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Public Relations Research Paper: Agencies and Firms

According to the Public Relations Society of America, “public relations is about influencing, engaging and building a relationship with key stakeholders across numerous platforms in order to shape and frame the public perception of an organization” (“About Public Relations,” 2020). There are numerous careers and specializations for those involved in the public relations field. Professionals can work within the public relations department of any business, government office, political campaign, a not-for-profit organization, entertainment and film production company, or in a public relations agency that solely focuses on working for multiple clients per day. Public relations agencies, otherwise known as firms, are different from other specializations of public relations because these companies usually only employ public relations professionals that have expertise in the field (Page, Teruggi, Parnell, 2019, p. 17). Some of the most widely known agencies at this time are WPP Group, Omnicom, Publicis Groupe, and Interpublic Group (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, 2016, p. 113). These companies, along with others, have the main focus of working with its clients’ image throughout events, media outreach, and more. Agencies may have hundreds of clients or only a select few based on the size of the firm, but it always maintains the highest quality of work in each partnership.

Public relations has grown from having the simple objective of promotion and publicity to now holding influence and power over extremely high levels of management within a company’s management. In 1905, Ivy Lee opened Parker and Lee as the first public relations

counseling firm. It was during this time that Lee took on his first client, Pennsylvania Railroad, with the title of “Publicity Counselor” (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, 2016, p. 50). Lee was also responsible for Rockefeller and the American Tobacco Company and the reshaping of those brands. Through these projects, Ivy Lee showcased the benefits of having a public relations specialist to represent one's company. More importantly, Lee proved that an agency can effectively represent multiple clients and businesses while maintaining a high standard of work. Edward Bernays was also one of the founding fathers of modern public relations. He began his career in the early 1900s, intending to offer "publicity direction" to clients of his new private consulting firm (Turney, 2015). Bernays' work highlighted the importance of clients and public relations practitioners needing to “listen to their publics at least as much as they spoke to them” (Turney, 2015).

The specialization of public relations within a firm comes with many benefits. The environment of an agency provides employees with the opportunity to not only learn from their colleagues but to receive feedback when brainstorming new ideas and strategies (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, 2016, p. 117). This setting can help professionals grow to be better throughout the rest of their careers. Because an agency is its own company outside of the clients it represents, it has the opportunity to represent companies from many areas beyond its region, or even the country it's based in. This mobility of firms is another advantage for employees who prefer to move around or those who would rather live outside of major cities. Public relations agencies also have certain credibility that is considerably higher than the average company's small public relations department due to the long list of clients and public relations professionals working within each firm (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber, 2016, p. 117). Among the many benefits of agencies, there are also negatives to consider as clients. Firms can bring a lack of full-time

commitment to a singular client, a large need for communication between management and agents, an extra cost of using an outside firm, and the resentment of the company's internal public relations staff.

The Public Relations Society of America describes the job of public relations practitioners to be "researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communications to achieve the inform public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims" ("About Public Relations," 2020). This definition remains true throughout all specializations of a public relations career, with some having a more focused approach to specific programs or audience dependent on the client or industry. Public relations agencies offer services such as speech training, research and evaluation, branding and corporate reputation, financial relations, crisis relations, and marketing communications (Wilcox, Dennis, 2016, p. 109). Just as a public relations department's responsibilities may vary within its own company, firms are hired as outside help in order to help meet the different needs of each client. Practitioners that work in public relations firms have the responsibility of handling many clients each day and maintaining high-quality work for each client, which requires constant attention to detail as well as knowledge of the public in case of any urgent issues that require crisis relations. Most agencies work with several clients each day but are expected to give each client full attention and care.

According to the Edelman public relations firm, anyone in public relations needs to have a "relentless pursuit of excellence, freedom to be constantly curious, [the] courage to do the right thing, [and] commitment to positively impact society" ("About Edelman", 2020). As someone who is known nationwide as a leader in the industry, Richard Edelman has created a specific system to evaluate clients to build rewarding client relationships that meet their business and

communications objectives. In all specializations of public relations, it is crucial to connect with clients and maintain lasting relationships for future partnerships. However, client relationships play a much larger role in the job of a practitioner in a public relations firm than it does in other specializations. A consultant needs to act with entrepreneurial tactics, by creating loyal partners in order to continue a successful company. Unlike other specializations of public relations, agencies must first build relationships with clients to begin earning profit. This means the employees must always maintain the highest quality of work, or their client could look elsewhere for its needs. Once a firm or a singular agent makes a mistake when working for a client, it can be detrimental to that partnership. Agencies must rely on producing high-quality work to ensure future opportunities with current clients.

Currently, it is predicted that public relations firms will continue to grow in the coming years as other nations adopt free-market economies. The predicted areas of growth are mostly focused on BRIC nations such as Russia, India, China, and Brazil (Wilcox, Dennis, 2016, p. 109). Another area of growth for public relations is in health-care related fields that have continuously prospered in recent years (Seitel, 2016, p. 99). Many people believe there will soon be an increase in the focus on employee communications due to a recent demand for more transparent administration among top companies. Along with the specific areas of growth, there have been constant improvements made by those in the public relations field in order to ensure a positive future for employees. There has been an increase in public relations jobs due to more organizations realizing the crucial role that public relations professionals play in the success of most companies. More companies that already have smaller public relations departments have begun to hire outside counsel for bigger events or issues outside of its department's capabilities. There has also been an increase in professionals that have actual public relations degrees, along

with more leadership roles being filled by public relations practitioners (Russell, 2020). These are all reasons to believe that not only are public relations firms growing but so is the public relations field as a whole.

In the year between 2018 and 2019, the median salary for public relations professionals in an agency rose by \$11K. Though many employees in agencies still opt to join the corporate side of public relations to earn a higher salary, it's been proven that successful agencies reward its employees through large compensations to promote productivity in the firm. Additionally, in the public relations field, gender wage gaps have decreased by over \$4,000 in the past few years, with women experiencing a 9.9% salary increase. With the public relations field proving to be more relevant with the rise of social media and information moving much faster than ever before, there has been a 15% decrease in public relations professionals choosing to leave their job for a different career field. Along with the improvement of salary, employers have also given an increase of flex time for their employees by 17.1% (Daniels, 2020). These statistics provide a sufficient amount of evidence to support the idea that public relations is a prospering career field that will continue to expand and improve in this new decade.

The careers of professionals employed in public relations firms seem to be very hectic and constantly changing. I could see myself enjoying the busy lifestyle of constantly updating current news and always having an assignment for my first few years in the public relations field. However, I can imagine growing tired of managing multiple clients at once and constantly communicating with management to ensure I understand the many needs of clients. Although I like the idea of having many other professionals alongside me while I begin my career, I couldn't see myself staying invested in my work if I didn't have a consistent client to work for. I think that my skills would be better suited to an individual company or corporation in which I can

invest myself in its work and message. If I were to state my goals in the public relations field, I would say that it would be ideal to work for an agency to gain knowledge about useful strategies and tactics in the field, and then to bring my newfound skills into another area of specialization. This is where I could combine my interests with my career in public relations. My research gave me plenty of assurance to continue my education in public relations. I understand that the internet has allowed the field to change in numerous ways, and public relations professionals are adapting to fit the new needs of clients. I am excited to continue learning about the practice of public relations with a new perspective on potential career choices.

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