

# Competence, competencies and/or capabilities for public communication? A public sector study

Jim Macnamara

*University of Technology Sydney*

## Abstract

Knowledge, skills, and abilities, referred to as KSAs, as well as competencies, overall competency or competence and, most recently, capabilities, are major foci in human resource literature, particularly that related to recruitment and professional development. They also have increasingly become a focus of study in public relations and corporate, government, and organisational communication. A number of national and global studies have been undertaken to identify the KSAs, competencies, and capabilities required to effectively undertake PR and communication management roles today and in the future. Recently, the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management completed an extensive review of professional qualifications and educational standards to produce a *Global Body of Knowledge* (GBOK), and in 2016 commenced a further stage of this research to develop a Global Capabilities Framework. This paper reports findings of a study undertaken to inform a capabilities framework for public sector communication professionals that supports and adds to the findings of the Global Alliance study and provides specific insights into the capabilities required in government communication today and into the future.

**Keywords:** Communication, capabilities, competencies, competency, knowledge, skills

## Introduction

Governments around the world, particularly in a number of mature democracies, are under pressure to address growing dissatisfaction, disengagement, and even distrust among citizens and stakeholders (Coleman, 2013; Harvard University, 2015; OECD, 2014). Increasingly, governments recognise communication as one of the five “levers of government” that can create attitudinal or behavioural change, along with legislation, regulation, taxation, and spending (HM Government, 2016). At the same time, governments are expected to exercise governance and be accountable for expenditure, which includes ensuring that government communication is effective and undertaken cost-efficiently.

Partly as a way of reducing costs and partly because of major changes in media and information consumption habits in the age of the internet, governments are adopting new digital technologies for communication and service delivery. For example, the UK *Government Digital Strategy* seeks to make service delivery and public communication “digital by default” (Cabinet Office, 2013, p. 2). Most developed countries including Australia are following similar paths.

While affording reductions in communication production and distribution costs, digitalisation and the internet have led to “audience fragmentation” (Anderson, 2006, pp. 181–191; Jenkins, 2006, pp. 238) and the decline of traditional mass media channels of public communication. As audiences fragment, new research and analysis techniques are emerging to gain audience insights and personalise communication, such as behavioural insights and ‘big data’ analysis, and new channels and platforms are being used for public communication. These factors and a range of other technological, social, cultural, and political shifts that are coalescing to create ‘disruptive change’ (AMEC, 2017) mean that communication practitioners need to acquire new knowledge,

skills, abilities, competencies, and capabilities to fulfil their roles in the future. Definitions of these various terms and characteristics, as well as what they entail, are examined in this analysis.

## **The changing communication workplace**

A number of studies have reported that up to 50 per cent of the jobs and occupations that exist today will not exist by 2025 (CBRE, 2015). Conversely, futurists such as Thomas Frey (2014) say that many of the jobs of the future do not exist yet. This has resulted in a renewed focus on identifying and developing the skills, knowledge, competencies and capabilities required in a changing world. An underlying premise in examining KSAs, competencies, and capabilities is that these should not only equip practitioners to undertake the tasks and roles of today, but also equip them to meet the challenges of the future.

When asked about competencies and/or capabilities, the public relations (PR) industry and related fields of professional communication practice most frequently call for and promote basic technical skills to meet immediate needs. For example, a 2015 survey of US PR agencies found that writing (92.6 per cent) and “media pitching” (88.9 per cent) were the competencies rated as most important. Research was rated a distant third (59.3 per cent) and this was related broadly to analysing information, not conducting primary research (Bates, 2015). Similarly, the 2015 *State of the Profession* survey of more than 2,000 UK PR practitioners by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) found that “64 per cent of all PR professionals identify traditional PR skills (written communication, interpersonal skills etc.) as key competencies when hiring junior and senior candidates ... compared to 20 per cent who identify digital/technical PR skills (e.g., SEO and HTML coding) as key competencies” (CIPR, 2015) [note use of the term ‘competencies’]. The 2017 CIPR *State of the Profession* survey also found that ‘traditional written communication’ continues to be the highest rated requirement in hiring graduates and junior employees (CIPR, 2017, p. 28).

Therefore, there is a gap in understanding what is required to ‘future proof’ professional communication roles and ensure effectiveness of PR and related practices such as corporate, government and organisational communication through the next decade and beyond. The study reported here set out to address this gap specifically in the context of government communication, but also makes a contribution to understanding future requirements in PR and communication management generally. This study sought to answer the question: What are the key knowledge, skills, attributes, competencies and capabilities required among communication professionals for the future? In addressing this question, by necessity this study also drew on a range of literature to define and clarify these inter-related but different concepts. As will be seen in the following analysis, a range of terms are used, often interchangeably, to denote the characteristics required for effective performance of roles.

## **NSW government capabilities study**

The state government of New South Wales (NSW) in Australia has a *NSW Public Sector Capability Framework* which describes the capabilities and associated behaviours that are expected of all NSW public sector employees at every level. The capability framework is the key reference and guide for all workforce management and development activities; role design and description; recruitment; performance management; learning and development; and strategic workforce planning.

In addition to the overarching *NSW Public Sector Capability Framework*, government policy provides that ‘Occupation/Profession Specific Capability Sets’ may be created for ‘job families’ that are “common in the sector and where functional capability building has been identified as a

critical need” (Department of Premier & Cabinet, 2016). Occupation/Profession Specific Capability Sets, in conjunction with the *NSW Public Sector Capability Framework*, provide a holistic description of the competencies and capabilities required for particular roles. To ensure maximum consistency across the NSW public sector, Occupation/Profession Capability Sets must be developed in accordance with and be fully compatible with the *NSW Public Sector Capability Framework*, as well as professional standards of relevant occupations or professions.

