

CAREER PATHS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS: WHICH WAY IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

>> LO 1.6 Review career options in the field of PR

While there are many variables and options, there are generally four paths or concentrations your PR career might take. These are agency (such as a PR or consulting firm); corporate, in a communications staff role; government (e.g., local, state, or federal), or working for a nonprofit organization (like the United Way) or an association (such as National Restaurant Association; see Figure 1.2).

Let's review each one individually and put them into perspective.

AGENCY

The path of working in an agency setting is one many PR professionals take—especially early in their careers when they are learning their craft. As a young PR

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How I Started and Built My Career in Public Relations and Corporate Social Responsibility

Erin Munley DeWaters, MetLife



Research shows Millennials will change jobs four times before the age of 32. I beat the average. I've held six roles with titles from assistant to strategist to vice president but not in that order. I've done many types of communications—from digital to crisis—

and even helped launch an award-winning CSR program. I have had an interesting, challenging, and rewarding career so far. I joke that I have good career karma, but I also fueled my success by leveraging two things: education and opportunities.

Careers start with decisions about education. When you select a college, you begin to create your network. Professors, counselors, and peers will be avenues to career opportunities. People you know from childhood, like friends of your parents, are also your initial network. That's how my career started.

My mom had a friend whose daughter worked on Capitol Hill. Through that connection, I got an internship in a congressional office. When I graduated, I wanted to go back to D.C., so I scoured the job boards and applied to entry-level roles. I was open to all opportunities, and I encourage you to be too.

My first job was in a nonprofit membership organization. It wasn't a PR agency or well-known company; yet, today, I do PR for a global corporation. When you're evaluating roles, know there is no "typical" career path.

Another major influence on my career was graduate school. Two years after college, I got my master's in PR. I learned a ton, broadened my network, and built confidence. Through that confidence, I've raised my hand many times to take on new responsibilities at work so I could learn and gain experience.

It was by raising my hand that I was asked to help launch a new CSR program for regional grocer Food Lion. There was a vacant position, and I stepped into a lead role on the project. Food Lion was looking to integrate PR and CSR, and that's exactly what we did through Food Lion Feeds. It was the most rewarding experience of my career. After that, I joined MetLife, where I now do PR for two of its U.S. divisions. MetLife's reputation as a good corporate citizen is one of the things that drew me to the company.

CSR isn't a nice-to-do; it's a must-do, and smart companies get that. An integrated PR/CSR strategy creates opportunities to tell stories, reach consumers, and much more. If you're entering PR today, you'll be at an advantage by understanding the intersection.

As you think about the road ahead, lean into your education, and value the relationships it helps you create. Be open to opportunities. Raise your hand and learn. You'll build competency and credibility, and that will be the foundation for your career path—whatever that may be. ●

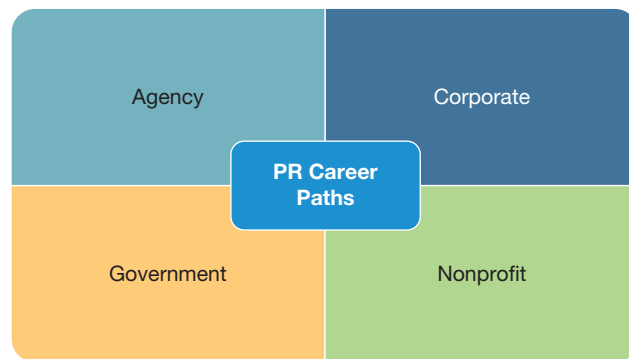
Erin DeWaters is an "Older Millennial," working wife, mom, and graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and The George Washington University. She serves as lead communications strategist for global insurance company MetLife.

Source: E. DeWaters (personal communication, 2017).

professional, joining an agency has many advantages. First and foremost is that the focus and business is on public relations—that is what they do for clients every day. As such you would be in an environment where nearly everyone you work with is a PR professional. The opportunity to learn new tactics and strategies, benefit from a colleague's industry experience, or bounce an idea off someone with more experience is actively encouraged. Some people make an entire career of working for an agency, rising to become practice leaders, office managing partners, or even senior management of a firm.

