Global Capabilities Framework: Perspectives of Public Relations Practitioners in Malaysia

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Abstract. The development of the Global Capabilities Framework (GCF) for the public relations and communication management profession was the first globally applicable Capability Framework for practitioner, employer and academic communities. Due to the lack of a global benchmark, GCF was developed in 2018 by a group of researchers under the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (Global Alliance). Prior literature reported on the GCF development of nine participating countries, and only one paper focused on the perceptions, assumptions and applications of GCF in one country. Given the importance of understanding the value and applicability of GCF and a critical insight into public relations capabilities as they are understood by practitioners, this paper explores the perspectives of public relations practitioners in Malaysia towards GCF as a shared set of capabilities in the field of public relations and communication management. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 public relations practitioners via online platforms, and the data collected was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed three main themes which answer two research questions. This exploratory study concludes that the awareness of GCF amongst public relations practitioners in Malaysia is currently lacking, and the GCF framework is yet to be applied in the public relations practices although the practitioners recognised its value and potential.

Keywords: Public relations · Global Capabilities Framework · Competencies · Public relations practitioners

1 Introduction

Public relations is recognised as a profession in the field of communication that has positive growth across the globe which impacts the society and has commercial effects. To keep up with the ever-changing and evolving public relations and communication management field, continuous learning and development of capabilities as a professional is deemed necessary to meet the challenges of the future [1]. Capabilities are the building blocks for core competencies, and determines an individual's path towards excellence [2]. However, competencies are fast changing [3], which poses the question as to how public relations and communication management practitioners, educators and employers

are expected to know the required capabilities and work towards developing them as the profession progresses. Moreover, a question arises on the importance of capabilities identified by public relations professionals which vary across countries and cultures. If so, would having a specific set of capabilities as a benchmark that defines the public relations and communication management profession globally be beneficial in encouraging the development of core capabilities among public relations professionals?

In 2018, the Global Capabilities Framework (GCF) was developed by a group of researchers under the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (Global Alliance) as a benchmark consisting of communication, organisational and professional capabilities that should be acquired by public relations and communication management professionals. However, despite having identified a standard set of capabilities that guide practitioners, academics and employers in developing the required core capabilities, research towards its application, relevance and effectiveness is seemingly lacking; and should be further explored in preparation for the advancement of the field. Thus, this paper aims to explore the understanding and perception of public relations practitioners in Malaysia towards GCF as a shared set of capabilities in the field of public relations and communication management.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Public Relations (and Its Definitions)

Throughout the years, the definition of public relations has changed considerably. The definition presented in the introductory text of 'Managing Public Relations' by Grunig and Hunt is amongst the most recognised, whereby public relations is defined to be the management of communication between an organisation and its publics. Upon a review of other popular public relations definitions, the key terms of 'manage', 'organisation', and 'public' appeared to be common components within public relations definitions. However, criticisms towards the definitions were prevalent. [4] highlighted that in efforts of being the intermediary between an organisation, with a moral duty to fulfil its organisational change, and the public, whose interests have to be considered, the term 'persuasion' is absent in all of the definitions reviewed. Core concepts such as 'communication' or 'relationships" are not identified by the definitions [5]. Thus, alternative definitions that do not present public relations as a management function were offered. [4, p. 64] suggested that public relations is "the active participation in social construction of meaning". In addition, [6] proposed the 'sociocultural approach' as an alternative paradigm in the field, in which public relations would both affect and be affected by culture, thus, it is viewed as a profession that alters the structure of society through producing, maintaining and organising cultural meanings. Albeit with the emergence of various definitions in defining the public relations profession as a whole, the modern definition by the Public Relations Society of America which defines public relations as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics" remains its relevance [7, para. 1]. Strategic communication refers to purposeful communication, in which public relations practitioners would engage in deliberate communication practices on behalf of an organisation to fulfil its missions [8]. This definition proves the shaping of public perception, and the relationship

building with key stakeholders of an organisation is crucial among the public relations profession.

2.1.1 Public Relations Functions and Purposes

The field of public relations is often misunderstood, in terms of its purpose and functions. In one study [9], the results generated were alarming, in which limited understanding on what is done by practitioners in the public relations field, among public relations majors itself, undermines the credibility of the profession. The purposes of public relations as according to the four models by Grunig and Hunt are: press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetric, and two way symmetric models, are identified to be either 'persuasion' or 'mutual understanding'. [5] supported the recurring interpretation of public relations' purpose as 'controlling publics', whereby public relations is persuasive by nature. Furthermore, the public relations purpose of achieving mutually beneficial or rewarding relationships concurred with [7].

