

The Effective Role of Malaysian Communication Professional Association: A Dire Need for Raising Global Standards

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to seek academic and practitioners' perceptions on the role of Malaysian communication professional associations especially the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) in terms of its effectiveness and contribution to the body of PR knowledge. In this survey, two research instruments, survey questionnaire and in-depth interviews, were employed in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. The findings showed that although the IPRM has marked some achievements in their early development, the body does not play a major role in enhancing the standards of PR professionalism. It is questionable that the IPRM is able to be an independent PR professional association and gain a chartered status in enhancing the value of public relations. Both academics and practitioners viewed that the IPRM needs to be revamped at large from developing the structure of organisation to setting a formal accreditation and licensing. However, many agreed that the role of IPRM is very important in shaping the bright future of PR industry. This may imply that the IPRM should play a bigger role in institutionalizing the standards of professionalism in public relations.

Keywords: public relations, professionalism, professional association, accreditation, profession

Introduction

Profession is seen as an occupational term that describes a domain of expertise. This term has developed over hundreds of years to refer to a rigorous occupational system in our society. It is important to distinguish between craft, technician and professional in any division of labour. Thus, different levels of practice require different levels of competence. Job designations and responsibilities, status and prestige, professional autonomy and financial rewards are all key factors in building a professional development system.

Literature Review

Profession from a Sociological Perspective. It is important to address three crucial questions: (1) What constitutes a profession?, (2) Who is a professional?, and (3) How does an occupation become a profession? (Morrell, 2004: 8; Neal & Morgan, 2000: 10). There are enormous debates, especially from a sociological perspective (Freidson, 1994; McDonald, 1995; Neal & Morgan, 2000; Watson, 2002; Larson, 1977; Moore, 1970; Halmos, 1973; Johnson, 1972; Wilensky, 1964), about what 'professionalisation' is and how 'professionalisation' can be developed for a particular sector. More recent debates have viewed management as a professional

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discipline¹ (Morrell, 2004; Squires, 2001; Mintzberg, 1996a, in Mintzberg & Quinn, 1996). Indeed, all these perspectives have been discussed on the basis of two dominant notions of organising the division of labour.

Professionalism is about exercising a degree of control and power over the society through influencing policy decision makers (such as the state) (Freidson, 1994: 41). Thus, it is important to ensure that professionals can influence a state's policy and maintain their professional privileges (Freidson, 1994: 44-45). A profession also requires an exclusive jurisdiction which is capable of being established independently. In distinguishing a profession from another occupation, *altruism* is clearly practised in a professional service (Johnson, 1972: 13). Specifically, professional altruism is seen as a 'personal service' to clients which may influence all industrial societies (Halmos, 1970 in Johnson, 1972: 13).

Indeed, Freidson (1994: 43) notes that there are three key elements of a profession: the body of knowledge, the public itself, and the training institutions (and professional associations). Morrell (2004: 10) argues that in determining the qualities of a profession, two important aspects are taken into account: the body of knowledge (e.g. abstract, codified and expert) and 'the role of underlying science' – how professionals can apply particular knowledge to their work. Thus, it is essential to develop uniformity in the body of knowledge (Larson, 1977: 17). Specifically, 'the core element of the professionalisation project is the production of producers' (Larson, 1977: 50). The university is often a main site where the production of knowledge can be developed to produce skilled workers or professionals. Upon the completion of their training and educational development, professionals gain esoteric knowledge and skills to improve their professional services in the marketplace. Commonly, part of their training is to become reflective practitioners. Academic institutions are seen as 'arenas for the exercise of professional activity' (Schon, 1995: 3). In addition, the professionalisation project is interpreted as the monopolisation of particular competences and a concomitant acquisition of status and privileges for an occupational group (Larson, 1977: 51). Apart from noting the importance of higher education and exclusive jurisdiction for developing a professional project, building respectability is crucial in the way the world perceives the value of a particular profession (MacDonald, 1995: 189).

