

## **An Existential phenomenological analysis of Public Relations practice as a strategic management function in selected organisations in Harare (Zimbabwe).**

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**Abstract:** This study explores the perceptions of Public Relations (PR) practitioners in selected organisations in Harare on public relations practice. The study seeks to analyse whether through their lived experiences, PR is a strategic management function or not. Historically PR has been viewed differently and in most cases practiced also differently and started as a technical function. The research made use of in-depth interviews to gather detailed descriptions of this phenomenon. Participant observation was also used. The data was analysed through naming meaning units and then synthesised them. The essential meanings were clustered which led to finally coming up with a statement of eidetic intuition about PR practice. Nvivo software was briefly used to complement the manual system during analysis. The study findings confirm that PR practice in the selected organisations is a strategic management function. The findings reflect that although Zimbabwe is a developing country it has not lagged much behind the developed countries where PR has long been taken to be strategic and not technical. Keywords: strategy, management, function,

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### **I. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM**

Public Relations (PR) is a broad and often misunderstood subject which has now become an interesting area of study (Grunig 2001, Steyn 2002, Van Heerden 2004, L'etang 2006, Daymon and Holloway 2011). A number of researches on PR have been done across the world in a bid to better understand the area. Literature on Public Relations (PR) shows that research in this area often follows five basic trends that Grunig (2000:1) lists below:

1. PR as a profession with its body of knowledge
2. PR as a strategic management function distinct from the commonly acknowledged technical communicative function PR has been assigned traditionally
3. A paradigm shift where "PR practitioners are fast becoming strategic counsellors who are less preoccupied with publicity in the mass media (communicative role) than their predecessors" ([www.prconversations.com](http://www.prconversations.com))
4. A second paradigm shift in which PR is fast becoming a profession dominated by females of all races as compared to the past when only white males were involved.
5. PR practice is becoming an internationally recognised profession ([www.prconversations.com](http://www.prconversations.com)).

Of the five trends, the technical communicative function of PR is the commonly acknowledged and is the most researched aspect of Public Relations (Grunig, 2000:1).

In the developing world generally and Zimbabwe in particular, PR is almost always reduced to this dimension and thus, whenever it is studied, (whether in State or Private Universities in Zimbabwe), PR is often treated as an aspect of Media Studies.

PR is often appended to other disciplines and steps to study PR as a standalone discipline, if there are there at all, are still in their infancy as some universities are introducing post- graduate diplomas in Public Relations. The fact that this is a 'post graduate' diploma implies that the mentality to attach PR to other disciplines, especially Media Studies, still prevails. Of course, the Zimbabwe Institute of Public Relations (ZIPR) runs courses and examinations which are taught by practitioners who are members of the institution. What is of concern is the scope of teaching of 'PR principles' and the absence of appropriate texts. In other words, ZIPR is offering training in PR but this cannot easily be deemed tertiary training in the sense that the programme is not yet accredited by the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). The programme is not structured following such academic standards as prescribed by ZIMCHE. Besides, the teaching staff, although they have degrees (some with PhDs), technically, they do not academically qualify to teach PR. The observation has been that they are what Ehling (cited in Grunig, 1992) refers to as 're-trades from other fields' especially journalism and education. The ZIPR programme course outline shows that the majority of the courses are related to journalism. This shows that for the ZIPR, PR as a profession is looked at in terms of

practice based on theory (Grunig, 2009 in [www.prconversations.com](http://www.prconversations.com)). This is exactly why the researcher did this research which advocates for a broader understanding of PR that defines it more by its theory than by its teaching techniques (<http://core.kmi.open.ac.uk>).

Since early 2000 PR practitioners in Zimbabwe, many with varied educational backgrounds have raised different problems they face in their duties. They have showed that they have a different understanding of what they should be doing. What was very common was that some PR practitioners were operating as independent departments while some appended to other departments or combined with other functions such as Sales and Marketing. On the other hand some PR personnel felt they were not being recognised. In some instances PR practitioners were asked to write positive information about the organisation to the extent of stage managing interviews with top officials who could say what they thought members of the public must hear. This was more of using PR in a synchronic way neglecting the two –way (diachronic) where publics are engaged.