Unlike public relations purposes, public relations functions are not end goals, but are means whereby a given objective is achieved [5]. As the public relations profession encompasses a number of roles, several functions of public relations are identified. Essentially, public relations as a management function was adopted by many scholars. Besides, public relations is frequently considered to adopt an image-making or image-building function, or tasked with protecting organisational reputation [10]. However, public relations functions are affected by environmental and societal factors, thus, the functions identified may vary between countries. In [11, p. 25], as compared to developed nations, public relations in third-world countries functions "as a receptionist and/or communications agent". This means that at an organisational level, practitioners play minor functions as information gatekeepers, whereas at a macro level, practitioners would communicate with the public to achieve certain goals through persuasion on pertinent issues and publicising achievements.

The definitions of public relations describe the various functions of public relations and the responsibilities performed by public relations practitioners. In order to perform well, practitioners are required to acquire the knowledge, skills and capabilities which provide a novel framework to understand the potential of the professional and the profession [12]. In particular, the capabilities refer to "ongoing learning, adaptation, critical thinking, and creativity and innovation to meet continually changing environments and challenges… the latest Global Alliance capabilities framework represents a step in this direction, public relations and communication researchers, educators and industry leaders…called for and in many cases continue to advocate technical skills and competencies as the core of public relations and communication management education and training" [13, p. 11].

2.2 Capabilities of Public Relations Practitioners

Primarily, capabilities focus on the development of qualities, abilities, capacity, and potential to meet future needs of a profession as a practitioner [2]. Capabilities as a concept incorporates Knowledge, Skill and Abilities (KSAs), competencies, as well as competency and competence, thus, constituting a meta-level [13]. Although capabilities

are often used interchangeably with competencies; both are manifestations of human abilities and skills. According to [2], the subtle difference between capabilities and competencies is that capability is essentially the term to describe how an individual has the capacity to fulfil a role, but lacks the necessary competencies to thrive completely. [1] stated that competencies refer to particular sets of KSAs required by an employee for a defined role. Moreover, competencies are behavioural sets tailored towards attaining organisational objectives that are required by employees to ensure the organisation's success [14]. Therefore, KSAs and competencies in public relations and communication management places focus on practitioners' actions according to their role necessities, such as the required knowledge and skills utilised in achieving organisational objectives. As competencies are an essential component in determining the capabilities of an individual, the constant improvement and development of skills required by public relations practitioners is vital.

As the public relations field evolves, the skills that are expected of a public relations practitioner to strategically communicate changes accordingly. According to multiple studies [15–17] to identify the professional skills deemed important by public relations employers, good written and verbal communication skills were often emphasised. In line with technological advancements, public relations practitioners should also possess additional technical skills such as social media skills [16, 17], and achieve competence in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) as a twenty first-century public relations practitioner [15].

Gaps were found in the expected skills, competencies, and knowledge of public relations professionals and what practising practitioners actually possess. Although the importance of various skills required by a public relations practitioner were identified, the development of capabilities in those areas are not prioritised. The research [1] shows that although social media and social networks were identified to be important channels for communication by practitioners in Asia-Pacific, only a small percentage of practitioners claimed to have 'very highly developed' capabilities, yet an even larger percentage claimed to have 'low' or 'very low' capabilities in utilising these channels. Moreover in [18], some participants stated that in terms of ideal competency that senior communicators should have, some exceeded expectations whereas others demonstrated deficiency within the organisation. These findings pose the question as to why public relations practitioners are yet to fulfil expectations on the required skills and competencies, despite having management focus on the development of capabilities. According to [13], the identified gap in capabilities of public relations practitioners poses a challenge for industry organisations and service providers involved in the professional development of communication practitioners. Therefore, studies undertaken to inform a capabilities framework for public relations and communication professionals is a necessity to provide specific insights into the capabilities required in the field of public relations and communication management for today and into the future.

2.3   Global Capabilities Framework (GCF)

Due to a lack of an attendant global benchmark so that public relations practitioners can share a common understanding of their current roles and duties [1], a two-year study produced a new approach to building capability via a four-stages research process - Global

Capabilities Framework (GCF). Research towards the development of the GCF for the public relations and communication management profession involves public relations practitioners, academics and employers from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the United States [19]. In all participating countries, individual country-specific capability sets were generated through three stages. The research started off with the use of Delphi method, whereby professionals reviewed their opinions of the professions' capabilities anonymously, over a number of rounds. To ensure its effectiveness, a survey was then distributed to a large population with the help of national professional bodies to gauge the differences among preferred capabilities in different regions, if any. To discuss the potential uses and practical value of the framework, final focus groups or individual interviews were conducted. Upon the collection of results, the GCF was then developed, consisting of 11 core capabilities grouped into three areas: communication, organisational and professional capabilities [19]. According to [20, para. 1], the communication capabilities refer to contribution by practitioners as communication professionals "to align communication strategies with organisational purpose and values; identify and address communication problems proactively; conduct formative and evaluative research to underpin communication strategies and tactics; and communicate effectively across a full range of platforms and technologies." The other pillars of GCF consist of organisational capabilities which refer to the contribution made by professionals towards their organisations; and professional capabilities which refer to capabilities that showcase professionalism.