According to Hodkinson and Issitt (1995: 4), it is worth noting that the concepts of competence and expertise are based on a post-Fordism perspective. This model rejects the classical Fordist aspect of mass production, and instead emphasises the importance of flexible specialisation. In a highly competitive business market, there are two ways for corporations to survive: maintaining low skills of mass

production in producing low quality products, and high skills in which total quality management is at stake. The second route of industrial production is based on training and skills development. This leads to developing a framework of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

This framework, with the emphasis on quality, may improve the classical models of professionalism in dealing with professional practice in a changing business environment. This model supports Weber's notion of the standardisation of a profession in terms of the determination of occupational groups and the levels of practice in the divisions of labour.

The issue of PR professionalism is still unsolved and debated vigorously among academics and practitioners. Indeed, it is imperative to note that in the absence of the role of professional bodies, public relations will be seen as a typical occupation rather than a distinctive management profession (Rawel, 2002).

Having discussed the importance of PR professionalism for the PR industry, this paper intends to examine academics and practitioners' perceptions on the effective role of communication professional associations in Malaysia in increasing the level of professionalism of PR practitioners and developing a rigorous body of PR knowledge. Thus, the objectives of this paper are highlighted in the next section.

The Objectives of This Study

Specifically, this paper has the following objectives:

1. to identify the proportion of the memberships of communication professionals bodies among communication practitioners,
2. to examine what consider a 'professional' as being perceived by PR fraternity.
3. to determine the implications of being members of the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia.
4. to determine the effective role of the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia in terms of setting a highly recognised accreditation and regulatory mechanism.

Research Method

In this survey, there were two types of data collections used in this study. Survey and in-depth interviews were employed to seek perceptions of PR fraternity on the effective role of the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia. For survey, 200 questionnaires were sent to targeted respondents using a stratified random sampling. This yielded an effective response rate of 34%, which are 68 usable responses. The sample included two major groups within the PR industry: 173 in-house PR practitioners (500 public listed companies – Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange) and 27 PR consultants (The Directory of Malaysian Companies (*Red Book*)) in the Klang Valley², Malaysia. Because the small number of PR academics, we decided to perceive practitioners' perceptions on the subjects studied. To obtain the sample for in-depth

¹ A number of management scholars have 'borrowed' sociological concepts to improve the status and nature of management work. Moreover, Squires (2001: 484) argued that 'management has structural affinities with other professional disciplines such as medicine, engineering and architecture', and also is seen implicitly as 'applied social science'.

² The fieldwork for this study was implemented within the Klang Valley, Malaysia, as it is a booming urban entity in Malaysia which has grown rapidly, incorporating six urban centres: Kuala Lumpur (the capital of Malaysia), Petaling Jaya, Subang Jaya, Shah Alam, Klang, and Kajang. It should be understood that most large corporations and prominent universities and colleges are centrally located in this urban state.

interviews, the Directory of Malaysian Companies (*Red Book*) was used to identify the major academics and practitioners of public relations distributed in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Of 20 selected PR academics and practitioners, only 12 of them replied and agreed to be interviewed. The interviews were conducted in English and/or Malay - depending on which language they preferred. Maintaining confidentiality was a necessary condition. Thus, at its discretion, all personal information (e.g. names of interviewees and organisations) is treated as confidential.

Findings

1. Memberships of PR Professional Associations

Table 1 shows that nearly 80% of the respondents had never joined any of the PR professional associations. Only a few (9.6%) reported becoming members of the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM), followed by the International Association for Business Communicators (IABC) (5.5%), then by the Public Relations Consultants' Association of Malaysia (PRCAM) (4.1%), and finally, by the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) (2.7%). Respondents who worked in consultancy were more likely to join professional associations - IPRM, PRCAM and IABC - compared with practitioners in both the private and public sectors. None of respondents in the in-house public sector had joined any PR professional association, which is probably due to a lack of awareness among PR practitioners of the value of being a member of these professional bodies. Another possibility is that the professional bodies have not impressed upon them sufficiently that membership would help them in their profession.