In 2016 the Strategic Communications Branch of the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) responsible for overseeing NSW Government communication commissioned research to inform development of an Occupation Specific Capability Set for communication professionals in the NSW Public Service in consultation with the NSW Public Service Commission (Department of Premier & Cabinet, 2016).

## **Methodology**

The research was primarily undertaken as a critical literature review and synthesis of data. However, findings from relevant literature were supplemented by drawing on progressive findings from an ongoing international study of capabilities for PR and communication management being undertaken concurrently and participatory action research conducted with senior NSW Government communication staff to test concepts against operational requirements and ensure alignment with the *NSW Public Sector Capability Framework*. Specifically, the methodology involved three stages as follows:

1. A global literature review examining four areas: (a) research in relation to human resources management, particularly professional development, that defines and discusses knowledge, skills, attributes, competencies and capabilities; (b) disciplinary literature in relation to specific knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies and capabilities in PR and communication management; (c) media and communications literature in relation to future technologies, trends and practices; and (d) literature that identifies and explains the structure of capability frameworks. Data was synthesised by manual coding of key concepts such as ‘strategic planning’, ‘research’, ‘digital skills’, etc. inductively derived from the literature;
2. Collaboration and data sharing with researchers at the University of Huddersfield in the UK, who were simultaneously conducting Stage 2 of a major capabilities study for the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management involving a multi-country Delphi study with partners in Europe, North America, South America, South Africa, Asia, and Australia. This included a number of meetings between the Australian and UK researchers and a visit to Australia by Professor Anne Gregory, lead researcher of the international project, for meetings with DPC;
3. Participatory action research (PAR) with a Working Group established by the NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) made up of senior NSW Government communication professionals. PAR engages members of the group involved in the practice as co-researchers in finding solutions to a problem or challenge (Hearn, Tacchi, Foth, & Lennie, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In this case, members of the participating group were encouraged to reflect on their practice and participate in feedback sessions on ideas and concepts presented. While the aim was to plan for the future, this ensured that the recommendations developed were grounded in practice and likely to be understood and accepted by practitioners.

## The literature – unpacking terms, definitions and theories

As noted under ‘Methodology’, study of KSAs, competencies, competence, and capabilities for communication practitioners is informed by four bodies of literature. First, definitions of terms and discussion of key concepts and principles are provided in human resource (HR) literature, particularly that related to recruitment, professional development, performance management, and specialist fields such as human performance technology (HPT) (Teodorescu, 2006). Second, applying these concepts and principles to PR and communication management requires review of disciplinary literature that focusses on KSAs, competencies, competence, and capabilities for PR and communication management. This is not a large field of study, but it has grown in the past two decades. Third, disciplinary literature in relation to future trends and directions including new technologies and practices is informative in setting the context of future professional practice. Fourth, specialist literature in relation to capabilities frameworks guides the design of such a framework for government communication professionals.

In the first instance, a brief analysis of HR literature in relation to professional development is necessary to unravel the myriad terms and often blurred boundaries between concepts such as competency, competence, competencies, and capabilities.

### ***Knowledge, skills, abilities (KSAs)***

Knowledge, skills, and abilities, commonly abbreviated to KSAs, have been widely applied in government. For example, the US federal administration uses KSAs along with *curriculum vitae* (CVs) as the basis of selecting candidates for positions. Even though KSA scoring sheets were phased out in 2009, most US federal government departments and agencies continue to place emphasis on KSAs in recruitment and staff development. For instance, the US Department of Veterans Affairs says that “KSAs are used to distinguish the ‘qualified candidates’ from the ‘unqualified candidates’ for a position” (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2009, para. 4). The US site Gov.Central (2017) discusses the “importance of KSAs in the federal application process”.

While there is a wide range of definitions and descriptions of KSAs, the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM), which manages the US civil service, says on the USA Jobs Web site, which processes more than one billion government job searches a year:

Knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), or competencies are the attributes required to perform a job and are generally demonstrated through qualifying experience, education, or training. *Knowledge* is a body of information applied directly to the performance of a function. *Skill* is an observable competence to perform a learned psychomotor act. *Ability* is competence to perform an observable behavior or a behavior that results in an observable product. (USA Jobs, 2017, para. 1) [italics added for emphasis]

The US Department of Veterans Affairs (2009) gives a more detailed description of KSAs as:

*Knowledge* – an organised body of information, usually factual or procedural in nature. For example, having knowledge of human resources’ rules and regulations could be used as a KSA for a human resources specialist position ...

*Skill* – the proficient manual, verbal, or mental manipulation of data or things. For example, having skill with operating personal computers for an office automation position ...

*Ability* – the power or capacity to perform an activity or task. For example, having the ability to use a variety of laboratory instruments could be used towards a laboratory technician position. (para. 3)

Academic focus also continues on KSAs across most industries and fields of professional practice (e.g., see Blakiston, 2011; Cetin, Demirciftci, & Bilgihan, 2016; Prestwich & Ho-Kim, 2007). However, while specific knowledge, skills, and abilities are important, attention has

turned from the *micro* level to broader concepts in recruitment, professional development, and performance management.

### ***Competencies (or competences)***

As noted on the USA Jobs Web site, knowledge, skills, and abilities relevant to a role are collectively referred to as *competencies*. In some literature, these are also referred to as competences. However, the former term is most common. Specifically, competencies refer to particular sets of KSAs required for a defined role.

### ***Competency***

Teodorescu (2006) notes that, according to dictionary definitions, competence and competency “mean basically the same thing” (p. 27). However, in HR literature the two concepts have different origins and, most importantly, denote different approaches.

Competency refers an individual’s capacity to perform particular tasks or a role competently. Because it is particularised, competency is usually determined *internally* in an organisation and has been a major focus of HR and performance management in organisations over many decades and in HR research (Stevens, 2013). Competency involves a *meso*-level bottom-up approach that describes what individuals must *do* to fulfil their roles.

