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# Executive summary

The Global Capability Framework study was undertaken between spring 2020 and spring 2021 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The research project was conducted in three stages, namely a Delphi study, a survey and focus groups. Public relations and communication management practitioners, employers and educators across the UAE participated. The study resulted in a list of 14 capabilities for the public relations and communication management profession in the UAE.

## Top 14 capabilities

- To set and manage **STRATEGIC** communication goals and functions aligned with organizational goals and strategies
- To define, mitigate, and manage **RISKS** and **CRISES**
- To build and proactively manage organizational **REPUTATION**
- To scan the **ENVIRONMENT**, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm's strategic responses are in sync with the environment
- To build strong, long-term **RELATIONSHIPS** with stakeholders
- To identify and drive performance-based key performance indicators to deliver **RESULTS**
- To manage **BRAND** strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations
- To define, create, and produce key **MESSAGES** and media **CONTENT**
- To communicate desired messaging across multiple **MEDIA PLATFORMS** and technologies/**CHANNELS**
- To manage social and **DIGITAL** media efforts such as influencer marketing, paid search, paid social, and UX/UI design
- To build **EMPLOYEE** morale, engagement, and satisfaction through strategic internal communication
- To be **PROFESSIONAL**
- To work within an **ETHICAL** and **SOCially RESPONSIBLE** framework
- To demonstrate **PERSONAL, INTERPERSONAL, and TEAM SKILLS**

The original Global Capability Framework project classified capabilities into three groupings, namely communication, organizational, and professional capabilities. The UAE study clustered its identified capabilities into strategic communication, operational communication and generic professional practice. Although the categorization was slightly different, most of the global capabilities were reflected in the country list.

The study’s findings are reflective of the UAE’s unique local environment with special emphasis placed on professionalism, the ability to manage people and teams, and employee engagement. This is ascribed to the high levels of diversity and multiculturalism evident in the country.
Introduction

Public relations contributes to organizational effectiveness through building relationships between organizations and their publics, and enhancing organizational reputation and legitimacy. However, much of public relations theorizing has been embedded in Euro-American worldviews as the academic study of communication can be traced to twentieth century USA. The US bias of communication studies has limited theoretical developments and scholars have called for research into communication management in other countries to reduce the ethnocentricity in theorizing (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2019).

Further, although public relations is practiced in an increasingly globalized world, there continues to be a lack of a global benchmark of public relations capabilities that can strengthen practice and education. A global benchmark can enable practitioners to create a common understanding of their roles and duties, recognize and aspire to best practices within their own and other contexts and plot a course for professional development. Furthermore, it can aid educators to create curricula that are in sync with the latest thinking in capabilities that will help to produce graduates who are future compatible.

To address this issue, Global Alliance (GA) a worldwide confederation of professional bodies in public relations and communication management with members from across the world embarked on a four-year research project in nine countries across Asia, Europe, Africa, Australasia, North America and South America to develop a Global Capability Framework which takes into account the needs of the profession now and into the future (see https://www.globalalliancepr.org/capabilitiesframeworks/ for details of the project). However,
the original study did not include the Middle East. Given the lack of research on public relations and communication management in the region, this study aimed to replicate the Global Capability Framework study in the United Arab Emirates.

Various professions have developed several frameworks for understanding, benchmarking, and setting standards for practice (Gregory, 2008; Lester, 2016). Traditionally, these have tended to be descriptions of tasks to ascertain professional expertise. This approach is based on competency and describes the skills, knowledge, attributes and/or behaviors of individual practitioners. These competencies can become outdated due to technological, social, and economic changes. These limitations have led professions to look towards capability approaches for more dynamic and fluid frameworks.

Capability approaches extend the notion of competence and contextualize it. They describe the abilities required by a profession or possessed by a practitioner (Lester, 2016). A capability approach emphasizes opportunities to achieve or acquire competences. Capability is contextualized and allows for consideration regarding access to resources, such as education, technology or social status and other variables (Nussbaum, 2000). Capabilities can be used to define the core practices of a profession. A capability approach is the conceptual framework for the Global Capability Framework used by the Global Alliance because it allows for cultural variables. The selection and prioritization of capabilities will define the current state and direction of the public relations profession in the UAE as perceived by its practitioners and educators.

