (a) the persistent negative perceptions or misunderstandings of the role of PR, and (b) a perceived lack of business savvy. Overall, there were several findings for this study in regards to these factor themes individually, as well as their inter-relatedness to a universal career path progression.

The practice and profession of public relations is still relatively young and, while the extent of research in this industry is expanding, there is still a great need for relevant and useful contributions. This qualitative study adds to the growing literature of this important social science and offers additional data for understanding the factors that lead to career advancement and how they are inter-related.
REFERENCES


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promotion (Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 1995).

*University Microfilms International* (UMI No. 9616977)


Appendix A

HSIRB Letter of Approval
Date: April 7, 2010

To: Jianping Shen, Principal Investigator
   Patrick Bishop, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 10-02-40

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “Paths to Top Management in Public Relations” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: April 7, 2011
Appendix B

Participant Qualifying Letter
Dear «First»,

You are in a rare class of people and I could really use your help.

My name is Patrick Bishop and I’m a professor of public relations and marketing at Ferris State University. More to the point, I am a doctoral student at Western Michigan University writing to request your participation in my dissertation research -- a study examining the experiences of people who have reached an upper level position in public relations.

The study would require approximately 90-minutes of your time in a face-to-face interview to take place in your office at a time of your convenience. The topic to be discussed would be your specific career path. The interview will be voice recorded (not visually recorded) and all information will be kept confidential. Following the interview, you will receive a copy of the transcript to review and make additional remarks. If necessary, I may need to make follow up phone calls for clarification.

To my knowledge, this study is the first of its kind in public relations and it’s my hope to publish the results. Your participation would be greatly appreciated. If interested, please read and sign the attached consent form, and return it to me in the addressed stamped envelope provided.

If you choose to participate by returning the signed consent form, you will be sent a short (3-5 minute) e-mail survey. Following this, final participants will be selected from a pool of qualified candidates and notified as soon as possible. If you have any questions or comments, you may reach me at patrickbishop@ferris.edu. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Patrick Bishop, APR, MS
FSUPR Program Champion & Professor of Public Relations and Marketing
Appendix C

Participant Consent Form
Western Michigan University
Educational Leadership, Research & Technology

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jianping Shen
Student Investigator: Patrick Bishop, MS, APR
Title of Study: Paths to Top Management in Public Relations

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled "Paths to Top Management in Public Relations." This project will serve as Patrick Bishop’s dissertation for the requirements of the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). This consent document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the time commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in this research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask any questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
The purpose of this study is to examine actual, lived experience of PR professionals who have attained an upper-management position in public relations. This study will explore career paths and factors that have helped or hindered a person’s attainment of an upper-management position in PR.

Who can participate in this study?
The primary qualification for participation is the attainment of an upper-management position in the field of public relations. A secondary criterion is proximity of location in West Michigan.

Where will this study take place?
In your office.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
There will be a 5-10 minute e-mail survey and a one-time meeting of approximately 90-minutes. Following this meeting, you will be sent a copy of transcribed discussion to review and make additional comments. If necessary, there may be a follow-up phone call for clarification.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
During the interview, you’ll be asked to discuss your career path. You will be asked to diagram your education and career path. You will be asked to rank order key traits of your career path. You will be asked to tell a story of a key point in your career. You will be asked to supply a copy of a current resume.

What information is being measured during the study?
Common career path characteristics, along with factors that have helped or hindered your attainment of an upper-management position in public relations.

What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?
The likelihood of risk is practically non-existent. You will be talking about your career path. The only potential discomfort may be in discussing barriers to your career. The only other risk of discomfort is if the study reaches full participation and the researcher needs to send you regrets due to over-capacity.
What are the benefits of participating in this study?
The primary benefit to participants may be the goodwill in giving back to the research base in the field of public relations. This study may give insight to any practitioner hoping to achieve upper-management in PR. This study may also assist educators training future practitioners.

Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?
None.

Is there any compensation for participating in this study?
None.