While competency can be modelled to project and predict across occupations or individual career paths, studies have found that the effectiveness of competency models is disappointing. Findings of research highlight the intrinsic limitations of competency models, particularly because of the influence of contextual factors (Caldwell, 2008).

### ***Competence***

More recently, attention has turned to models of competence. Competence is mostly described and defined *externally* – for example by a professional body. Thus, while competency is an internal approach focussed on doing specific tasks and performing certain roles in a particular organisation, competence describes the standards required for a role across a sector or an entire occupation or profession. Competence involves a *macro*-level top-down approach that describes what a field of practice or profession *needs* for members to fulfil their responsibilities. For example, the International Standards Organization (2012) describes competence as the “ability to apply knowledge and skills to achieve intended results”. In Australia, where this study was undertaken, the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) has developed a professional framework focussed on competence, listing expected competencies and a ‘competency matrix’ (PRIA, 2015).

### ***Capabilities***

Most recently, research in human resource management and professional development has advocated focus beyond competencies, competency, and even competence to a broader range of factors that is referred to as the *capability* or *capabilities* approach (Gardner, Hase, Gardner, Dunn, & Carryer, 2008; Hase & Davis, 1999; Lester, 2014, 2016; O’Connell, Gardner, Coyer, Gardner, & Coyer, 2014). As well as specific disciplinary studies, the capabilities approach draws on research into international development and sustainability by Nussbaum (2000) and Sen (1999) and recent work on human resource management by Lester (1995, 2013, 2014, 2016) in the UK and Europe.

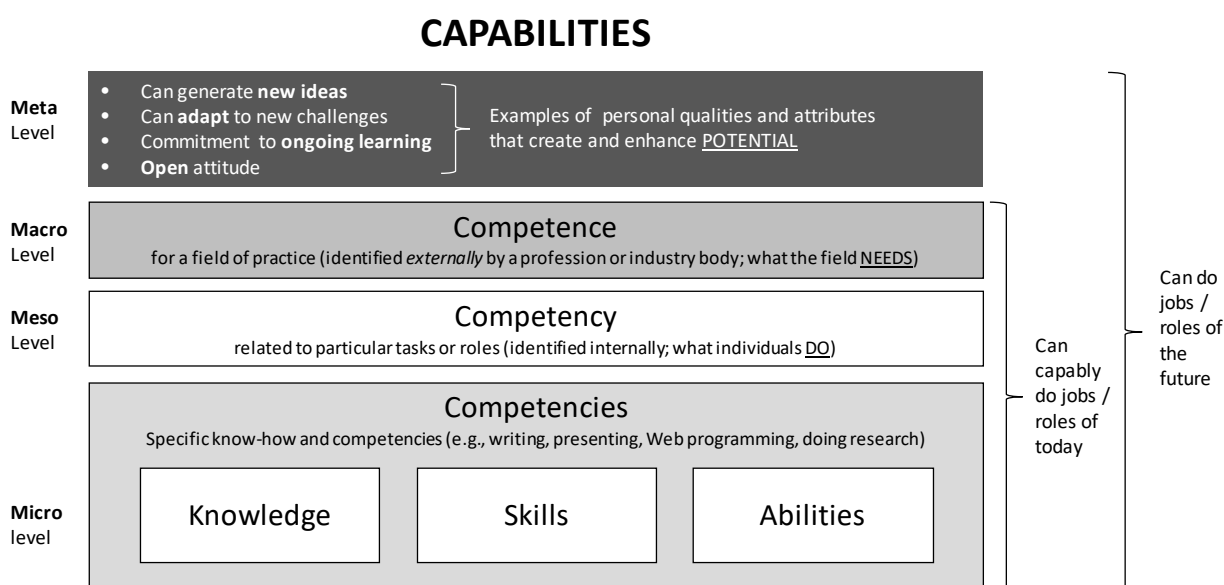
While KSAs and competency focus on what practitioners *DO* and competence focusses on *NEEDS* in a field as determined by a professional or industry body, capability approaches focus on developing *POTENTIAL* to achieve or acquire competencies even if they are not present at a particular point in time through certain personal qualities and attributes of individuals as well as

ambition and effort (see Figure 1). In this sense, capabilities incorporate generic elements that underpin and enable competencies, such as flexibility, adaptability, and ongoing learning.

Conceptually capabilities constitute a *meta*-level because they holistically incorporate and integrate KSAs (i.e., competencies), competency and competence. In simple terms, capabilities are made up of competencies, competency, and competence, plus various enablers to go beyond existing knowledge and experience. Nagarajan and Prabhu describe capability as “integration of knowledge, skills, and personal qualities used effectively and appropriately in response to varied, familiar and unfamiliar circumstances” (2015, p. 8). Similarly, Cairns defines capability as “having justified confidence in your ability to take appropriate and effective action to formulate and solve problems in both familiar and unfamiliar and changing settings” (2000, p. 1). Fraser and Greenhalgh are even more specific, describing capability as “the extent to which an individual can apply, adapt, synthesise new knowledge from experience, and continue to improve their performance” (2001, p. 799).

The capability approach encourages professional maturity, according to Lester (2014) because it facilitates more fluid, dynamic engagement with broader issues of professionalism such as the capacity to reflect critically or apply independent judgement in complex situations. Lester also notes that “an advantage of the capability approach is that is generally perceived as an open model, supporting continuous development: there is a spectrum of capability as opposed to either a threshold of ‘capable or not capable’ or a neat scale of progressively increasing capacity” (Lester, 2014, p. 38).

Figure 1. Model of KSAs, competencies, competency, competence, and capabilities.