In this study capabilities were clustered into three groupings:

- **Strategic Communication Practice**
  - such as Capability to help an organization define and realize its values and purpose.

- **Operational Communication Practice**
  - such as Capability to express complex meaning in a variety of platforms, traditional and digital.

- **Generic Professional Practice**
  - such as Capability to apply ethical frameworks.

Figure 1: UAE three capability clusters
Research methods

Consistent with the studies done earlier in the nine countries, three empirical data collection methods were used – Delphi study, survey, and focus groups. The lead researchers based in the UK developed and tested the research instruments, which had been shared with the ZU research team for adaptation and use in the UAE.

The target populations were public relations/communication management practitioners, educators, and employers.

Study 1: Delphi panel

To identify a shared set of public relations capabilities that defines the profession nationally, the research team conducted a Delphi study. The Delphi technique is well suited to develop new concepts as the method seeks the opinion of a small group of experts, assesses the level of agreement among the panel, and strives to resolve disagreements through multiple rounds of structured deliberation. The Delphi study allows each country to consult its own expert practitioners, educators, and employers to generate a capability set. Several key characteristics of Delphi studies are regarded as important for the Global Capability Framework study, particularly anonymity; no need for face-to-face meetings; and freedom from dominant personalities and social pressure.

Profile of the experts

A Delphi panel of nine expert practitioners, educators and employers were asked to volunteer their view of the profession's capabilities in spring 2020. The participants were recruited from the membership of the National Advisory Council of the lead researchers’ college, the College of Communication and Media Sciences at Zayed University, as well as from networks of professional contacts. The panel included five directors of communication and public relations, representing in-house and agencies, and four educators; seven men and two women. In this first stage of the project the panel of experts were requested to identify the core capabilities of the field. The goal was to create a set of 8-10 core capabilities that help describe what public relations/communication management can bring to the organization. This part was done online.
Stage 1: Delphi method

Employers  N=5
Educators  N=4
Total:  N=9

The process

The Delphi study was conducted in three rounds. In round one, the panel members were asked to list and define the most important capabilities of the public relations/communication management profession in the UAE. This generated a list of 21 capabilities along with brief descriptions of each capability. In round two, they were asked to rank these capabilities in terms of importance. This reduced the list to 14 important capabilities. In round three, they were asked to indicate the ten most important ones ranking them from 1 to 10 – the top 10 capabilities for the UAE.
Table 2: 21 Capabilities identified in round 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic communication capabilities (8)</th>
<th>Operational communication capabilities (7)</th>
<th>Generic professional capabilities (6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To set and manage strategic communication goals and functions aligned with organizational goals and strategies</td>
<td>• To define, create, and produce key messages and media content</td>
<td>• To build a diverse and inclusive work culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To define, mitigate, and manage risks and crises</td>
<td>• To organize events</td>
<td>• To develop self professionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To build and proactively manage organizational reputation</td>
<td>• To write and speak in public, in multiple languages (at least in English and Arabic)</td>
<td>• To offer loyalty to the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm’s strategic responses are in sync with the environment</td>
<td>• To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies</td>
<td>• To be professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders</td>
<td>• To coach and train senior executives in areas such as media relations and public speaking</td>
<td>• To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To identify and drive performance-based key performance indicators to deliver results</td>
<td>• To manage social and digital media efforts such as influencer marketing, paid search, paid social, and UX/UI design</td>
<td>• To demonstrate personal, interpersonal, and team skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To manage brand strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations</td>
<td>• To build employee morale, engagement, and satisfaction through strategic internal communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
14 Capabilities identified in round 2

From the 21 capabilities identified in the first round, one strategic (to offer organizational leadership) and three operational and generic capabilities each got dropped in round two. These included organizing events, multilingualism, coaching senior executives, building an inclusive and diverse work culture, professional development, and offering loyalty to the organization.