Who will have access to the information collected during this study?
Only Patrick Bishop, the student researcher, and Dr. Jianping Shen, the dissertation committee chair.

What if you want to stop participating in this study?
You can choose to stop participating in the study at anytime for any reason. You will not suffer any prejudice or penalty by your decision to stop your participation. Additionally, although rare and unlikely, the investigator can also decide to stop your participation in the study without your consent.

Should you have any questions prior to, or during the study, you can contact the student investigator, Patrick Bishop at 231.225.8266 or patrickbishop@ferris.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions arise during the course of the study.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is older than one year.

I have read this informed consent document. The risks and benefits have been explained to me. I agree to take part in this study.

Please Print Your Name

______________________________________________
Participant’s signature Date

Your e-mail address: ______________________________________
Appendix D

Epoche
The following is an epoche, a brief overview of the lived experience of myself, the researcher, Patrick Bishop. This epoche highlights the significant academic and professional events and achievements of my career.

I was raised in a mid-sized Midwestern town in Michigan where I attended private schools from kindergarten through twelfth grade, graduating among the top 50 of my class of nearly 250. Following high school, I attended the local community college in pre-engineering, making the Dean’s List three of four semesters. Due to my program choice of pre-engineering, I was required to take several business courses, which today would be considered a business-core curriculum. While at community college, I worked on-campus as a Macintosh computer tutor, at times, teaching up to 30 students how to use a variety of software applications. During my second year at community college, I wrote for and helped design the student-run newspaper. After two years, I transferred to Michigan State University where I received a Bachelor of Arts in Communication with an emphasis in Public Relations. While at Michigan State, I worked on-campus as a Macintosh tutor in the Communication building. During this time, I was also a research assistant for Dr. Steven McCornack. While at MSU, I completed two internships. My first one was at Consumers Energy’s corporate office as a video intern. The second internship was at Walt Disney World’s EPCOT Center where I received a “Ducktorate” and the highest-review rating possible. I was offered, but declined a professional internship position in WDW’s marketing department.

Upon returning from Disney, I accepted an adjunct instructor position at the community college I previously attended, teaching Macintosh software. In April 1990, Quality Stores, Inc. (QSI) of Muskegon, Michigan, offered me my first professional, full-
time position as a graphic designer and writer. Quality Stores was the third-largest farm retailer in the nation with more than 100 locations across several states. My responsibilities included the copywriting and design of flyers, brochures, radio spots, and other miscellaneous advertising material. In the fall of 1990, I accepted a manager trainee position in Lansing, Michigan and in three-months was promoted to assistant manager in Big Rapids, Michigan. In late spring of 1991, I was promoted to a marketing coordinator position responsible for all special events and public relations. Approximately one-year later, I was promoted to marketing manager with additional responsibilities for the business loyalty program, farm shows, and other community relations functions. In 1994, I was promoted to purchasing as an assistant buyer, responsible for women’s wear. In 1995, I became the buyer for the major category of workwear, footwear, and front-end, responsible for $60 million in revenue. During this time, I managed the number-one volume vendor as well as the number-one profit vendor. Sales, profits, and turn numbers of these critical business categories all had significant positive growth while under my management. My tenure with Quality Stores lasted nine years.

In the spring of 1999, I accepted a position as Vice President of Sales and Marketing with Fortress Products, Inc. (FPI). Although FPI was based in Cincinnati, Ohio, I was able to work from my home office, with frequent travel to customers, shows, vendors, business partners, and the corporate office. FPI was a small glove and textile manufacturer with less than ten U.S.-based employees and approximately $5 million in revenue. The manufacturing facilities were located in Pakistan. Along with the principal owner, I was the only other officer of FPI. In late 1999, because of previous relationships, I was instrumental in helping Fortress gain the license to manufacturer work gloves under
the Dickies brand. Dickies is the number one brand name for workwear across the nation. Under this new license agreement with Dickies, sales grew significantly, as did the opportunity to produce other items such as denim shirts, leather jackets, flannel sheets, and other textiles. In the fall of 2000, I was offered and declined the position of President of Fortress Products. The travel created significant stress on my personal life and there was a realization that this was not a field of deep passion for me.