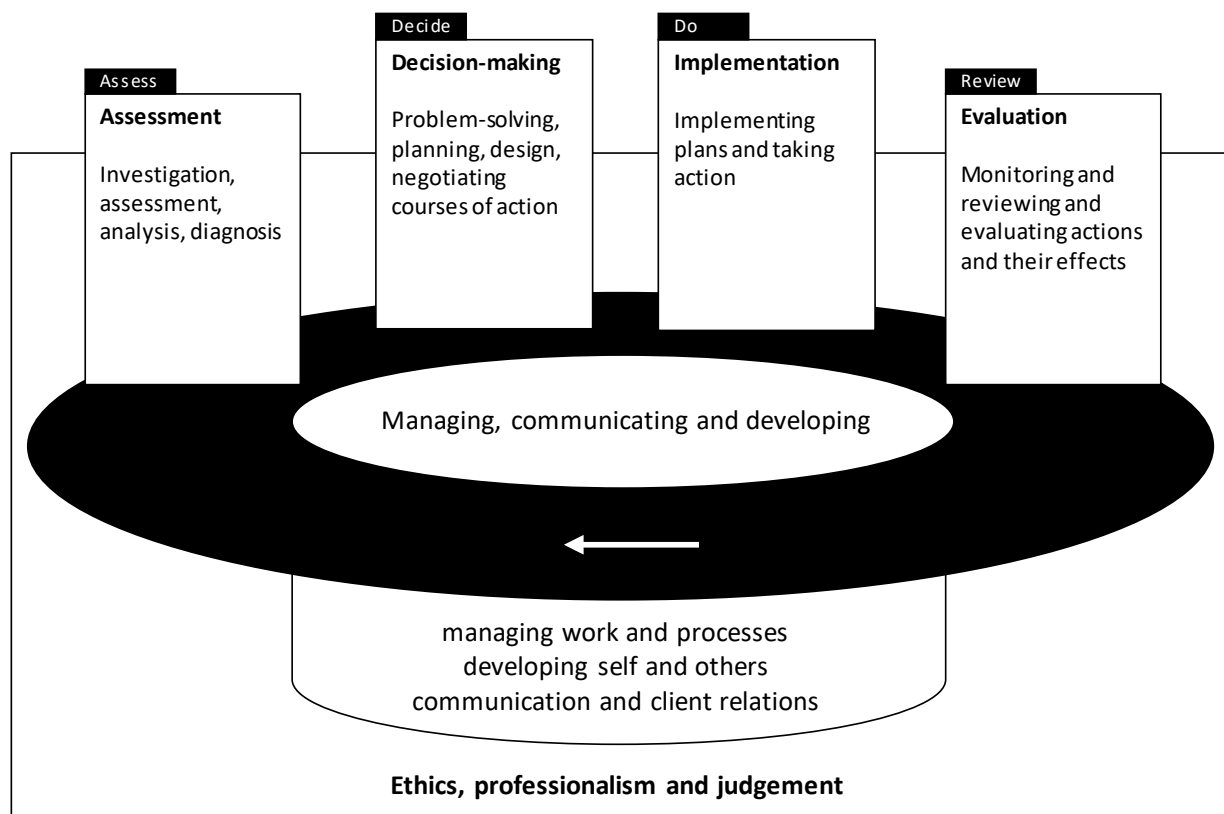
Lester also argues that frameworks focussed on competence or competency cannot provide prescriptions for practice that reflect the need for practitioners to act intelligently and ethically and make judgements in complex and unpredictable situations.

When it comes to designing a capability framework, Lester’s work is among the most practical and applied. His three-level ‘core capability’ model identifies four main task-related stages, which he describes as ‘assess’, ‘decide’, ‘do’, and ‘review’. Within these stages, a number of assessment, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation activities need to be able to be undertaken.

Second, Lester identifies that these four task-related stages need to be underpinned by number of managing, communicating, and developing activities including managing work and processes, developing self and others, and communication and client relations.

Third, he argues that all activities and tasks must be underpinned by ethics, professionalism, and judgement (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Lester’s model for identifying ‘core capabilities’ (Lester, 2014).



## PR and communication studies of KSAs, competencies, and capabilities

In the second stage of literature review, this study accessed articles, papers, books, and frameworks and models in PR and corporate, government, and organisational communication related to KSA, competencies, and/or capabilities.

This analysis was able to draw on the Global Alliance *Global Body of Knowledge* (GBOK) project undertaken under the leadership of Jean Valin (Global Alliance, 2015), which examined 30 frameworks from around the world. In addition, this analysis looked specifically at recent frameworks and models as well as best practice, accreditation, education, and training and development guidelines related to KSAs, competencies, and capabilities of a number of professional bodies. These included the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC); the Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA); the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS); the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) in the UK; the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the UK Government Communication Service (GCS). See Table 1.

Analysis showed that most of these as well as scholarly studies in the field of PR and communication management have focused on knowledge (e.g., Global Alliance, 2015) and on specific skills and competencies (e.g., Fleisher, 2002, 2007; Gregory, 2008; Nyan, Samsudin,

Othman, & Tiung, 2012; Sha, 2011). Also, the GBOK study found that few frameworks included behaviour statements, with most focused simply on naming KSAs and competencies rather than what practitioners need to be able to do.