1. To set and manage strategic communication goals and functions aligned with organizational goals and strategies
2. To demonstrate personal, interpersonal and team skills
3. To define, mitigate, and manage risks and crises
4. To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm’s strategic responses are in sync with the environment
5. To identify and drive performance-based key performance indicators to deliver results
6. To manage brand strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations
7. To build and proactively manage organizational reputation
8. To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework, in line with professional and societal expectations
9. To be professional
10. To build employee morale, engagement and satisfaction through strategic internal communication
11. To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders
12. To manage social and digital media
13. To define, create, and produce key messages and media content
14. To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies

10 Capabilities identified in round 3

From this list of 14 capabilities, the panelists were asked to choose the top 10. Strategic communication capabilities dominated the top 10 list, with five strategic communication capabilities, three operational communication capabilities, and two generic capabilities.

1. Reputation - To build and proactively manage organizational reputation
2. Strategy - To set and manage strategic communication goals and functions aligned with organizational goals and strategies
3. Professionalism - To be professional
4. Relationships - To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders
5. Environment - To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm’s strategic responses are in sync with the environment
6. Content - To define, create, and produce key messages and media content
7. Crisis - To define, mitigate, and manage risks and crises
8. Employees - To build employee morale, engagement and satisfaction through strategic internal communication
9. Digital - To manage social and digital media
10. Skills - To demonstrate personal, interpersonal and team skills
Study 2: Survey

Sampling

A quantitative online survey was conducted to further investigate the most important capabilities for the UAE. The target population were full-time employees, over the age of 18, working in the field of communication, marketing, public relations, and educators in these fields. YouGov, a marketing research company recruited the sample from its research panel of employees from the United Arab Emirates. The survey was offered in English and Arabic. A sample of 121 participants was obtained during September 2020.

Survey instrument

The questionnaire followed the same structure as the original one used by the researchers from University of Huddersfield. We adapted questions to the UAE communication environment. For example, we asked participants to identify the local communication professional organization they belong to as well as the city in which they live.
The questionnaire centered around the top 14 capabilities:

- To set and manage strategic communication goals and functions aligned with organizational goals and strategies
- To demonstrate personal, interpersonal and team skills
- To define, mitigate, and manage risks and crises
- To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm’s strategic responses are in sync with the environment
- To identify and drive performance-based key performance indicators to deliver results
- To manage brand strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations
- To build and proactively manage organizational reputation
- To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework, in line with professional and societal expectations
- To be professional
- To build employee morale, engagement and satisfaction through strategic internal communication
- To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders
- To manage social and digital media
- To define, create, and produce key messages and media content
- To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies

Respondent profile

The sample was comprised of 23 educators, 55 practitioners, and 43 employers. The majority of participants were men (79) compared to women (42). A similar ratio was found amongst educators (18 men, 5 women), practitioners (35 men, 20 women), employers (26 men, 17 women).

Table 3: Breakdown of survey respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 2: Survey</th>
<th>N=121</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>N=43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners</td>
<td>N=55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>N=23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>N=121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The majority of participants were younger than 35 years old (58%) with less than 12% over the age of 45 years old. In general and similar to neighboring GCC countries, the UAE is a country with a relatively young population.
Most (43%) had an undergraduate degree, from which 20% had a degree in PR or communication. From those who had a master’s degree (27%), 12% with a degree in PR or communication. Only 2% have a Doctorate or PhD in PR or communication.

The majority (69%) did not belong to a professional organization. However, if they did, they were members of MEPRA (16%), IABC (9%), CIPR (7%), and PRCA (4%).
As the UAE is mainly comprised of expatriate workers, the nationalities of the respondents reflect the diversity of the population.
Findings

The first question asked respondents to rate each capability’s importance for the future of the profession on a five-point scale from not at all important to extremely important. As indicated below, all capabilities were rated similarly and were rated as important. No capability stood out or was rated as extremely important.