To the best of our knowledge, only one study [21] conducted a pilot study based on the GCF which aimed to explore the perceptions of senior academics and industry leaders in the field of public relations and strategic communication of the assumptions and application about GCF within the South Africa context. The findings revealed "a limited awareness of the GCF but unequivocally confirmed the relevance and value of the framework and its contribution to both the academic and industry practice. Although many of the participants indicated an awareness of GCF, it was evident that a strategic communication mindset is required when the principles of the framework are applied within their respective contexts" [21, p. 138].

Deriving from the literature review on public relations, capabilities of practitioners, and the GCF, further exploration on the use and relevance of the framework by public relations professionals is needed, due to the current limited literature in regards to the GCF. Thus, this paper aims to answer two research questions.

1. What is the understanding of public relations practitioners on the Global Capabilities Framework?
2. What is the perception of public relations practitioners on the communication capabilities of Global Capabilities Framework?

3   Research Methodology

A qualitative interview was selected for collecting the data for this paper. The targeted participants are public relations practitioners, residing in Malaysia. In line with the Covid-19 pandemic and the procedures of movement control order, online interviews were held through Zoom upon receiving confirmation from participants through email.

The interview questions were created to gain perspective on public relations professionals towards having a shared set of capabilities that define the public relations profession as a whole, and whether the GCF is of relevance in their daily practices. The questions were further guided by each pillar of the GCF, its core capabilities, and its sub-capabilities. The participants would firstly be asked general questions such as if they are aware of the GCF, their perception of GCF and their own personal capabilities to practise, as well as their opinion on having a shared set of capabilities for the profession. Other questions asked are: What is your opinion on the value of applying GCF as an individual, organisation and profession, at a national, regional and global context? To what extent does GCF affect the capabilities of professionals in your respective industry and country? How do you reflect your own capabilities and do you constantly engage in change in public relations?

Subsequently, participants were also asked about each pillar of the GCF with in-depth questions that are in accordance with the core and sub-capabilities. These questions were successful in drawing insightful answers as participants freely shared their perception, stories, and experiences.

All interview sessions were recorded for transcription purposes with prior consent from the participants. The 12 participants were made up of ten males, with experiences in the industry ranging from 3–24 years, and two females, with up to 11 years of experience. The data collected from the interview was manually analysed through three phases of thematic analysis method. During the first phase, answers for each question were summarised into coding and themes. Next, participants' responses were then analysed and compared during the second phase. The thematic analysis method ends with the compilation of themes that answer the two research questions.

4 Findings and Discussion

The first two themes identified from the interviews were the awareness of GCF and the value of applying GCF in public relations practices. These themes help us recognise the state of understanding of GCF in the Malaysian context. Furthermore, the third theme on the communication pillar identifies the perception of practitioners towards the communication capabilities of GCF.

4.1 Awareness of GCF

During the interviews, when asked if participants were aware of the GCF framework, mixed reactions were obtained. Some participants mentioned that they have heard of GCF, but were mostly unaware of what it entails, whereas other participants claimed that they are not aware of this framework. Perceptions towards GCF among six participants who are aware of the framework were mostly neutral. Two participants highlighted that the listed capabilities are things that practitioners would already be practising unknowingly, and that capabilities are not always as straightforward. The only negative perception is consequent to the framework's lack of popularity. The following excerpts show the comments from Participants 3 and 8 about their awareness of GCF.

It doesn't mean one rule for all, but it is good to have aspirational benchmarks. (Participant 3)

My experience is that there is no one global framework. If you go to different PR associations and professional bodies, they all have got, you know, sort of like laundry lists of best practices. This is just one of many laundry lists. (Participant 8)

Moving on, the perceptions towards having a shared set of capabilities that defines the public relations profession as discussed by two participants who do not have prior knowledge of GCF were neutral; nevertheless, one participant was quite supportive of such a framework (Participant 12). Three excerpts of the interview with Participants 9, 10 and 12 are as follows:

Every single client, or situation, requires different sets of responses and technical skill sets. To have a universal framework, it depends on what the framework is trying to regulate or outline. (Participant 9)

Having a framework is fine, when it should not be very prescriptive. The beauty of what we do is that we don't have one certain way of doing things. It's very much customised for each situation. So it's good, but it really depends on how it is implemented. (Participant 10)

Overall it's quite a positive thing to have because it's just another tool that helps with employee satisfaction, as well as you know, just harmony within the team and understanding within the team. (Participant 12)

Overall, the participants of this study demonstrated limited awareness of the GCF which concur with [21]. Those participants who were aware had little knowledge about GCF, therefore, this paper served as an impetus for future opportunities and further exploration about the value of GCF in Malaysia or within the Southeast Asia region.