Table 1. Professional communication industry competency/capability frameworks and guides.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Details</b>
Communicator’s Competency Model	International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)	May, 2008, San Francisco, CA
It’s Your Move: Communication Competencies and Expectations	International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) (Author: Gillis, T.)	2009, San Francisco, CA
Pathways to the Profession: An Outcomes Based Approach Towards Excellence in Canadian Public Relations and Communications Management Education	National Council on Education, Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS)	March, 2011, Toronto, Canada
Accreditation Handbook	National Council of Accreditation, Canadian Public Relations Society	February, 2012, Toronto, Canada
Accreditation Programme	Public Relations Institute of new Zealand (PRINZ)	2012, Auckland, New Zealand
Communication Management Competencies for European Practitioners	ECOPSI (Authors: Tench, R., Zeffass, A., Verhoeven, P., Verčič, D., Moreno, A., & Okay, A.)	June, 2013 Leeds, UK.
Professionalism and Standards	Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA)	2015, Sydney, Australia.
Professional Framework	Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA)	14 November 2016, Sydney, Australia.
Government Communication Professional Competency Framework	Government Communication Service, UK Cabinet Office	February 2016, London, UK
PRogressions: Continuing Professional Development for the Public Relations and Communication Profession	Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa	2017, Johannesburg, South Africa
Core competencies – Detailed Knowledge, Skills and Abilities Tested on the Computer-Based Examination for Accreditation in Public Relations	Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)	2017, New York, NY.
Performance Framework: 10 Guiding Principles and Standard Metrics	Government Communication Service, UK Cabinet Office	n.d., London, UK

### ***Global education reports***

Three significant research studies by the Commission on Public Relations Education have identified key skills and capabilities required for public relations practice. *The Professional Bond* published by the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE, 2006) reported that critical thinking and problem-solving skills; a good attitude; an ability to communicate publicly; and initiative were essential at entry level. In addition, the report advocated that consideration of ethics, diversity in the workforce, and an understanding of new technologies were important as professionals advanced in their careers. Interestingly, in outlining key subjects for undergraduate and graduate education, *The Professional Bond* report listed public relations theory, but did not



include communication theory more broadly. Despite calling for interdisciplinary approaches to PR education, the report was very PR specific.

The second report produced by the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE, 2012) related specifically to the focus and content of postgraduate education programs and recommended similar features but at a more advanced and strategic level. The most recent study by the commission again found that basic skills are most demanded by the industry, particularly writing, although understanding of ethics, research, and technology were also highlighted in the 2017 study (CPRE, 2018).

***The Global Alliance Global Body of Knowledge (GBOK)***

Collaboration with the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management was an important component of this study because it afforded the researchers access to ongoing research by the Global Alliance into competencies and capabilities for communication professionals worldwide.

In the first stage of its research conducted in 2014–2015, the Global Alliance produced a Global Body of Knowledge (GBOK based on examination of 30 frameworks from around the world and almost 1,000 pages of descriptions of KSAs, competencies, and capabilities related to PR and communication management. The analysis focussed on two levels of practice: entry-level and mid-career.

At entry level, the Global Alliance identified seven areas of knowledge considered to be important and eight core skills and abilities as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Entry-level knowledge and core skills and abilities (Global Alliance, 2015).

<b>Areas of Knowledge</b>	<b>Core skills and abilities</b>
Research, planning and evaluation	Writing, oral and visual communication
Ethics and law	Critical listening skills
Crisis communication management	Global awareness and monitoring news
Communication models and theories	Management of information and knowledge
History and current issues in PR	Critical thinking, problem solving and negotiation
Business literacy	Technological and visual literacy
Media and social media channels, IT	Contribute to strategy

At mid-career level, the Global Alliance identified the same seven areas of knowledge considered as important with expanded core skills and abilities as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Entry-level knowledge and core skills and abilities (Global Alliance, 2015).

<b>Areas of Knowledge</b>	<b>Core skills and abilities</b>
Research, planning and evaluation	Writing, oral and visual communication
Ethics and law	Critical listening skills
Crisis communication management	Contextual intelligence
Communication models and theories	Leadership qualities, innovation and flexibility
History and current issues in PR	Cross-cultural and diversity considerations
Business literacy	Meeting facilitation skills
Media and social media channels, use of IT	Strategic management of communication

The GBOK also identified a number of behaviours that are considered important at all levels. These included: learning; inclusiveness and accommodation; judgement and collaboration; citizenship and sustainability; influence and leadership; ethical conduct; legal and contextual awareness; integrity and accountability; adaptability; and transparency.

The GBOK study was considered essential groundwork, but it was identified as not conceptually rigorous because (a) it was drawn from a range of existing literature rather than primary research; (b) it was largely Western in orientation; and (c) it was not considered “future-proof” because of a focus on ‘here and now’ needs and priorities.

### ***The Global Alliance Capabilities Framework***

In 2016 the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management commenced a further international study to develop a capabilities framework that identifies core capabilities for communication professionals that can be adapted to different cultures, different roles, and different levels.

A Delphi method is being used. This involves a series of iterative stages of research or ‘rounds’. In the first round, the views of purposively selected industry leaders and academics are sought to establish a list for further discussion, modification, expansion, or reduction. A facilitator compiles a summary of the responses and may include reasons that particular responses were provided. In a second round, the selected experts are invited to revise their previous answers in light of the views of others and their comments. Sometimes this is followed by further rounds in which the most common responses from experts are circulated to a larger sample of professionals in the field in a survey in which participants are asked to rank the list in order of their priority. The logic of Delphi studies is that participants engage in a deliberative process and progressively develop a consensus informed by a range of expert and user views. The Delphi method of research originated in forecasting, so it is an ideal research method to inform capabilities required to meet future needs and change.

Academic definitions include that of Linstone and Turoff (1975) who describe the Delphi technique as “a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem’ (1975, p. 3). The main purpose of the Delphi method is “to acquire the most reliable consensus of a group of experts’ opinion by a series of intensive questionnaires combined with controlled opinion feedback” (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963, p. 458). Landeta, who reviewed a number of uses of the Delphi method concluded that:

These applications highlight how this technique may be adapted to different social realities and requirements, making a positive contribution to social progress, provided it is applied with the necessary methodological rigour and with a good knowledge of the social medium in which it is being applied. (2004, p. 467)

The findings of the first two stages of the Global Alliance Capabilities Framework Delphi study indicate that core capabilities for communication professionals today and for the future are:

- Communicate effectively;
- Be a trusted adviser;
- Work collaboratively;
- Align communication to corporate objectives;
- Conduct formative and evaluation research including the collection of intelligence/insights and environmental scanning;
- Use digital channels;

- Produce creative written and visual content;
- Apply ethical standards;
- Employ governance.