Table 4: Overall perception of importance of future capabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To build employee morale, engagement and satisfaction through strategic internal communication</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders</td>
<td>4.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To manage social and digital media efforts</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. To define, mitigate, and manage risks and crises</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. To be professional</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. To demonstrate personal, interpersonal and team skills</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. To manage brand strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. To define, create, and produce key messages and media content</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. To identify and drive performance-based key performance indicators to deliver results</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. To build and proactively manage organizational reputation</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework, in line with professional and societal expectations</td>
<td>3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. To set and manage strategic communication goals and functions aligned with organizational goals and strategies</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm’s strategic responses are in sync with the environment</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When we compared educators, practitioners and employers, we found some differences as well as similarities. Overall, practitioners rated the capabilities higher than educators and employers. “To manage social and digital media efforts” was rated the highest by both educators and practitioners. Educators also thought “to be professional” was important. Practitioners perceived that “To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies” was very important as well. However, educators and practitioners had different opinions regarding “To build and proactively manage organizational reputation” and “To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework, in line with professional and societal expectations” capabilities. Employers rated “to build employee morale, engagement and satisfaction through strategic internal communication” and “to manage brand strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations” as their most important capabilities.

Table 5: Comparison of respondents' perceived importance of future capabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Educators (N=23)</th>
<th>Practitioners (N=55)</th>
<th>Employers (N=43)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To build employee morale, engagement and satisfaction through strategic internal communication</strong></td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.09</td>
<td><strong>4.05</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>4.29*</td>
<td>3.79*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>To manage social and digital media efforts</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.87</strong></td>
<td>4.29*</td>
<td>3.72*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To define, mitigate, and manage risks and crises</td>
<td>3.61*</td>
<td>4.25*</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be professional</td>
<td>3.83</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To demonstrate personal, interpersonal and team skills</td>
<td>3.57*</td>
<td>4.16*</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To manage brand strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To define, create, and produce key messages and media content</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To identify and drive performance-based key performance indicators to deliver results</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To build and proactively manage organizational reputation</td>
<td>3.48*</td>
<td>4.16*</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework, in line with professional and societal expectations</td>
<td>3.43*</td>
<td>4.15*</td>
<td>3.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To set and manage strategic communication goals and functions aligned with organizational goals and strategies</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm's strategic responses are in sync with the environment</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Groups are statistically different
When each group was asked to rank the top three capabilities, our results found some similarities and differences. Some capabilities received similar rankings. The most important capabilities for practitioners were similar to educators and employers. When asked about the second most important capability, all three groups provided different answers. Educators concentrated on ethics and social media; practitioners focused on KPI and results; and employers focused on environmental scanning and brand strategy. Educators and employers agreed on interpersonal/team skills and multiplatform messaging as the third most important capability.

**Table 6: The most important capabilities by respondent group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Most important</th>
<th>Second most important</th>
<th>Third most important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>To be professional</td>
<td>To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework, in line with professional and societal expectations</td>
<td>To demonstrate personal, interpersonal and team skills such as skills of negotiation, problem-solving and conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To manage social and digital media efforts such as influencer marketing, paid search, paid social, and UX/UI design</td>
<td>To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners</td>
<td>To build and proactively manage organizational reputation</td>
<td>To identify and drive performance-based key performance indicators to deliver results</td>
<td>To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm’s strategic responses are in sync with the environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To be professional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To build employee morale, engagement and satisfaction through strategic internal communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>To build and proactively manage organizational reputation</td>
<td>To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm’s strategic responses are in sync with the environment</td>
<td>To demonstrate personal, interpersonal and team skills such as skills of negotiation, problem-solving and conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders</td>
<td>To manage brand strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations</td>
<td>To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework, in line with professional and societal expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To manage social and digital media efforts such as influencer marketing, paid search, paid social, and UX/UI design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, participants were asked about constraints in incorporating these top capabilities. Educators perceived that resistance from colleagues was an obstacle and that training and requirements from the professional body could assist in including the capability in their teaching and in the curriculum. For practitioners, pressure on funding and lack of encouragement from employers were the two obstacles that prevent them from reaching this capability. The best solution would be better employer support. As for employers, they identified lack of qualified candidates and the fact that parts of the organization do not share the same priority as the two obstacles from incorporating the capabilities in the workforce. They propose more in-house training support and revised organizational goals as possible solutions.