In February of 2001, I accepted a position at the Fremont Area Community Foundation (FACF), responsible for all internal-and-external communications. FACF is among the largest fifty community foundations in the nation and, at the time, was the second-largest in the nation on a per capita basis. During my five years with FACF, my responsibilities continually increased due to the quality of my work, as well as my creation of new events. Throughout this time, I drastically reduced the budget, while increasing the quality and quantity of communication output.

While with FACF, I did considerable personal work in self-awareness and analysis and was able to name my career dream of becoming a full-time college professor. With this goal in mind, I enrolled in Grand Valley State University’s (GVSU) master’s of communication program. To gain teaching experience, I accepted evening adjunct teaching positions at GVSU and Baker College. I graduated from GVSU in the spring of 2005, summa cum laude and recipient of the Outstanding Graduate Student award. In the fall of 2005, I was accepted in Western Michigan University’s doctoral program for which I am writing this epoche. Also in the fall of 2005, I gained Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). At one point during this period, I was working full-time at FACF, teaching two
courses, taking one doctoral course, pursuing my APR and experiencing significant personal change. To say it was a very difficult few years would be an understatement.

In the fall of 2006, I accepted a full-time, tenure-track position as assistant professor of marketing and public relations with Ferris State University. I currently have four years of full-time teaching experience in public relations, marketing, advertising, and retail at Ferris State University. In 2007, I created the first fully-online public relations course. In 2009, I assisted in the successful Academic Review Process for public relations. In the fall of 2009, I became program champion of the public relations curriculum. In the spring of 2010, I accepted the additional role of program coordinator as the sole, full-time, tenure-track professor of public relations. Under my leadership, FSU was recently awarded Certification for Education in Public Relations (CEPR) from the national Public Relations Society of America, becoming one of approximately 30 programs in the nation to attain this status and the only one in the State. Additionally, FSU is the only program in the nation to award a bachelor’s in public relations as a business degree, based out of the College of Business, requiring more than 30 hours of business credits. In April 2010, I was awarded the Sytsma Award for Faculty Excellence, an honor presented annually to one faculty member in the College of Business. In August of 2010, I completely reorganized the registered student organization under the mission as a student-run PR firm. Also in August 2010, I created and seeded the first donation for the FSUPR Champions Scholarship Fund.
Appendix E

Interview Protocol for “Paths to Top Management in PR” Participant
Thank you for participating in this interview. To maintain the integrity of the study, I’m going to start the digital recorder and asked you to simply disregard it as much as possible... Great, let’s get started; and rest assured, I will do my best to keep this to our already agreed upon 60-minute time frame. As you may remember, the purpose of this study is to explore your actual experience in gaining an upper-level PR position in a business setting. I will be asking questions regarding your lived experience, which will be recorded, then transcribed by myself. Please note, during the interview, I won’t be able to make any personal comments or agreements, even though I may like to. The reason for this is to reduce my influence on your answers as much as possible. This interview is all about you and your unfiltered comments of your experience; so, please take your time and answer the questions as completely as possible. As we proceed, I may ask you to provide more information about some topics. May we begin?

PART ONE: CAREER PATTERNS

1. Starting after high school, and continuing until your most recent experience in college or university, please describe your education.
   Prompt: have you taken any business courses or received any business skills training?
   Prompt: did you have any internships? If so, was/were it/they required?

2. Starting with what you consider to be your first professional job, please give a detail description of your career path.

3. What would you consider to be the most important steps in your career path?
PART TWO: FACILITATORS FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT

1. What do you feel are the factors that facilitated your career?
   Repeating prompt: Are there other factors?

PART THREE: BARRIERS & CHALLENGES TO CAREER ADVANCEMENT

1. What barriers to advancement did you experience throughout your career?
   Repeating prompt: Are there other barriers?