2. The Professional Standards of Public Relations

Of the six items tested, the majority of respondents in all sectors viewed their work as a serious profession, based on the following key elements: 'a professional is someone who is proficient or an expert' (85.3%) with mean scores of 4.3; 'requiring professional skills' (82.4%) with mean scores of 4.1; 'a profession is more highly valued than an occupation' (80.9%) with mean scores of 4.1; 'having specific personal expertise' (80.9%) with mean scores of 4.0; and 'I view my job as a profession' (76.5%) with mean scores of 4.0. In fact, over half reported 'they have had substantial training in professional skills' with mean scores of 3.6 (see Table 2). This result implies considerable awareness of the importance of this emerging profession among PR practitioners and probably underscores the important role PR professional bodies such as the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia should have in shaping the emergence of the PR industry.

3. Implications of Being Members

Regarding the five items tested, PR practitioners across all sectors felt that the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia was still far from excellent in developing the highest standards of PR professionalism. On all items, a low rating in terms of mean score was produced (see Table 3a): the lower the mean score, the poorer the degree of perception of this institute. Specifically, respondents who worked in the private and public sectors were relatively unsure of the role of the IPRM in shaping the PR industry, whilst respondents from consultancy rated all statements given as significantly low.

| Professional Bodies | THE SECTOR PR PRACTITIONERS WORK FOR | | | | | | Total | |
|--|--------------------------------------|------|------------------------|------|-------------|------|-------|------|
| | In-house private sector | | In-house public sector | | Consultancy | | N | % |
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | | |
| 1. Institute of Public Relations Malaysia | 4 | 5.5 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 4.1 | 7 | 9.6 |
| 2. Public Relations Consultancy Association Malaysia | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 4.1 | 3 | 4.1 |
| 3. International Association of Business Communicators | 2 | 2.7 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 2.7 | 4 | 5.5 |
| 4. Chartered Institute of Marketing | 1 | 1.4 | 1 | 1.4 | 0 | 0.0 | 2 | 2.7 |
| 5. None of the above | 38 | 52.1 | 19 | 26.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 57 | 78.1 |
| Total | 45 | 61.7 | 20 | 27.4 | 8 | 10.9 | 73* | 100 |

Table 2: Distribution of PR practitioners' perceptions of the professional standards of public relations according to the categories of in-house private sector, in-house public sector and consultancy

| Items | THE SECTOR PR PRACTITIONERS WORK FOR (N: 68) | | | | | | | | | Overall Mean Scores |
|--|--|--------------|--------------|------------------------------|------------|--------------|------------------|------------|------------|---------------------|
| | In-house Private Sector N: 44 | | | In-house Public Sector N: 20 | | | Consultancy N: 4 | | | |
| | Disagree % | Neutral % | Agree % | Disagree % | Neutral % | Agree % | Disagree % | Neutral % | Agree % | |
| 1. I believe that a professional is someone who is proficient or expert. | 10 (14.7) | 8 (11.8) | 34 (50.0) | 0 | 0 | 20 (29.4) | 0 | 0 | 4 (5.9) | 4.3 |
| 2. I believe that a profession is more highly valued than an occupation. | 3 (4.4) | 8 (11.8) | 33 (48.5) | 0 | 1 (1.5) | 19 (27.9) | 0 | 1 (1.5) | 3 (4.4) | 4.1 |
| 3. I view my job as a profession. | 5 (7.4) | 9 (13.2) | 30 (44.1) | 0 | 2 (2.9) | 18 (26.5) | 0 | 0 | 4 (5.9) | 4.0 |
| 4. I have specific personal expertise. | 5 (7.4) | 5 (7.4) | 34 (50.0) | 0 | 3 (4.4) | 17 (25.0) | 0 | 0 | 4 (5.9) | 4.0 |
| 5. My work requires professional skills. | 3 (4.4) | 7 (10.3) | 34 (50.0) | 0 | 2 (2.9) | 18 (26.5) | 0 | 0 | 4 (5.9) | 4.1 |
| 6. I have had substantial training in professional skills. | 11 (16.2) | 12 (17.6) | 21 (30.9) | 0 | 4 (5.9) | 16 (23.5) | 0 | 1 (1.5) | 3 (2.9) | 3.6 |

Table 3a: Distribution of PR practitioners' perceptions of the IPRM according to the categories of in-house private sector, in-house public sector and consultancy