Table 7: Perceived constraints and solutions by respondent group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constraints</th>
<th>Suggested solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resistance to change from colleagues</td>
<td>Professional body requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training for teaching staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressures on funding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of encouragement from employer</td>
<td>Employer support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priorities not shared by other parts of the</td>
<td>Organizational support for in-house training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of suitably qualified applicants</td>
<td>Build support for revised organizational goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey also included an open-ended question, asking respondents to add any other capability they might think is important. A capability suggested by two respondents was creativity.
Study 3: Focus groups

Sampling

The primary aim of the third stage of data collection was to solicit the views of educators, practitioners and employers in the UAE on the findings from the first two phases of the research project. The use of focus groups is seen as an appropriate method because it encouraged participants to reflect on the top 10 important capabilities of public relations and communication management as identified by the Delphi panel and survey respondents.

We employed purposive and convenience sampling to identify relevant participants. Since the UAE’s academic community is relatively small, we extended the invitation to participate in a focus group discussion to various educators at universities across the country. A total of seven educators were contacted via e-mail.

Participants for the employer and practitioner focus groups were selected as follows: Eighteen members of the Middle East Public Relations Association’s (MEPRA) Strategy Board were randomly selected and contacted via e-mail to participate in the employer focus group. While a number of individuals agreed to participate, some did not attend the focus group. Only three employers participated and to supplement their views a separate interview was scheduled with one employer who had initially indicated their availability for the scheduled focus group.

A College of Communication and Media Sciences (CCMS) faculty member, who is also on the MEPRA Strategy Board, contacted board members to nominate junior to mid-level practitioners from their organizations to participate in the study. The MEPRA Strategy Board is comprised of senior public relations and communication managers and employers in both the public and private sectors. A total of eight nominations were received. These potential participants were contacted via e-mail to inform them of their nomination and to convey details regarding the scheduled practitioner focus group.

The three online focus groups and one interview were conducted via Zoom since Covid-19 restrictions were still in place in the UAE in February and March 2021.

Participant profile

In total, 15 individuals participated in the three focus groups (14 participants) and one interview (1 participant categorized in the employers group). The gender composition of the groups was: ten females and five males.

Table 8: Breakdown of focus group participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 3: Focus groups</th>
<th>N=15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employers</td>
<td>N=4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practitioners</td>
<td>N=6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educators</td>
<td>N=5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All participants were asked at the beginning of each online focus group to give consent to participate in the study and to have their participation recorded. It was noted that no individual names would be linked to the answers. Participants were informed that the data would be reported in the aggregate and would remain anonymous.

Focus group process

The moderator outlined the aim of the country-specific Global Capability Framework at the beginning of each focus group. Background on the first two phases of the research study was provided as part of the introduction. A short definition of ‘capabilities’ was provided by the moderator to illustrate the difference between ‘capabilities’ and ‘competences’. The top 10 important capabilities from both the Delphi and the survey phases were presented to the participants.

The following seven question groupings formed part of the focus group moderation guide. Questions 1, 2, 4 and 5 were modified slightly for all three participant groupings. Questions 3 and 7 were only adapted for practitioners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9: Focus group moderation guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employers</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. When thinking about the future of public relations and communication management as a profession, which capabilities do you think are most important?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. As an employer, which capabilities do you consider to be the most important when building a workforce for the future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Have we missed a key capability? Do you want to say something about your own situation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What prevents you from incorporating the listed capabilities into your workforce?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What helps you achieve progress in developing capabilities in your future workforce?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How can this framework be of practical value to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What factors have affected changes in capabilities needed from say, five-ten years ago?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results and analysis

One of the most prominent observations by focus group participants was related to the ranking of the top 10 capabilities. Participants in all three focus groups mentioned that they would rank the capabilities in a different order. This was attributed to the fact that the capability sets generated by the Delphi panel was completed in spring 2020 (pre-pandemic) while the second capability set was formulated after the completion of the survey phase in fall 2020 (mid-pandemic). Participants agreed that Covid-19 had an impact on how they perceived the importance of capabilities.