## Future trends informing capability requirements

The third field of research literature examined related to trends and developments in communication and media technologies and practices and how these are predicted to affect PR and communication management in future. This included a review of some studies focussed specifically on the effect of new technologies on government communication (e.g., Graham, 2014), as well as general communication industry studies such as the *European Communication Monitor* over a number of years (e.g., Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2013; Zerfass, Verhoeven, Moreno, Tench, & Verčič, 2016); the *Asia Pacific Communication Monitor* (Macnamara, Lwin, Ada, & Zerfass, 2016); *The Global Communications Report* (USC Annenberg & The Holmes Report, 2016, 2017); and *The Relevance Report* (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2017).

Both the *European Communication Monitor 2016* and the *Asia Pacific Communication Monitor 2015/16* have reported that “competencies in the growing field of social media are often lacking” (Zerfass et al. 2013, pp. 38–49; Macnamara et al., 2016, 34–41). Also, they reported a lack of management and business understanding.

*The Relevance Report* published by the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations in 2017, based on a survey of 875 practitioners, also mentioned a need for “business acumen”, but additionally highlighted “digital fluency”, “comfort with data and analysis” and “creative thinking” (Feldman, 2017, p. 27).

In 2017, the authors of the *European Communication Monitor* published a book (Tench, Večrič, Zerfass, Moreno, & Verhoeven, 2017) summarizing the key findings of the ECM over a decade in which more than 21,000 communication professionals in 80 countries were surveyed on a range of issues including competencies and capabilities and major issues and challenges in their field. Among key findings, the authors concluded that over the decade, key requirements identified as important included:

- “Help organisational leaders to be communicative” (p. 62) (i.e., be advisers to management);
- Be “trusted” (p. 111);
- Be anticipatory (p. 111) – i.e., be able to identify emerging issues and trends through formative research;
- Undertaking “measurement and evaluation, particularly evaluation focussed on results, outcomes, and impact (pp. 94–96);
- Using “big data”, data analytics, and “automatisation” – what the authors refer to as being “datafied” (pp. 98 – 105);
- “Linking communication to organisational strategy” (pp. 120–128) and being “strategised” (p. 129);
- Recognise the “new relevance of ethics” (p. 175).

Tench et al. summarised the four key ‘qualifications’ for communicators as:

1. Social and empathic [sic] antenna;
2. Producing and delivering effective messages (i.e., communicate effectively);
3. Research skills and organisational management skills (i.e., formative research and evaluative research);

4. Knowledge about society (Tench et al., 2017, p. 142).

One criticism of the Tench et al., study is that their analysis intermingles ‘skills’, ‘qualifications’, ‘competencies’ and ‘competence’ – a not uncommon practice as noted earlier. Also, this book as well as the *European Communication Monitor* study and the recently introduced *Asia Pacific Communication Monitor* continue to focus on competencies and competency.

However, this work does note two inter-related capabilities that do not appear in other communication literature – “knowledge about society” and a need for “social and empathetic antenna”. This call for understanding of society and the implicit call for aligning with societal needs, values and expectations deserves consideration in a capabilities framework, particularly for government. This is deemed to be covered in ‘audience focussed’ and ‘ethical and socially responsible’ in the recommendations presented in Table 4.

*The Relevance Report* also noted a need for ‘soft skills’ including empathy combined with insights to engage the new generation of millennials, highlighting qualitative research as well as intuitive understanding “interwoven” with “cultural awareness, intellectual curiosity, adaptability, and 360-degree creativity”. The report warned: “Declining empathy in markets and in politics erodes basic trust, putting democratic capitalism at serious risk (Wilson, 2017, pp. 76–77).

## **Designing a capabilities framework**

The process for developing a capabilities framework is informed by HR and professional development literature, particularly the work of UK capabilities specialist Stan Lester.

### ***Scope***

Lester says that the first step in developing a capabilities framework is deciding “the scope of the project” (Lester, 2016, p. 22). In simple terms, this answers the question: ‘What is the framework to be used for?’

The Occupation Specific Capabilities Set for Communication Professionals was designed to support the full range of workforce management tasks in relation to communication positions as defined by the NSW Public Service Commission (2015, p. 6), namely:

1. Role design and position descriptions;
2. Recruitment;
3. Performance management;
4. Learning and development;
5. Strategic workforce planning.

The UK Government Communication Service *Professional Competency Framework* supports these applications, but adds that such a framework also supports “personal development plans” (GCS, 2016, p. 2). This is considered important in demonstrating benefits for individual employees as well as organisational benefits, and for incentivising employees to develop capabilities.

### ***Field/s of practice***

The second step in developing a capabilities framework according to Lester is to “define the field” that the framework is to cover (Lester, 2016, p. 23).

The brief for this research project (Department of Premier & Cabinet, 2016) identified the following communication roles across the NSW Government to which the Occupation Specific Capabilities Set for Communication Professionals should apply:

- Branding and strategy;
- Audience insights;
- Community engagement and events;
- Internal engagement;
- Stakeholder engagement;
- Social media;
- Advertising and marketing;
- Media and PR;
- Digital (content strategy and user experience);
- Creative production;
- Corporate affairs and ministerial services.

It can be seen that the requirement of NSW government communication professionals involves a wide range of activities and, therefore, requires a range of skills, knowledge, competencies and capabilities. This is also characteristic of many employers of communication professionals.