To resolve this rather perennial challenge, it was agreed that there was need to develop PR literature that advances local theory and practice relevant to the Zimbabwean situation. This study represents a similar endeavour taking cue from the American PR experience. When the Americans first developed PR literature along the lines proposed in this study, the Europeans could not agree with their approach, criticising it for lacking European perspectives and later came up with their own European Body of Knowledge (EBOK) project which created European PR literature for a better understanding of the practices of European PR. Steyn (2000) also talked of South African PR scholars coming up with a South African PR perspective. The critical argument was that to better understand the situation in PR theory and practice, perspectives from other continents should be considered before conclusions can be drawn towards the meaning of the PR profession that could be globally applicable.

On the African continent not much has been written about PR as a search on available electronic databases has yielded very little results. The existing literature on PR does not show how and where the African continent and other developing countries can contribute into the “definition, dimension and domain of PR”. Since there is little or lack of knowledge or information on PR in Africa most literature and researches are predominantly from the developed world. Rensberg (2002) and Agang (2009) agreed that there is very few empirical studies describing the nature of PR in emerging markets, therefore Africa as an emerging market needs to find out the status of PR so that it can contribute to the body of knowledge.

For the same reasons that the EBOK project was established, it is critical for African scholars to study PR on the continent if we are to avoid PR practice from other countries and continents being generalised to include us. This is then a challenge to African PR scholars to determine, understand and test PR practice according to international standards and present their case based on their own experiences and facts. This study is an attempt to determine the status of PR by exploring PR practice in Zimbabwe. It is hoped the findings would generate more research in other areas of PR and sectors in Zimbabwe.

This is what is lacking in research on PR in Zimbabwe. Part of the problem lies with our institutions of higher learning as indicated above. It is clear that in Zimbabwe PR is not taken as a standalone discipline such as law and medicine. As shown, it is treated as a course appended to Media studies, Human Resources, English and Communication or as part of Customer Care course(s) in Business Studies. This approach to PR by institutions of higher learning appears to be recurrent and, unfortunately, has led to a narrow understanding of PR. It is the aim of this study to broaden this understanding. The study’s preliminary intuition is that by looking at PR as a management function, horizons on PR are broadened and Zimbabwe may join other countries in the developed world and also neighbouring South Africa where PR is a standalone discipline of study with a distinct theory and practice. Thus, it is logical to surmise that knowledge about PR available in Zimbabwe represents only about a fraction (perhaps 20%) of what can be known and done about PR as a field of study. This study aims at producing a home-grown body of knowledge about PR based on local theory and practice as informed by local conditions. The study’s intuition is to advance a basic premise that PR as a function of strategic management forms this local theory’s nucleus and gives the study sufficient mileage to unpack several other dimensions of PR. The theory proposed here marks a point of departure from the common view of PR as a technical communication profession.

## **II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

This study examines the extent to which PR is viewed and recognised, in Zimbabwe. The key research question is, does PR in Zimbabwe go beyond the limited publicity related set of activities that gave it both a foundational birth and corporate identity to become a full strategic management function?

## **III. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this research is to examine the extent to which Public Relations is regarded as a strategic management function in Zimbabwe.

#### **IV. OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of the study are to:

- Examine theories and practices of PR globally.
- Establish how PR is practiced in Zimbabwe.
- Synthesise PR practice as a strategic management function in Zimbabwe.
- Assess the significance of PR practice as a management function in Zimbabwe.

#### **V. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The study introduces a shift from the traditional understanding of PR from the perspective of the press agency model to a broader understanding of PR as a strategic management function. Thus, the study may act as a basis for broadening horizons guiding the policy of strategic management in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study will add onto the existing relatively limited literature in PR in the contemporary Zimbabwean context. The study will be a platform for transferring knowledge.

#### **VI. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of the study can be understood from the key words in this study that is strategic management function. The three words forms the building blocks for this study where the study is trying to see if public relations in organisations in Harare play a strategic management function. In most developed countries public relations now play a strategic management function in their organisations (Grünig, 2002). The key words to be looked at here are thus; strategy, manager and function where we are saying at the end an effective PR person should be a strategist, a manager and a functionary. In the modern day world a PR practitioner should not just be a reporter or journalist for the organisation but a strategist, a manager and a functionary;

The History of PR

There are a number of versions on the origin of PR but from the sources consulted a general development was made. PR is said to have started as far back as 1800 BC in Babylon where the Babylonians posted messages on stone tablets encouraging farmers to produce more food so that their country becomes rich. In ancient Egypt achievements were shown through “word pictures on monuments and festival parades, while the Romans used slogans and shows”, Skinner, Von Essen and Mersham (2004). Ojomo Olusegun posits that the force of public relations was visible in ancient Rome as shown in their use of phrases such as (Vox Populi, Vox Dei) the voice of the people is the voice of God; (Ves Publicae) public affairs (Olusegun, 2006).