Although the relative importance of the capabilities differed among the participants, capabilities such as reputation, relationships and professionalism were consistently viewed as very important.

General comments

All three participant groups discussed professionalism in great detail. Participants in the employer and practitioner focus groups reported that professionalism was regarded as a prerequisite that underpinned various other capabilities.

Professionalism was seen as a capability that had to be fostered at university level. Participants in the employer focus group added that practitioners have to keep themselves to high standards.

Relatedly, what it means to be professional has changed as a result of the pandemic. One participant said: “But professionalism doesn’t look like the way it used to look like pre-pandemic because before, we used to imagine professionalism as people dressed up in suits, going into executive meetings. But now we can do it with touching a button” (Practitioner FG participant 6).

Participants in the educator focus group said strategic thinking was the most important capability that had to be taught to students. While it was ranked highly, participants thought it was the most difficult capability to teach. One participant noted that while digital platforms were constantly evolving - resulting in the continuous demand for new digital skills - “strategy is something that AI [artificial intelligence] can’t replace just yet” (Educator FG participant 1).

Participants questioned why ethics was not listed in the two top 10 important capability sets aimed at educators. The moderator informed the participants that although ethics was part of the 14 capabilities in round two of the Delphi panel, it did not make it to the top 10 list in round three. Educators stressed that ethics and ethical frameworks were very important and should receive attention in curricula.

Participants in the practitioner focus group emphasized operational communication capabilities such as being able to: produce key messages/content; manage social and digital media efforts; and communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies/channels. It was evident that the focus on these capabilities was heightened by the pandemic.

“Part of being a PR professional is being a great storyteller” - Practitioner FG participant 2
The importance of content generation was highlighted by practitioners working in large agencies. Participants mentioned that “content is king” and that “part of being a PR professional is being a great storyteller” (Practitioner FG participant 2).

Participants’ comments revealed that digital media efforts and digital strategies were at the forefront of their thinking. The emphasis on being digitally savvy and “the value of digital” was a result of remote working conditions and the Covid-19 pandemic that necessitated content being conveyed digitally and on social media (Practitioner FG participant 2). The participants agreed that digital media efforts and the cultivation of a digital mindset would continue to be crucial in the foreseeable future.

Echoing the open-ended suggestion from the survey, participants proposed that creativity should be added as an additional capability. When viewed from a future-oriented perspective, professionals have to be creative in their thinking and execution of tasks. Creativity was seen as a capability “that will [...] keep pushing the industry forward” necessitating “being creatively bold, being creatively brave for our clients” (Employer FG participant 1).

**Obstacles to developing capabilities**

Participants in the employer focus group noted that funding for suitable external training was rarely an issue. Although budgetary constraints were not regarded as an obstacle, they said there were various free online resources that could be used by practitioners to upskill themselves.

Similarly, participants in the practitioner focus group said while lack of training was the most impeding factor for them, enrolling in self-funded or free courses could be explored.

Participants said pressure on time on existing staff (i.e., finding no or little free time) resulted in practitioners not prioritizing training.

Participants in the educator focus group had varying views on obstacles that prevent them from achieving progress in teaching capabilities. Lack of time, pressure to publish research
along with curriculum restrictions and syllabus approvals from international universities were all mentioned in the discussion.

Resistance to change was also cited as a barrier. One participant stated that educators were resistant to change as they were afraid of losing their jobs. This coupled with other expectations such as fulfilling key performance indicators (KPIs) hindered educators from focusing on and developing new capabilities.

**Enablers/opportunities for developing capabilities**

Participants mentioned organizational support for in-house training was important. They stated that various employers have started implementing innovative ways of holding training sessions in an effort to upskill their workforces.

Participants in the educator focus group agreed that professional body requirements, institutional support and curriculum review were among the most important enablers to achieve progress in teaching capabilities.

Participants reported that if professional body requirements received greater attention, it would give educators leverage to champion both curriculum changes and increased educator autonomy. The aforementioned coupled with robust, collaborative curriculum review from a variety of entities such as private, semi-government, and public universities could be regarded as additional enablers.