PART FOUR: CAREER PATH DIAGRAM

1. Using this outline, please chart your career path, beginning with your educational experience and continuing through your current role.

2. Next, I’m going to give you a written set of directions. Please read them carefully and, if you are not in full understanding, please ask for clarification. Ok?

   WRITTEN DIRECTIONS:
   On the attached sheet are factors that may, or may not have, facilitated the advancement of your career to an upper-level position. Please review the stickers. If any of these factors were important in advancing your career, please place them in the left-hand column of your career path diagram in the location where they were MOST INFLUENTIAL to your career advancement. If there are factors that were important to your career advancement, but they are not located on this sheet, please use your pen to write these factors on the three blank stickers provided at the bottom and place them on your diagram.

3. Thank you. Now, we will do the same exercise for another set of factors.

   WRITTEN DIRECTIONS:
   On the attached sheet are factors that may, or may not have, been barriers or challenges to the advancement of your career to an upper-level position. Please review the stickers. If any of these factors were important barriers or challenges in advancing your career, please place them in the right-hand column of your career path diagram in the location where they were MOST HARMFUL to your career advancement. If there are factors which are not located on this sheet, please use your pen to write these factors on the three blank stickers provided at the bottom and place them on your diagram.
PART FIVE: CARD SORTING

Script: I will now have you rank order three different categories of factors which all relate to career advancement. The first set will be career path patterns. The second set will be facilitating factors. The third set will be delimiting factors to career advancement.

1. Here is a set of cards representing career pattern factors of career advancement. Please place these cards in order, from most influential to least influential, in regards to how they assisted YOU in achieving an upper-level PR position in the field of business. If there are factors which you believe are missing, please write those factors on the blank cards provided and include them in the ranking.
   a. Prompt: (if two or more items are ranked equally) please take some time to reflect on these items and rank order them in relation to what YOU believe is most important so each card has its own rank.
   Entry-level position
   Cross function experience
   Job Mobility
   Advanced education with an emphasis in business
   Employment in larger organizations
   Supervised experiential internship
   Traditionally sequenced career progression over time

2. Here is a set of cards representing facilitating factors of career advancement. Please place these cards in order, from most influential to least influential, in regards to how they assisted YOU in achieving an upper-level PR position in the field of business. If there are factors which you believe are missing, please write those factors on the blank cards provided and include them in the ranking.
   a. Prompt: (if two or more items are ranked equally) please take some time to reflect on these items and rank order them in relation to what YOU believe is most important so each card has its own rank.
   Personal traits (positive attitude, initiative, flexibility, passion)
   Task skills (writing and communication competence)
   Management skills (critical thinking, research, strategic decision making)
   Positive ethics
Business savvy
Diversity of experience
Use of role models and mentors

3. Here is a final set of cards of delimiting factors. Please place these cards in order, from most harmful to least harmful, in regards to the challenges or barriers they placed upon your achieving an upper-level PR position in the field of business. Again, if there are factors you believe are missing, please write those factors on the blank cards provided and include them in the ranking.

a. Prompt: (if two or more items are ranked equally) please take some time to reflect on these items and rank order them in relation to what YOU believe is most important so each card has its own rank.

- Substandard education
- Substandard skills, particularly writing
- Negative perceptions of public relations
- Gender
- Lack of business savvy

PART SIX: ARTIFACT COLLECTION

Script:
Thank you for your time and patience during this process. We are nearly done.

1. Please tell me a story about an experience you had that represents a major turning point in your career advancement.

2. Do you have any special physical artifacts from this experience in your office that you could share with me?
   a. Prompt: Can I get a copy of your resume?

This concludes our interview. I want to extend a sincere thank you again for your time, patience, and cooperation. I will take the information gathered here, review and compile it along with several other interviews.
May I contact you if I have further questions or need any clarification? Excellent. Thanks again and I hope you have a wonderful day.

Shut off digital recorder.
Appendix F

Career and Educational Path Diagram
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<th>Education Institution / Employer Organization</th>
<th>Academic Degree / Job Title</th>
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