NOTE: Mean scores in this table are based on responses to a five-point answer scale where '1' equalled 'Strongly disagree' and '5' equalled 'Strongly agree'. Consequently, the higher the mean score the better the perception of the IPRM.

| Statements | THE SECTOR PR PRACTITIONERS WORK FOR (N: 68) | | | | | | | | | Overall Mean Scores |
|---|--|--------------|--------------|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|------------|------------|---------------------|
| | In-house Private Sector N: 44 | | | In-house Public Sector N: 20 | | | Consultancy N: 4 | | | |
| | Disagree % | Neutral % | Agree % | Disagree % | Neutral % | Agree % | Disagree % | Neutral % | Agree % | |
| 1. IPRM plays important roles in shaping the emergent PR industry | 4 (5.9) | 12 (17.6) | 11 (16.2) | 0 | 7 (10.3) | 10 (14.7) | 3 (4.4) | 0 | 1 (1.9) | 2.3 |
| 2. IPRM offers members good services | 5 (7.4) | 18 (26.5) | 4 (5.9) | 0 | 11 (16.2) | 6 (8.8) | 3 (4.4) | 1 (1.9) | 0 | 2.1 |
| 3. IPRM is effective and efficient | 8 (11.8) | 15 (22.1) | 4 (5.9) | 0 | 10 (14.7) | 7 (10.3) | 3 (4.4) | 1 (1.9) | 0 | 2.1 |
| 4. IPRM exists to support PR professionals & non-professionals | 2 (2.9) | 14 (20.6) | 11 (16.2) | 0 | 6 (8.8) | 11 (16.2) | 1 (1.9) | 1 (1.9) | 2 (2.9) | 2.4 |
| 5. IPRM offers a range of qualification and training programmes for members | 2 (2.9) | 10 (14.7) | 15 (22.1) | 0 | 11 (16.2) | 6 (8.8) | 3 (4.4) | 0 | 1 (1.9) | 2.3 |

Table 3b: Distribution of PR practitioners' perceptions of the IPRM (N = 68)

| What do you think about the effective role of the IPRM? | F | % |
|--|-----------|-------------|
| NEGATIVE STATEMENTS | | |
| 1. Did not promote the PR profession extensively to the general public | 10 | 14.7 |
| 2. An ineffective & inefficient PR association | 8 | 11.8 |
| 3. Should be more people-friendly | 3 | 4.4 |
| 4. Has been procrastinating (being lazy or complacent) | 1 | 1.5 |
| 5. Enrolment through the website is inadequate | 1 | 1.5 |
| 6. Should provide hands-on activities & research development | 1 | 1.5 |
| 7. Not visible enough | 1 | 1.5 |
| 8. Does not expand the role of PR | 1 | 1.5 |
| 9. Not attractive | 1 | 1.5 |
| 10. No incentives | 1 | 1.5 |
| 11. An exclusive club for PR 'wannabes' and clueless about how to enhance the standard of PR practice – internal politicking | 1 | 1.5 |
| 12. Does not play adequate role in changing people's perception of PR | 1 | 1.5 |
| 13. Should gain credibility | 1 | 1.5 |
| 14. Needs a complete revamp to bring true benefits to the profession | 1 | 1.5 |
| 15. Should regulate and manage PR practitioners to achieve high standard of professionalism | 1 | 1.5 |
| 16. Should give more exposure to PR practitioners | 1 | 1.5 |
| 17. Must work harder to get the industry recognised by general public | 1 | 1.5 |
| 18. Still 'fledgling' to PR practitioners | 1 | 1.5 |
| Total | 36 | 53.4 |
| POSITIVE STATEMENTS | | |
| 1. It is a good PR body and has potential to be one of the most prominent organisations in Malaysia | 2 | 2.9 |
| 2. A good platform to address PR issues | 1 | 1.5 |
| 3. The body serves its purpose | 1 | 1.5 |
| 4. A good foundation for young PR executives | 1 | 1.5 |
| Total | 5 | 7.4 |