Different scholars have written on PR history some saying it started with the Greeks while others said the Christians (Sati, 2004; Olusegun, 2006). Van Heerden also said on the African continent, “PR praise singers have for centuries publicised the virtues and accomplishments of Africa’s leaders (van Heerden, 2004:5). Some scholars have thus argued that PR is as old as humanity and has only been influenced by changing context(s). One of the significant change as noted by Ojomo Olusegun was the invention of the movable type by Gutenberg in 1456 which heralded the use of mass communication technology, and thus public relations was gradually pushed to the frontiers of modern civilisation (Olusegun, 2006).

PR in the 20<sup>th</sup> century started with American politicians who were using it for publicity. Later on big organisations recruited journalists to defend their business interests from dirty journalism and government regulations through publicity. During the First World War the American government created a Committee on Public Information to influence public opinion by telling their story (Agang, 2009).

Generally PR is said to have evolved as a result of the following according to Van Heerden (2004):

- a) The growing number of large organisations which wanted to reconcile their activities with those of the society they served.
- b) The need to manage information flow.
- c) The increased nature of changes as well as conflict and confrontation in society.
- d) The advent of democracy which came with an increase of public opinion.

Public Relations as a Function and Philosophy of Management

Charles Onwunali argues that PR’s philosophy is the creation, building and maintenance of mutual understanding and respect based on truth and effective two-way communication process for the betterment of corporate institutions and enhancement of social and economic development (Onwunali, 2006). The author noted that this philosophy proposes that an organisation should do right, follow the greatest good of the largest majority and support only those things that will improve the welfare of humanity.

Ogunsanya (1991) in Onwunali (2006) rightly observed that PR is an unstoppable lubricant in the wheel of strategic management. “It demands from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) an open management system, the installation of a responsive information management system, preparedness to share power without

abdication of responsibility and a decision-making machinery that accommodates the overall interest of the society and ensure equity/justice in all ramifications” (Onwunali, 2006:23). The author added that to be effective PR philosophy must be expressed in action and good public relations must be done in the public interest since in today’s world it is impossible to escape from the effects of public opinion and public attitudes. We are now living in an era of “the public be pleased”, “the customer is always right” and no individual or institution can flourish without public support. Charles Onwunali stressed that organisations are now judged by what they do and not what they say (Onwunali, 2006). PR is the philosophy of doing things people like and doing them the way they like, thus the doing is more important than the saying, although there must be saying after the doing (Onwunali, 2006).

#### Public Relations: Strategic Communication

Although PR has been defined differently, the highly valuable definitions value the management function of PR. For example, J.Grunig and Hunt (1984:7) said PR is “the management of communication between an organisation and its publics”, while Cutlip, Center and Broom (1994:1) defined it as “the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends” In this study the researcher is interested in seeing whether public relations is practiced as a management function in Zimbabwe. As shown above this study takes public relations based on the definition by J.Grunig and Hunt.

#### Strategic Management of Public Relations

According to J.Grunig and L.Grunig (2000a) strategic public relations is now an accepted concept with PR practitioners. It is noted that in most discussions of “strategic” public relations refer to the plans, objectives and evaluation of PR programmes within the frame of organisational objectives (J.Grunig and Repper, 1992). According to Sung (2004) from the strategic management perspective, effective PR must be part of strategic management at the organisational level, while strategically managing its own programmes. She argued that PR has to balance internal activities with strategies that deal with the external environment so as to achieve organisational goals and mission.

Public relations contributes to organisational effectiveness as part of strategic management through developing good relationships with stakeholders that can hinder or help the organisation realise its mission. Although some PR scholars have highlighted that the role of public relations is not recognised in strategic management but J.Grunig and L.Grunig (2000b) argues that public relations plays a critical role in strategic management by helping the organisation to identify the most important components of the environment and building good relationships with them through communication. Vercic and J.Grunig (2000); J.Grunig and L.Grunig (2000b); L.Grunig, J.Grunig and Dozier (2002) agreed that by doing so an organisation becomes effective and competitive and manages the interdependencies with its strategic constituencies that support or constrain it. Sung (2004) said the environment is an essential concept when explaining the importance of strategic public relations. She added that organisations struggle for autonomy in accomplishing their goals and mission because of the interdependency with external factors for resources or information, they have to have good relationships with external groups that might constrain their growth or survival and minimise constraints (Sung, 2004:39).