### ***Key capability areas/groups***

Once the scope and field are defined, the third step is to “define the key areas” of capability that are relevant (Lester, 2016, p. 24). In the language of the NSW PSC these are described as ‘capability groups’. Lester recommends that there is unlikely to be fewer than five, but that there should be no more than 10 ‘key areas’ or capability groups in a field of practice.

### ***Core competencies***

Once the ‘key areas’ or capability groups are identified, Lester says that it is time to “fill in the detail” (Lester, 2016, p. 26). Specifically, the detail of a capability framework includes:

1. *Core competencies*, which are most typically described in *behaviour statements* (i.e., what should practitioners do that demonstrates a competency or capability); and
2. *Levels* (i.e., graduations of behaviour statements relevant to entry level through to senior management of communication functions based on job grade).

### **Data synthesis and action research testing**

Synthesis of data from all four areas of literature using coding identified seven capability groups and eight core capabilities, with two core capabilities relating to one group. As indicated in the literature, capability groups (or categories) are broad and should not number fewer than five and not more than 10 (Lester, 2016, p. 24). Core capabilities, in most instances, identify the single most important capability in a category/group, often a broad capability such as ‘communicate effectively’. Following this, 16 behaviour statements that drill down into specific capabilities have been identified in relation to the eight core capabilities. (See Table 4)

Of the seven capability groups for NSW Government communication professionals, three exist already in the *NSW Public Sector Capability Framework* – ‘relationships’, ‘results’, and ‘technology’. While noting the requirement of Occupation Specific Capability Sets to not duplicate the over-arching PSC framework, disciplinary and industry practice indicates that strategic communication professionals require very specific capabilities in these groups.

Therefore, these groups are included in the OSCS for communication professionals with specialised behaviour statements attached.

In addition, the OSCS for communication professionals identified four additional capability groups, namely 'focus', 'creativity', 'ethics', and 'quality', each with specialised behaviour statements outlining requirements. (See Table 4)

Underpinning these core capabilities, Table 4 lists examples of personal qualities and attributes that HR and leadership literature (e.g., Northouse, 2010) identifies as important to inform and guide behaviours.

Table 5 serves as a template to show that behaviour statements for each core capability need to be graduated by level of role and function. For example, 'highly advanced' roles (what some literature and organisations refer to as 'level 5', 'executive leadership' or 'managerial'), will have behaviour statements requiring much higher levels of performance than *foundational* level roles (what some literature and organisations refer to as 'entry level', 'level 1', 'basic', 'technician' or 'professional starter'). The task of developing graduated behaviour statements for specific levels is usually a specialised HR function in most organisations, conducted as part of developing position descriptions and performance measurement criteria.

Draft lists of capability groups, capabilities and personal qualities and attributes were discussed with the Working Group of senior NSW Government communication professionals in several workshops and their feedback along with analysis of the wide range of literature informed the final recommendations. Several issues emerged from this participatory action research that are informative in operationalising a capabilities framework.

One key question that arose is the classic research question: 'So what?' What happens when a capabilities framework is developed and introduced? This led to the important conclusion that *gap analysis* needs to be conducted in an organisation in conjunction with development of a capabilities framework to compare existing levels of capability and qualities and attributes with those identified as necessary in future. This gap analysis in turn informs the design of professional development programs.

A second key question that arose in relation to operationalising a capabilities framework as a positive force for change was 'how could employees be encouraged to develop their capabilities, qualities and attributes in line with the framework?'. Couching such a framework in management language related to performance and efficiency, as often occurs, is likely to be seen as serving the interests of the organisation and not necessarily the employees. It was agreed that employee engagement is very important and that this requires demonstration of mutual benefits for employees and the organisation alike. Discussions identified that a clear, published capabilities framework could facilitate personal career planning by staff and help them prepare for and achieve promotion and advancement.

Table 4. Eight capability groups and 16 core capabilities identified for government communication practitioners.

Capability Groups	Sub-sets of Public Service Commission capability groups and capabilities				Specific communication capability groups and capabilities			
	RELATIONSHIPS	RESULTS		TECHNOLOGY	FOCUS	CREATIVITY	ETHICS	QUALITY
Core capabilities	Communicate effectively	Plan and prioritise	Deliver results / demonstrate accountability	Use relevant / latest technology	Audience focussed	Creative and innovative	Ethical and socially responsible	Manage communication effectively and efficiently
Behaviour statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Know and apply human communication and media theory and best practice</li> <li>Provide counsel and strategic advice to senior management</li> <li>Work collaboratively with stakeholders and publics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand and apply strategic planning models of communication</li> <li>Set SMART objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apply an evidence based approach to communication activities informed by formative research and analysis</li> <li>Apply rigorous evaluation of outcomes and impact of strategic communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand and use relevant and best available technologies including latest digital platforms and formats</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Base all advice and communication strategy on audience understanding and insights</li> <li>Listen to stakeholders and publics, as well as distribute information (i.e., speak)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop and apply creative approaches in communication (whether written, sound, visual or multimedia) relevant to audiences</li> <li>Develop innovative approaches (i.e., think 'outside the square'; explore options and alternatives)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Act ethically in accordance with communication and media ethics</li> <li>Apply social responsibility in all communication activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement communication activities effectively and efficiently with quality control and governance</li> <li>Apply professional standards (e.g., as determined by relevant professional bodies)</li> </ul>
Underpinning personal qualities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commitment to learning</li> <li>Openness to others</li> <li>Emotional intelligence</li> <li>Positivity / enthusiasm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commitment to learning</li> <li>Self-organised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inquisitiveness</li> <li>High moral and ethical / values standards</li> <li>Self-organised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commitment to learning</li> <li>Openness</li> <li>Adaptability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inquisitiveness</li> <li>Openness to others</li> <li>Adaptability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inquisitiveness</li> <li>Openness</li> <li>Ongoing learning</li> <li>Positivity / enthusiasm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Openness to others</li> <li>High moral and ethical values / standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing learning</li> <li>High moral and ethical values / standards</li> </ul>

Table 5. A capabilities matrix for structuring behaviour statements for each core capability by level based on experience and role.