Barri Rafferty, worldwide president of Ketchum Public Relations, got her start in the industry working at Cone Communications while in graduate school in

FIGURE 1.2

PR Career Paths

Boston. She then moved to New York and experimented with a big agency (Burson-Marsteller), on the corporate side (SlimFast), and at a small beauty boutique (Lippe Taylor). Rafferty decided that a big agency would provide a supportive environment as she started her family, so she joined Ketchum as a vice president and account supervisor in New York.

Working her way up to her present position at Ketchum, Rafferty has held several key roles, including group manager for the New York Brand Practice, associate director of the New York office, and director of the Global Brand Marketing Practice. She relocated to Atlanta to be director of the office and later became director of the Ketchum's South region. She came back to New York to serve as office director. In 2012, Rafferty became CEO of North America, and in 2016 she was named worldwide president.

After working in an agency for a few years, you might decide to move to an internal (or client-side) position in a government, corporate, or nonprofit setting. Others decide to start their own firms or set up shop as independent counselors to leverage the skills and contacts gained while working for a larger firm.

Barri Rafferty is now worldwide president of Ketchum Public Relations.

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CORPORATE

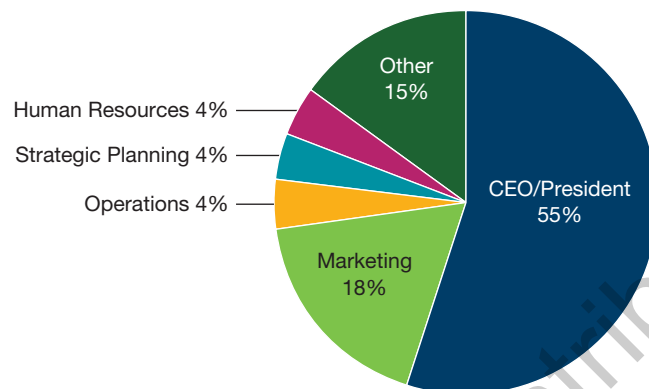
For those PR professionals who pursue a career working in a corporate environment, there are challenges and opportunities to develop skills not found in other work settings. As a corporate PR professional, you would generally work in the communications department, although it may have many different names depending on the nomenclature and culture of the company. Some companies refer to the department as public relations; others will use variations of corporate communications, external affairs, corporate affairs, public affairs, and/or just communications or marketing.

This is also dependent on the corporate structure and reporting relationship of the function. According to a recent study by USC Annenberg Center (Holmes, 2017a), in most



FIGURE 1.3

In-House Reporting Lines



Regardless of the reporting relationship, staff members in a corporate communications department are usually responsible for media relations, executive, internal (sometime shared with HR), and financial communications if the company has public shareholders and is listed on a stock exchange, for example, the New York Stock Exchange or NASDAQ.

Source: Holmes (2017a).

companies, PR reports to marketing or the CEO, but in some cases, it reports to others including legal or human resources (HR). Reporting to the CEO is viewed as desirable because it positions the function as a key corporate department with direct access and interaction with top management (see Figure 1.3).

For these individuals, there is often the added responsibility of writing the company's annual report to stockholders, news releases on quarterly financial results, announcement on mergers and acquisitions, and senior management changes. These are known as **material events**, and publicly traded companies are required to produce them in a timely manner.

A career in corporate PR can be challenging and rewarding, and the compensation and benefits are often quite good. As well, corporate PR positions can be somewhat more stable and less susceptible to economic downturns or client-mandated changes that can directly impact agency work and staffing.

Recent research suggests that succeeding in a corporate role requires communications executives "to be knowledgeable about the business—from strategy to operations—so they are able to provide strategic input on issues that span business functions" (Arthur W. Page Society, 2017). The Page report quotes one CEO as suggesting, "I don't think a healthy organization can do much without (communications) being involved in every part of the strategy and every part of the operation."