#### Systems Theory

The PR’s management aspect is based on the systems approach. Under the systems theory an organisation is looked at as a living organism. Cutlip et al (2000) defines a system as ‘a set of interacting units, which endures through time within an established boundary by responding and adjusting to change pressures from the environment to achieve and maintain goals set.’ Public Relations roles Public relations roles as a concept refers to the daily activities carried out by PR practitioners. Roles are defined as “recurring actions of an individual, appropriately interrelated with the repetitive activities of others so as to yield a predictable outcome” (Katz and Kahn 1978:189 in Dozier 2008). Tindall (2007 on <http://drum.lib.umd.edu>) also said roles are the expected, everyday activities associated with a particular position in any organisation. A role one plays in an organisation is what is expected from that individual and this tends to give a structure of an organisation (Van Heerden and Rensburg 2005:71; Katz and Kahn in Steyn 2000:13; Nabukeera 2006). PR as a Strategic Management Function Dolphin and Fan (2000:19) suggested that corporate communication is looked at as one of the most important strategic tools and has an essential role to play in ‘the total business system’. Although there are many definitions given by literature on strategy, Kerin, Mahajan and Varadarajan (1990) in Agang (2009) analysed some of them and concluded that key aspects of strategy among others are; a means of establishing the purpose of the organisation in terms of its long term objectives, programmes of action and priorities for resource allocation and continuously and adaptively responding to external opportunities and threats and internal strengths and weaknesses that affect the organisation.

Steyn and Puth (2000) said strategic management was balancing internal activities with strategies for dealing with external factors. According to the authors, strategy was concerned with the thinking and the logic behind the actions and more of doing the right thing rather than doing things right. It is noted strategy also looks at an organisation's pro-active response to an ever-changing environment. A good strategy is therefore more of an instrument that enables an organisation to find synthesis between its goals and resources in view of the risks and challenges of the changing environment. Strategic management is important to PR because when the head of PR is involved in strategic management of an organisation he/she surveys the environment which helps define the mission, goals and develop problem solving strategies for the whole organisation (Steyn and Puth, 2000). On the other hand the PR department is able to manage its programmes strategically through aligning communication goals to the organisation's mission. Generally PR as a result is able to integrate and coordinate its work with that of the whole organisation. Sung (2004:38) also posits that for PR to be of great value to any organisation it has to be used strategically. Grunig and Repper (1992) in Sung (2004) further said that strategic public relations refer to the plans, objectives and evaluation of PR programmes that should be within the frame of organisational objectives.

It was also noted that PR scholars have pointed out that PR can only be a strategic function if it helps the organisation to diagnose the environment and manage exchanges between environmental actors and the capabilities and competencies of the organisation (Moss and Warnaby, 1998). The strategic role of PR in any organisation is said to be that of creating long-term relationships with all key constituencies (which are stakeholder groups that limit the autonomy of an organisation in its pursuit and realisation of its strategic goals).

## **VII. METHODOLOGY**

The study was qualitative and used existential phenomenology so as to get the descriptions of the lived experiences by the PR practitioners. The philosophy underpinning this study was interpretivism because the researcher obtained an understanding of the world (PR practice) from an individual perspective (Daymon, 2008) and on the other hand knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation thus subjective. To get descriptive data the researcher sent out e-mails to all Zimbabwe Institute of Public Relations (ZIPR) members based in Harare informing them about the study and asking them to volunteer if interested in taking part. Only participants were included and these were the first ten to respond and satisfying all the stipulated conditions. The criteria for inclusion were that to all PR practitioners had to be working in formal organisation, have been employed in PR for five or more years and being a member of ZIPR. Purposive sampling was used because the researcher wanted experts in PR field and that the sample be homogeneous and information rich to illuminate the questions under study. The researcher was the main instrument of data gathering and used the interview guide for total control and to get similar information.

A bracketing interview was carried out before to get predetermined ideas about the topic and helped prevent the researcher from imposing own thoughts and bias about the phenomenon. The data was gathered through note taking, participant observation and recording. The participants also completed consent forms and pseudonyms were used. The data was transcribed verbatim in direct and indirect quotations and presented in themes retaining wording and descriptions of participants. The data was analysed through naming meaning units and then synthesised them. The essential meanings were clustered which led to finally coming up with a statement of eidetic intuition about PR practice. Nvivo software was briefly used to complement the manual system.