In addition, nearly one-third did not know of the existence of the institute (see Table 3a). As shown in Table 3b, this study examined PR practitioners' opinions of the IPRM by dividing these opinions into two categories: negative and positive statements. Negative statements (53.4%) were more common than positive statements, which accounted for only 7.4%. Significantly, within the negative statements, some viewed the institute as 'does not promote the PR profession extensively to the general public' (14.7%); being 'an ineffective and inefficient PR association' (11.8%); and 'should be more people-friendly' (4.4%). In contrast, only a few (7.4%) offered positive statements such as 'it is a good PR body and has potential to be one of the most prominent organisations in Malaysia' (2.9%); 'a good platform to address PR issues' (1.5%); and 'a good foundation for young PR executives' (1.5%). Apparently, in this case, the role of the institute seemed not to be robust and rigorous enough in contributing to the emergence of the PR industry. Thus, hard work and perseverance are required from

council members of this professional body to vigorously promote and shape the emergence of the industry, coupled with a need to improve professionalism among potential PR practitioners through PR education.

In-depth Interviews

The second data collection employed in this study does not only compliment the first method but also look at these research themes deeper and more rounded. Evidence from the in-depth interviews, the informants were quite generous in their views on the role of professional associations in enhancing the standards of PR professionalism. One of the most important aspects IPRM pursues to achieve and maintain is setting a highly recognised accreditation and licensing from PR fraternity.

PR Accreditation and Licensing

Almost all informants agreed that there is a need to improve accreditation of public relations; hence, this profession may gain a better recognition from the general public. Informants also stressed that having

proper accreditation gives a lot of advantages to the PR industry. Currently, this profession has suffered from a bad reputation from the general public, as there are still many non-qualified practitioners practising public relations. Therefore, informants felt that offering accredited certificates to practitioners might project a better profile for the PR industry as a whole. Some also emphasised the importance of licensing to improve the value of this growing field by arguing that licensing would legitimise members who should become competent PR professionals. Comparing with established professional works such as medicine and engineering professions, the IPRM may play a unique role to improve this industry. A PR academic from the established public university noted that:

In terms of accreditation, the IPRM is supposed to evaluate and accredit the PR curriculum in a local university. But this association is not really effective to increase the memberships and strengthen the accreditation. I think there is internal politicking among council members. In fact, there is no networking between PR academics and practitioners to create better accreditation. I think we should learn from other established professional bodies like the Malaysia Medical Association or the Malaysia Engineering Association, they have a very strong accreditation for their members. I think the IPRM should consult this matter with the Ministry of Education to gain proper accreditation, as the National Accreditation Board may help this association to tackle this issue seriously. Apart from accreditation, PR practitioners should practise self-regulation when they make decisions to get their work done. So that, this profession can be more recognised.

Although many criticised the role of this national professional body in setting the accreditation, one argued that under new leadership (a transition from academics to practitioners) in early 2004 may improve the image of the association. When asked about the effectiveness of the role of IPRM, a top practitioner from the established corporation argued that:

The IPRM is not effective because previously it was led by PR academics. They are not true practitioners. But now, under the new leadership, we can see that 90% of council members are talented and motivated senior practitioners. I am now a council member of IPRM. Give us about 2 or 3 years to re-develop this association. Now, we are working on accreditation aggressively. We would try to gain professional status for this profession. I think licensing is also important for PR practitioners. But some practitioners felt that

licensing may humiliate people when they have to pass certain examinations. To be recognised, we need the professional body like the IPRM to govern the accreditation and licensing. I am adhering to the Codes of Athens. But I don't think we should have traditional professions like doctor, lawyer and suchlike. PR should become new profession, which requires multi-knowledge and skills.