Participants in the practitioner focus group said proactivity in one's career advancement was important. They listed self-funded courses and training as examples of how one could show initiative. The need for financial support from employers was de-emphasized as participants said there were numerous free online courses that could be taken.

The need to develop oneself professionally and prioritize career advancement were seen as important by practitioners. Participants identified setting clearer career goals as the most important enabler. Participants said well-defined career goals would motivate individuals and assist them in understanding “the trajectory of their career” (Practitioner FG participant 6).

**UAE context**

The unique and diverse nature of the UAE was emphasized by participants. Participants said one had to embrace diversity as people from different nationalities, ethnicities, cultures and religions live and work side-by-side in the UAE. This necessitates the implementation of intercultural training and developing a culture of empathy in organizations.

The importance of understanding cultural contexts was mentioned by various participants in the employer focus group. Participants in both the employer and educator focus groups proposed that the UAE could be regarded as having two parallel universes, namely Emirati and expatriate communities.

The same demarcation was visible in the manner in which Emirati and expatriates operate in organizations. For example, Arabic speaking practitioners would focus on Arabic media relations and non-Arab practitioners would be tasked to do English media relations. It was
proposed that a different approach should be followed to overcome this divide. Instead of operating in ‘bubbles’, 360° degree communicators should be cultivated. For example, 360° degree communicators would be individuals who embrace diversity, understand specific cultures, exhibit cultural awareness, and are able to operate with sensitivity in a multicultural society.

Participants in the employer focus group said practitioners had to have specific mindsets to enhance and propel the public relations profession forward. They mentioned practitioners had to be resilient, agile and entrepreneurial. This was particularly true in the UAE due to political contexts that have a tendency to change and shift rapidly.

Not only should professionals have “growth” mindsets they have to be “intrinsically motivated” to develop themselves professionally (Employer FG participant 3).

One participant said professionalism was at the apex of capabilities required in PR and communication management professionals working in the UAE. This participant said professionalism was not fully ingrained in UAE professionals and a generational mind shift was required to change this. The participant noted that a lack of professionalism hindered entry-level professionals.

Stigmas related to employer types have to be addressed as Emirati students and professionals tended to opt for government positions over working for private sector organizations. Participants said: “they are forced to opening up to working in the private sector” (Educator FG participant 1); and “there’s no insult in doing a 9-6 [job] for an employer rather than for the government” (Employer FG participant 2).

It is necessary to raise the UAE media landscape to global standards and change mindsets from traditional to digital channels. One participant noted that the UAE media landscape was “underdeveloped” when compared to other countries as there was “a great dependency on traditional PR strategies” (Practitioner FG participant 2). Another participant noted that the onus rests on PR professionals to change the mindsets of UAE clients, who gravitate to traditional media vehicles, by making the value of digital strategies apparent.

Participants referred to the importance of reputation management. While some participants described managing reputation as “important” (Practitioner FG participants 1 and 4), another noted that “maintaining a good reputation for your clients is [...] a key capability because if you don’t uphold their reputation, then they’re going to [...] pack up their bags and go to someone else who can” (Practitioner FG participant 2). Participants also linked job security to managing the reputation of the UAE. One participant said: “We need to work on how the UAE is perceived, not only inside the UAE itself but also outside because that is where the future of all of the work that we do lies” (Practitioner FG participant 1).

Participants also linked job security to managing the reputation of the UAE. One participant said: “We need to work on how the UAE is perceived, not only inside the UAE itself but also outside because that is where the future of all of the work that we do lies” (Practitioner FG participant 1).
Conclusion

While in most of the country studies the survey findings corroborated the list of capabilities generated through the Delphi technique, the study in the UAE happened over the course of Covid, before and after. As expected, there were differences in the list of capabilities identified in the Delphi study before the pandemic and in the survey after the pandemic had set in. Yet, the following core capabilities continued to be important before and after:

- building strong relationships between organizations and their stakeholders
- mitigating and managing risks and crises.
- building employee engagement through strategic internal communication
- managing social and digital media efforts
- producing key messages and content
- displaying professionalism
- demonstrating personal, interpersonal and team abilities

While the Delphi study had foregrounded the importance of strategic capabilities such as building and managing reputation, aligning strategic communication goals with organizational goals, and scanning the environment to ensure that the organization is in sync with the environment, as well as the generic capability of working within an ethical/socially responsible framework, the survey, conducted after the pandemic had set in, highlighted the importance of tactical operational capabilities such as communicating messaging through multiple media platforms and technologies, as well as the strategic capabilities of managing brand strategy, planning, architecture, and activations; and driving KPIs to deliver results.