Capability Groups	RELATIONSHIPS	RESULTS		TECHNOLOGY	FOCUS	CREATIVITY	ETHICS	QUALITY
Core capabilities	Communicate effectively	Plan and prioritise	Deliver results / demonstrate accountability	Use relevant / latest technology	Audience focussed	Creative and innovative	Ethical and socially responsible	Manage communication effectively and efficiently
Level 1 (Foundational)								
Level 2 (Intermediate)								
Level 3 (Adept)								
Level 4 (Advanced)								
Level 5 (Highly Advanced)								



## Conclusions and recommendations

This Australian public sector study confirmed the importance of *capabilities* as an overarching and holistic concept that encompasses competencies as well as knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), and which is extremely relevant in “the age of disruptive communication” (AMEC, 2017), which is part of ‘disruptive innovation’ (Bower & Christensen, 1995). Capabilities extend beyond specific knowledge, skills, and abilities and competencies in relation to particular roles to include a capacity for and commitment to ongoing learning and adaptability. This is important because of the rapid rate of change in technology, and predictions that many of the roles that exist today will not exist in 10 years – conversely, many of the roles required in the future do not exist today.

From the multiple data sets examined, the study has identified a group of capabilities that are essential for public sector communication professionals looking forward, as well as underpinning personal qualities and attributes. While identifying some additional responsibilities and requirements for civil servants, particularly those working for government in democratic countries, the findings of this study closely align with the findings of the Global Alliance study, thus identifying a consistent set of capabilities that are important for communication professionals in future.

While core capabilities and behaviour statements can apply to all communication roles, it is important though to recognise that the work involved in public communication is diverse, encompassing many specialist roles and functions ranging from research to creative production such as graphic design and video editing; as well as writing; management such as planning and budgeting; and highly technical tasks such as HTML coding and data analysis. Therefore, some roles will require greater emphasis on certain capabilities and behaviour statements. For example, a digital communication specialist can be expected to ‘Understand and use relevant and best available technologies including latest digital platforms and formats’ at a higher level than managers, while planners can be expected to have a deep understanding of setting SMART objectives.

Determining the intensity of focus on capabilities and behaviours and the levels of competence required in each is undertaken at the ‘levels’ stage of a capabilities framework, which is tailored to individual organisations and roles (see Table 5).

In addition to providing insights into the capabilities required of communication professionals in future, as shown in Table 4, this analysis also identified a number of specific principles and steps that are important in relation to a capabilities framework.

1. In the case of an Occupation Specific Capability Set where an overarching sector-wide capabilities framework exists, as is the case in the NSW public sector, the OSCS should not duplicate the overarching framework. An OSCS should identify any additional capability groups (areas) and core capabilities that are specific to the occupation and not included in the overarching capabilities framework.
2. However, in addition, this analysis found that some capability groups and core capabilities in the overarching sector framework have very specialised application in specific occupations – in this case communication. For example, while ‘communicate effectively’ is a sector-wide core capability for the NSW public sector, this mainly relates to interpersonal communication. Specialist communication professionals need to have competencies and capabilities to communicate effectively in highly specialised ways such as through design of creative advertising, use of digital media, and so on. Therefore, Occupation Specific

Capability Sets may contain sub-sets of overarching capability groups and core capabilities, as well as additional specific capability groups and capabilities.

3. The scope or purpose of a capabilities framework should include facilitation of personal career planning by individual staff, not only serve organisational goals such as recruitment, role design and development of position descriptions, performance management, and workforce planning. A clear capabilities framework can help employees prepare for and achieve promotion and advancement. This is important to incentivise employees towards developing their capabilities, as well as for creating a holistic and equitable approach in management.
4. Once a capabilities framework has been developed, *gap analysis* should be conducted by organisations, professional bodies, and educators involved in developing capabilities to identify strengths as well as areas for improvement. An example of gap analysis for communication professionals' capabilities was the *Communication Capability Review* conducted by the UK Government Communication Service (GCS, 2013), which identified a number of gaps in the capabilities of the GCS's 4,000 members. This gap analysis informed the design of the GCS's professional development program. Recent research indicates that there are capability gaps among communication practitioners in relation to important core capabilities. For example, a 2017 study sponsored by the Arthur W. Page Center and the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS) found that millennial<sup>1</sup> PR practitioners do not feel prepared to offer ethics counsel and are unlikely to speak up when faced with ethical dilemmas (Neill & Weaver, 2017a, 2017b).
5. When gaps or shortfalls in capabilities are identified, *gap filling strategies* should then be developed. In almost all cases, a capabilities framework must be supported by an ongoing *professional development program* aligned to the framework.
6. Because of the rapid rate of change, it should go without saying that capability frameworks need to be regularly reviewed and updated. The processes outlined in this article provide a guide for doing such reviews.

These specific findings indicate that a capabilities framework is more than a list of KSAs, competencies, or even expanded capabilities. A capabilities *framework* identifies future needs and potential as well as current requirements, and as part of the process also incorporates regular gap analysis and ongoing updating of professional development programs to build and enhance capabilities to equip professionals and organisations for the future. In short, professional development should be designed based on forward-looking strategic assessment, not only on current needs. These principles and steps contribute to the design of higher education courses; professional development programs in the field; HR management, particularly performance management and staff development; and individual planning of careers. In addition, this review and synthesis of the literature makes a contribution to better understanding of the oft-confused terminology, concepts and principles of knowledge, skills, attributes (KSAs), competence, competency, competencies, and capabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> The first generation to come of age in the new millennium, therefore born after 1980 and now in their mid-career (Pew Research Center, 2017).