## **VIII. FINDINGS**

The findings were grouped into themes arising from the objectives of the study. First, the findings of this study showed that public relations is fairly understood in Zimbabwe. All the participants showed that what stands out for them when they think about their experience in PR is somehow related to the organisation they work for and the various publics of the organisation. What stood out significantly was the issue of the organisation communicating with these various groups. This showed that public relations is all about strategically managing communication between the organisation and its stakeholders.

The theories and the global practice of PR seem to have a strong bearing on the practice of public relations in Zimbabwe. The participants showed a strong appreciation of these two. Zimbabwe has one of the highest literacy rates in Africa and this could have assisted in the appreciation of these theories and practices. The researcher observed that the participants were very comfortable discussing PR and what they do in their workplaces. Most of the definitions of PR the participants gave were very close to those given in textbooks. This could have been one of the participants' deliberate efforts to impress on the researcher the fact that they had read about PR practice.

PR literature has focussed on a number of theories and has also indicated that the practice differs from one country to another and from one organisation to the other. The findings in this study did confirm this notion although the main concept remained the same. Although in some organisations PR is bundled together with

either Sales, Marketing or even Human Resources, it was pleasing to note that, just like the trend in the western world, the majority of the participants showed that PR in their organisations is now taken as a standalone department.

PR is regarded as management of communication between an organisation and its stakeholders and publics. It was noted that it is taken as key in handling mutual understanding between the organisation and its publics and at the centre is the diachronic element which entails PR practitioners playing the advisory or counselling role in the organisation. These are critical aspects of PR over and above the tasks of sprucing-up the corporate image and reputation of the organisation.

As indicated above, although some universities in Zimbabwe today still indicate on their websites that one can be employed in public relations after studying programmes that do not have any PR component, the findings showed that all the practitioners who participated in the study had studied public relations or had done a university programme where public relations was included as a module. They noted that it was critical to study public relations for one to practise it effectively. One has to have grounding in PR theories and other essential aspects of the trade for effective practice. Those who studied PR under Media Studies acknowledged that although they had the basic skills they still felt they lacked some aspects which they thought they could have acquired had they studied PR as a standalone discipline.

PR literature has highlighted that most public relations practitioners started as journalists. This study also found out that most participants were either former journalists or studied PR as a module in Media Studies. Besides the document analysis, observation and in-depth interviews showed that there is a powerful historical relationship between journalism and public relations. Journalism from as far back as the nineteenth century has been the stepping stone into PR and this is evident in the findings.

In this study the participants pointed out that they got interested in joining PR because of the exposure they got whilst studying and working in the media. The media gave them some of the critical skills such as writing for mass communication, photography, filming and generally the chance to interact and network with different people.

The second theme the findings looked at was how PR is practised in Harare, Zimbabwe. From the interviews, it was observed that the majority of the PR practitioners perform common public relations duties, such as offering strategic advice to the organisation, events management, crisis management and scanning the environment. They also perform technical roles since most of the PR departments are manned by one or very few people. Generally the participants' descriptions of their activities showed that what they do is similar to what is regarded in PR literature as strategic management function.

The in-depth interviews also showed that the heads of PR departments in the study report to the most senior person in the institutions they work for. This is the trend in modern PR, especially if PR practice is to be effective. The advice on critical issues can only be done to top management otherwise it would be distorted or diluted if sent through third parties.

It was also clear that the practitioners are contented with the work they do. They do not feel that their superiors are distracting them from their PR functions. They felt that their roles as PR practitioners are appreciated by other employees in their organisations. This showed that PR practice compliments other departmental functions, leading to the organisations operating effectively and efficiently as denoted in the Systems Theory earlier discussed.

The third theme looked at a synthesis of PR practice as a strategic management function in Harare, Zimbabwe. It is clear from the interviews with participants that public relations practice is strategic; the heads of PR departments are managers and functionaries in their respective organisations. The researcher noted that most PR practitioners attend senior management meetings as heads of PR departments on an equal footing with other departments such as Marketing, Production and Finance.

The fact that PR practitioners always take part in the organisation's strategic planning and most of them are involved in the crafting of the final document used by the organisation, also further proves that public relations is a strategic management function. Besides the organisational strategy document, PR also has its own public relations strategic plan which the practitioners implement and evaluate.