4.2 Value of Applying GCF in Practice

The value of GCF was observed through participants' opinion of applying GCF as a practitioner, as well as the extent in which it affects their capabilities. Among the six varied responses by participants towards the value of applying GCF, three mentioned that it is helpful to have a framework as guidance and reference, but it largely depends on the context as every client requires different responses. For example, Participant 10 reinstated: *"If a framework tells you what to do, then there's no value. It defeats the whole purpose and the value that PR brings, communications brings."* One of the participants also offered suggestions towards improving the framework in terms of expanding clients' base. The following excerpt shows the critique of Participant 12.

I don't think this necessarily does much for the clients, seems to be very much focused on the staff and the employers. This can help you develop better relationships with them (clients) or better ways of managing them, but it doesn't really do anything in the sense of getting to explore new clients or get to meet new clients. So I feel like that's a big chunk that's missing. (Participant 12)

Apart from that, participants were generally pessimistic towards the extent in which GCF affects the capabilities of public relations professionals in the industry. The participants felt that experience and creativity are more crucial in guiding the professionals towards the best approaches, in comparison to applying GCF which is referred to as a theory or regulation. Participants 9 and 7 provide their views about GCF and capabilities of public relations professionals.

Theory will only get you so far and every situation teaches you differently, and a PR agency has to react appropriately and in their own creative ways to add resources. (Participant 9)

In later stages, I feel like the regulations are considered important. But in the initial stages, it's best to just let our thoughts flow. (Participant 7)

Although only a handful of participants revealed the benefit of GCF as a guide or reference for public relations practices; many criticised its usefulness in the practice of building relationships with clients or innovative strategy planning. This finding is consistent with the study of [21] which found a limited application of the GCF although public relations practitioners recognised the value and importance of having such a framework.

4.3   Communication Capabilities

The last theme derives from the interviews is the communication capabilities of GCF in which four participants shared their perception about having a good understanding of clients' goals and needs in ensuring communication strategies are aligned with organisational purpose and values. Good communication and having an efficient team ensures the effectiveness of a communication plan. Participants 2 and 7 commented on achieving communication objectives which aligned with clients' goals.

Once you establish that clear communication with them (clients), you're able to understand what they need, and then set a path and set some strategies and tactics on your end, to kind of achieve those goals. (Participant 2)

There's multiple roles in the organisation, for anything to be effective, there are certain roles in certain departments to take care of that. (Participant 7)

Next, a recurring opinion of participants towards identifying and addressing communication problems proactively was the significance of being up-to-date on the happenings within the industry, and having a well-rounded team. For example, to identify opportunities for designing communication and core content, Participant 7 stated: *"It's about what's happening recently, if any touch point of the audience or the viewer is interested in, we'll focus on that."* Participant 10 had a similar viewpoint: *"You have to be connected to the world which applies to clients. Again, for the consulting purpose, you have to always be in the space of the client."* On the other hand, to develop an integrated communication operation, Participant 2 stated *"It's all about bringing all of that under one roof. I guess how you would do that is basically try and develop a team with varying skill sets."*

In addition, we found a mixed reaction from the participants towards conducting formative and evaluative research underpinning communication strategies and tactics. Although participants acknowledged that they are in a better position to make decisions when thorough research is done, it largely depends on the budget (as according to Participants 2 and 10). The evaluation systems measure the impact of communication and are deemed necessary by four participants; it is the element that determines success and provides opportunity for improvement.

Lastly, in the aspect of effective communication across a full range of platforms and technologies; there was a consensus among the participants that communication channels largely depend on the budget of the clients and what clients are aiming to achieve. Participant 10 stated: *"It goes back to what you are trying to achieve because different plans force a different way"*.

5   Conclusion

This study was exploratory in investigating the understanding of GCF amongst public relations practitioners in Malaysia, as well as their perceptions towards the communication capabilities of GCF. The findings of this paper revealed that the awareness of GCF in Malaysia is currently lacking, and the GCF framework is yet to be applied in the public relations practices although the practitioners recognised its value and potential. Besides, most of the communication capabilities listed within the GCF are relevant and have been practised by practitioners despite being unaware of the framework. Thus, this paper serves as an initial effort towards understanding the relevance of GCF from a Malaysian context. Future research can be directed towards examining the perception of public relations practitioners in Malaysia towards the two other pillars of GCF, which are organisational and professional capabilities of GCF, as well as examining the understanding and perception of educators towards GCF in the Malaysian context.

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