Table 10: Shifting emphases on capabilities before the pandemic (Delphi) and during the pandemic (survey)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAPABILITIES – DELPHI AND SURVEY</th>
<th>DELPHI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To build strong, long-term stakeholder RELATIONSHIPS</td>
<td>To build and proactively manage REPUTATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To define, mitigate, and manage RISKS and CRISES</td>
<td>To align STRATEGIC communication goals with organizational goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To build EMPLOYEE engagement through strategic internal communication</td>
<td>To scan and sync the ENVIRONMENT and organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To manage social and DIGITAL media efforts</td>
<td>To work within an ETHICAL and Socially RESPONSIBLE framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To produce key MESSAGES/CONTENT</td>
<td>SURVEY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be PROFESSIONAL</td>
<td>To manage BRAND strategy, planning, architecture, and activations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To demonstrate PERSONAL, INTERPERSONAL, and TEAM SKILLS</td>
<td>To drive KPIs to deliver RESULTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies/CHANNELS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do the UAE findings stack up against the Global Capability Framework? What are some of the similarities and differences? There were quite a few similarities, with most of the global capabilities reflected in the country list. However, the UAE list displayed some nuances and emphases that were specific to the local environment, specifically the focus on professionalism, employee engagement, and ability to manage people. These could be due to the extremely high levels of diversity and multiculturalism evident in the country. With practitioners from over 200 nationalities in the UAE, having a common code of professionalism, the ability to manage people and teams, and foster engagement among a highly diverse employee base probably acquires even more significance than anywhere else. It was also intriguing to note the need expressed in the focus groups to create 360° communicators who are adept at multiple languages and not specialized in serving niche segments of society. Similarly, another contextual factor that needs to be considered is the continually shifting and dynamic political contexts, which calls on practitioners to develop agile mindsets that can quickly learn and adapt to changing situations. Finally, as noted in the focus groups, the country had traditionally focused on media relations through traditional channels. This needs to be transformed to incorporate more focus on digital.
### UAE top 14 capabilities

#### Table 11: UAE top 14 capabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic communication capabilities (7)</th>
<th>Operational communication capabilities (4)</th>
<th>Generic professional capabilities (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• To set and manage strategic communication goals and functions aligned with organizational goals and strategies</td>
<td>• To define, create, and produce key messages and media content</td>
<td>• To be professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To define, mitigate, and manage risks and crises</td>
<td>• To communicate desired messaging across multiple media platforms and technologies</td>
<td>• To work within an ethical and socially responsible framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To build and proactively manage organizational reputation</td>
<td>• To manage social and digital media efforts such as influencer marketing, paid search, paid social, and UX/UI design</td>
<td>• To demonstrate personal, interpersonal, and team skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To scan the environment, identify stakeholder trends, concerns and expectations, and ensure that the firm’s strategic responses are in sync with the environment</td>
<td>• To build employee morale, engagement, and satisfaction through strategic internal communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To build strong, long-term relationships with stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To identify and drive performance-based key performance indicators to deliver results</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To manage brand strategy, planning, brand architecture, and brand activations</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The findings of this study will have significant implications for the following stakeholders:

1. **Practitioners**: the research will help public relations and communication management practitioners assess their own performance in the capabilities they see as important. When practitioners can self-assess, they can set professional development goals and seek resources to enhance their performance.

2. **Educators**: the research will be useful to identify any gaps between what is taught and what competencies are needed in the UAE. Educators can design courses and curriculum to focus on knowledge and skills needed to enhance certain capabilities deemed important by the profession in the UAE.

3. **Employers**: the research can help employers understand which capabilities are seen as important and thus provide individuals with the right resources to support their team.
References


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