However, there is no agreement between academics and practitioners regarding the perception of PR professional status: some suggest recognising this profession like other traditional professions such as medicine, law or engineering, or others suggest that it should become a serious profession which focuses on strategic management. In order to realise this aspiration, informants emphasised that professional bodies like the IPRM and IABC should govern a great deal of the efforts to improve the accreditation and licensing. Thus, practitioners should seriously adhere to a code of ethics developed by a professional association such as the IPRM. Informants argued that there are some reasons why the IPRM has not yet established proper accreditation nor made a substantial contribution to the Malaysian PR industry. There seems to be internal politicking around council members of this association. As a PR educator from the private university said that:

I am a member of IPRM. Unfortunately, this association is not really dynamic and active. The IPRM does not play an effective role (to fight for a proper standard of professionalism) unlike other professional organisations. I know a number of academics in there but they are not really effective. There is no compulsion to get the license. Professional organisations probably can do better by organising seminars, workshops and so on to improve the status of this profession. The IPRM just does a one-off event, not continuous and dynamic activities. Members claim that they are PR experts but they are not educated in the PR field. I think this professional association should urge practitioners to adhere to a code of ethics that is developed to practise better public relations.

While questioned the role of IPRM, a top PR practitioner from the international PR firm also emphasised the importance of accreditation by arguing that:

I think that the IPRM should improve their role, as we can see now most of council members from academia. They are not practising public relations. That's why this association is not really effective. Accreditation is very important for public relations to differentiate between PRO and GRO (Guest Relations Officer).

Qualified practitioners need to abide by the codes of ethics developed by an established PR professional body. It is good to see that public relations has been taught in the local university, but we need to accredit the curriculum. I think that the University should offer a bachelor's degree in public relations, not only in mass communication. It is too broad. I think a PR degree should be offered in the Business School, and no longer in the Media School. Once you got a PR degree, then you go to the real world to practise them. In the real world, public relations is also integrated with strategic management which many senior practitioners participate actively in the executive board.

Besides emphasising the importance of achieving professional status for the IPRM, a PR academic from the international university and also an advisor of the IPRM noted that the board members have been elected every year. He mentioned that:

The IPRM 'should be' an effective organisation and 'should achieve' professional status for this profession. However, we must understand that even the PRSA or the IPR¹, UK has not yet achieved professional status. But we are still working on it. So far, we have achieved certain development to improve the PR industry. Actually, the boards have been changing every year. Perhaps, the new leadership under Shameem Abdul Jalil will bring a new vision for this industry. Setting proper accreditation and licensing is important. That's why we offer certain certificates and diploma for qualified PR practitioners.

Besides reinforcing proper regulation, the importance of self-regulation cannot be ignored among academics and practitioners. Sriramesh and Vercic (2003) pointed out that practitioners are urged to regulate themselves in a good manner such as being ethical, being credible and making the right decision in managing their work. Practising public relations in the Malaysian context, informants stressed that practitioners should be more sensitive and cautious with Malaysian cultures and norms. This sensitivity and caution can be built up through self-regulation and self-learning. Therefore, to be successful, it is important for practitioners to move away from the notion that their superior is keeping an eye on them when practising public relations and instead to manage their work professionally and with full dedication and commitment. As one PR practitioner from the international PR firm pointed out that:

In terms of self-regulation, we should be more ethical. Here, we are no longer working for cigarette companies. But we still have clients

from alcohol companies, but as a Muslim, I am not handling this part. We've non-Muslim to run that business. We can't say 'no' when our clients asked us to do that. However, here, there is a diversity of working staff consisting the Malay, Chinese and Indian. I am very cautious about the sensitivity of our work. I've got to balance between business and cultural sensitivity. We should respect our culture, as that is our identity. I tell you what, our culture and religious activity do not hinder the way we manage our work.

In order to see an improvement in increasing the standard of the professionalism of public relations and in reducing the perceptual gap, academics and practitioners should work along, hand in hand, to produce an excellent body of PR knowledge. Besides teaching the PR curriculum, PR academics, can be interpreted as strategic managerial researchers, should be more committed to produce more research focusing on the real world effect, so they should then build appropriate academic theories in accordance with local needs and our own cultures. At the same time, practitioners should help the University by actively supporting the applied PR research especially with regard to the local context. In fact, by developing the 'Centre for Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management', the professional body such as the IPRM, may provide more room for practitioners to participate in this applied research rather than focusing on arranging social gathering activities.