The PR practitioners act as the eyes and ears of the organisation as they sit on the fence with one leg in the organisation and the other outside. This enhances their interaction with both the organisation and its publics using various communication tools such as meetings, workshops, media, brochures etc to interact with both internal and external publics. This is because developing positive relationships with the organisation's publics is key to any PR worth his/her salt.

The last theme entailed assessing the significance of PR practice as a strategic management function in Harare, Zimbabwe. The findings showed that PR is valued in most organisations to the extent that if management is to be streamlined, PR practitioners saw themselves surviving retrenchments. As the study reveals, today most organisations do not want to leave the PR post vacant for a day longer. This has resulted in some organisations having to employ two or more PR personnel so that when the PR head leaves his/her

subordinates cover for him/her. In some organisations they stipulate in the PR person's employment contract that the incumbent must give adequate notice before leaving so that a replacement is sought in time for proper hand over take over. This is done so that the PR department continues to function smoothly all the time. Generally from the study it can be argued that in Zimbabwe PR is a critical part of the organisation where not everyone can be assigned to carry out PR work. In most cases it is only the CEO who does PR work when the PR personnel are not available. The study found out that despite PR being all about managing communication between an organisation and its publics, what the PR practitioners said and do on a daily basis showed that they are strategists, they are managers and functionaries, and thus they play a strategic management function in their organisations.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

PR literature has indicated that public relations is defined differently and up to today no one definition has been agreed upon as happens in other professions such as law and medicine. The study, on the other hand, showed that the same literature has come up with same theories of PR such as the Systems Theory, Role Theory and the Excellence Theory but the practice has not been uniform in different countries or regions due to differences in culture. As discussed earlier this led to the EBOK study, which highlighted the European PR perspective, and the South African perspective both of which are different from the American perspectives.

Culture plays a critical component in PR because public relations is all about communication, while communication is closely related to culture. This was corroborated by students from Uganda, Taiwan, Greece and India when they returned to their home countries after studying PR in South Africa and America respectively (Nabukeera, 2009; Lattimore et al, 2011). Since most PR literature stems from the developed world and most of the theories applied in Zimbabwe are from this body of knowledge. This is why the PR flair in Zimbabwe is either South African, European or American.

This study showed that PR contributes to the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation since the role of PR personnel is strategic. This agrees with the Excellence Study and other literature on PR about strategic public relations. Although not all elements stipulated in the Excellence Study appear in the descriptions by the participants in this research, a fairly large portion is available. On the other hand, it is also not feasible for all the elements that appeared in an American study to naturally appear in the Zimbabwean scenario. The researcher can conclude that based on what the participants said, PR in the various organisations in Harare, and therefore Zimbabwe, is playing a strategic management function as their roles impact on the organisational strategy. It appears that in Zimbabwe both the top management and the PR practitioners understand what role PR should play and in some cases the researcher heard that some PR practitioners had to push for recognition and made the CEOs understand their role. This has led to a clear definition of PR roles and the dominant coalition now knows what to expect of the PR department. Thus, contrary to the researcher's suspicion in the initial stages of this study, PR in Zimbabwe is now regarded as strategic and the public relations personnel have since moved beyond the press agency role. This appreciation of strategic PR is evident from the participants' acknowledgment that some had to study PR as a standalone course since they lacked certain skills (for those who had done Media Studies only). It is important that PR is practised by someone who is knowledgeable and has received formal training in PR so that he/she is able to make effective contribution.

The participants went out to acquire more skills that assisted them to be effective. Besides PR, others had studied other courses which helped them to be more professional at their workplaces. The majority showed that they were comfortable with research and evaluation which are key components in strategic PR. This shows that PR has been empowered just like other departments which take part in all strategic issues about the organisation, including drawing budgets and programmes independently. This is a result of the organisation having knowledge and appreciation of how important PR is. What is valuable in this study is that as stated in PR literature, PR practitioners in the study report to the CEOs of their organisations and not to anyone else. This enabled PR to function as a strategic management component. The PR function interacts with stakeholders so its input has due regard for the stakeholders. PR scholars have posited that where decisions are made with input from the head of PR, the organisation takes into account consequences of its decisions and activities on the stakeholders rather than those of the company. However, the PR function in Zimbabwe still falls short of that of the West and South Africa because of our different economic and social situations. What is encouraging is that we are moving very closely behind as PR in Zimbabwe is now involved in decision making. The PR function is now duly recognised in organisations and practitioners are increasingly acquiring better appreciation and more knowledge about PR.

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