One cautionary note about this path—unlike the agency world, it is likely you will be one of only a handful of people who work on PR for your company. This can limit your internal network and be challenging because your fellow employees may not understand what you do and how it adds value to the company's business objectives. As a result, many PR pros wait to pursue corporate opportunities until later in their careers when they have more general PR experience.

GOVERNMENT

Many PR professionals have long careers in a government communication role working at the federal or state level. In the federal government, the function is more commonly referred to as **public affairs**. Most every cabinet department—from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—has a public affairs office. In larger departments with a national or international focus (like the U.S. State Department), there are often regional offices where communications professionals interact with the regional media around the world and serve constituents (e.g., US citizens and companies) locally instead of referring them to headquarters in Washington, D.C. Generally, the focus of this work is more reactive and service oriented as opposed to proactive or lobbying/advocating for the reasons already noted.

Similarly, at the state, county, or city level, public information and public service is the driving force and primary focus. Most elected officials, for example, a governor, county commissioner, or mayor, often have a dedicated press secretary, who is a political appointee, serving at the pleasure of the elected official. In each major city or state department, there is usually also a public information office, and its focus is on responding to the media and the public, providing information about essential services and responding in crisis or disaster situations. As with the other career paths noted here, the PR professional (or public affairs officer) is usually part of a small group. As such, there are few others in the office who understand your role and can offer suggestions or advice.

NONPROFIT AND/OR ASSOCIATION PUBLIC RELATIONS

Nonprofit and association work is an increasingly popular path for young PR professionals, especially in the Washington, D.C., area and in metro New York, where many of these organizations are headquartered. However, the measure of success in this setting is more often measured in awareness, membership growth, and fund-raising success. Non-profits, like the United Way, the Red Cross, and the World Wildlife Federation are focused on a key cause or issue, such as community service, disaster relief, or protecting endangered species. The PR professionals in this environment will have responsibility for traditional PR activities like media relations and executive counsel as well as supporting the ongoing fund-raising efforts and membership communications.

The membership looks to their association to monitor events and activity of the local, state, and federal government as well as advance the profession through research, training, and overall visibility. Often these organizations take on the additional role of managing industry-wide issues and crises on behalf of their members or assist member companies as they work their way through the situation.

Jeff Joseph is senior vice president of communications and strategic relationships at the Consumer Technology Association (CTA), based in Northern Virginia. According to its website, The CTA “advocates for the entrepreneurs, technologists and innovators who mold the future of the consumer technology industry” (J. Joseph, personal communication, 2017). The CET (formerly the CEA) is perhaps best known as the host of the huge Consumer Electronics Show (CES) each year in Las Vegas, which draws thousands of tech suppliers and customers to see what’s new and cool

The Red Cross PR team is actively involved in community outreach and fundraising support, as well as community and media relations activity when the organization responds to disaster situations across the United States and around the world.

Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel/Getty Images



in high technology and popular entertainment from the biggest names in technology. “Association PR allows me to engage in a variety of PR disciplines. One moment I’m focused on public affairs. The next, media relations, or crisis communications. All while supporting our singular mission—to help grow our industry,” he concludes.

SCENARIO OUTCOME

At the beginning of this chapter, you read about IBM’s strategy to turn its 100th anniversary into a celebration of service for its thousands of employees worldwide. The goal was to celebrate the event in a way that emphasized the company’s commitment and tradition of community service and social responsibility and highlighted the many contributions of its employees and business partners.

You were asked to consider how IBM turned this milestone celebration into a comprehensive, year-long, company-wide event; how employee, corporate, and marketing communications were addressed; how success was measured; and how social responsibility was included.

Here is what the company did: IBM created a comprehensive, company-wide event with its Celebration of Service by driving engagement in multiple ways. It established a highly visible Service Pledge on the IBM Centennial website that constantly updated total hours pledged. Activity kits in seven languages offered grab-and-go volunteer ideas. It also provided detailed service leader training modules and grants to support IBMers’ volunteer activities.

A Global Communications Guidebook was created to support the local IBM communications teams, and an NGO Communications Guidebook was provided as well to enable NGOs to amplify their partnerships with IBM through numerous global communications channels and on social media.