Specifically, senior PR practitioners, can be described as managerial strategists and there should be more enthusiasm for conducting applied research regarding local PR practice using appropriate academic theories as a key reference for managing the policies of their organisations. Through this process, when everyone plays a specific role, the IPRM may propose proper accreditation based on applied PR research projects, which carried out by practitioners and academics. Therefore, this effort directly and indirectly would improve the profiles of the Malaysian PR industry. This could be followed by developing a strategic alliance with the international PR educational and professional bodies such as the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) and the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management. Next, it is worth discussing the importance of continuous professional development as a part of the strategic role of the professional association.

Recommendations

Some recommendations are suggested based on the findings of this study: PR practitioners and academics should be more dynamic and proactive to enhance their professionalism. An annual meeting for both parties needs to be held to discuss the industry's issues. Developing a strategic plan by providing a blueprint of public relations is useful to improve this profession. This can be done by coordinating a series of applied research projects regarding

the current practice of public relations and its future direction.

The IPRM should become an established professional body with a unique mission and vision, and not merely a non-government organisation. The organisation should be organised by senior PR practitioners and academics. The meaning of 'senior' refers to someone who is well educated and also can and has made considerable contributions to the Malaysian body of PR knowledge, and not only being selected among highly experienced people.

The IPRM, in collaboration with the public and private university, should accredit the PR curriculum that is being taught at various local universities. This study suggests that the accreditation can be given to the undergraduate and postgraduate curricular. Importantly, accreditation needs to be applied to people who have a bachelor's and/or master's degree and/or at least five years' working experience in this field and/or have demonstrably made solid contributions to the PR industry. Note that prior to awarding accreditation to undergraduate and / or postgraduate courses, the curriculum needs to be reviewed and strengthened with more coherent managerial competency courses such as strategic thinking, strategic planning, corporate strategies, strategic political communication and other such appropriate courses – which widen the critical skills necessary to the heightening of the standards of the profession.

The IPRM should vigorously promote the benefits of membership to potential members. New strategic campaigns need to be planned and implemented. This can also be conducted using online and offline approaches. The website must be presented in a corporate style (e.g. less colourful), coupled with presenting a great deal of substance (e.g. content development). In respecting cultural diversity, when developing a policy, the IPRM should also consider the Malaysian culture, notably the principal language practitioners use in either the private or public sectors, as well as religious sensitivity, style of management and many more elements. The study found that although PR practitioners are aware of the importance of Malaysian cultural norms to their practice, they are more likely to practise western public relations rather than international public relations.

The IPRM should also improve their services regarding career development for current and potential PR practitioners. Job opportunities should be advertised in the website of IPRM. Additionally, this institute should recommend internships for PR students. Thus, PR graduates would benefit from these services. Importantly, the IPRM should strongly improve their continuous professional development including training and evaluation. As a central part of this, practising self-regulation and abiding by codes of ethics should be enhanced. Evidence from this research showed that PR practitioners and academics agreed about the importance of continuous professional development and self-regulation to the PR practice.

Implications of Study

The findings of this research disclosed that public relations has not yet become a profession because it

has not met all of the criteria initiated by Neal & Morgan (2000). Although all of the respondents agreed on the importance of the four pillars of professional development, some of the business leaders and PR practitioners did not think that public relations should be legally regulated by imposing mandatory accreditation. Importantly, it was perceived that setting global benchmarking standards for PR professionalism is an urgent necessity. In fact, performing complex and sophisticated technical and managerial tasks is a 'must have' capability for real PR professionals.

Future Scope

Globally, a comparative study should be conducted to develop better global benchmarking standards concerning PR professionalisation in terms of setting a universal professional project, including: strategic plans; accreditation and licensing; international relations; continuous professional development schemes; a code of ethics; membership benefits; and training and qualification between Eastern (e.g. Malaysia, China and India) and Western worlds (e.g. the United Kingdom and the United States).

Conclusion

Importantly, excellent public relations and communication management in Malaysia substantially relies on the pivotal roles of PR professional associations such as the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia and the Public Relations Consultants Association Malaysia (PRCAM). It seems that these associations are still 'young' in contributing to the body of Malaysian PR knowledge. Research and education are key elements for raising the standards of PR professionalism, but these are not yet much in evidence.

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