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From: Tera Blackham  
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Re: Empirical Research Report

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## A Career in Public Relations

### Introduction

The purpose of this report is to help technical writing students discover what it takes to become a public relations specialist. Typically, when people think of technical communicators, they think of people who write user manuals for complicated machinery or computer software. This is not always the case. I want to explore a career that focuses on a completely different view of communication, one that requires personality and public involvement.

In this report, I will present job responsibilities within public relations, including communication, documentation, and daily tasks. I will reveal job requirements, focusing on the skills and preparation necessary to enter and succeed in this field. Then, I will discuss the job outlook relating to career opportunities, advancement, and salary figures. My goal is to help students gain enough insight into public relations to determine whether or not a career in this field would interest them.

### Method of Obtaining Facts

As a starting point, I consulted chapter one of *The Practice of Technical and Scientific Communication* by Jean A. Lutz and C. Gilbert Storms. This book gives valuable information regarding careers in technical communication. Chapter one (pp 1-27) focuses on technical writing in a business-related industry, including public relations.

The Bureau of Labor and Statistics researches information relating to labor and economics for the Federal Government. I referred to the Bureau's Occupational Outlook Handbook (2006-07 Edition) and website to find up-to-date information regarding salaries, the nature of public relations, the typical working conditions, necessary training, and qualifications.

For my primary research, I interviewed two people who work in the public relations field. Nile Easton works for the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) as a Senior Public Information Officer. He has worked in public relations for over ten years and has had experience in government and non-profit organizations. He also works closely with several public relations agencies. Lorraine Richards works for Baker Engineering as a Project Manager. One aspect of her job is public involvement. She has over 25 years of experience in public involvement relating to transportation and environmental issues. The combined knowledge and experience of Easton and Richards give great insight and information regarding the preparation and expectations within the public relations field.

To discover what experiences and requirements companies expect of their employees, I surveyed five job listings in several different career fields and locations. I found the following job listings on the International Association of Business Communicator's website (www.iabc.com):

<u>Job Title</u>	<u>Industry</u>	<u>Location</u>
• Public Relations Officer	Medical School	Stanford, California
• Public Relations Manager	International Security	Alexandria, Virginia
• Communications Trainer	Public Relations Agency	Seattle, Washington
• Public Relations Specialist	Internet / E-Commerce	Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
• Marketing Communications Intern	Computer Software	Minneapolis, Minnesota

## **Results**

The information I found on this topic is divided into three main categories: job responsibilities, job requirements, and job outlook.

### ***Job Responsibilities***

The primary responsibility of a public relations specialist is to build and maintain positive relationships with the public while representing the company for whom he or she works. They also inform the public about specific issues or products created by their company (Bureau 2007).

As a Public Information Officer for UDOT, Nile Easton describes his job as somewhat chaotic and unpredictable. Easton handles media inquiries, writes press releases, manages public relations contracts with other agencies, generates newsletters, writes speeches, and creates presentations. He portrays a specific message to the public through newspaper, television, and web media. Easton refers to himself as an "information junkie." He must know everything that is going on in the media. The first thing Easton does each morning when he gets to work is read the newspaper. He reads both local and national papers and determines whether or not any of the information he has read affects UDOT. He says that gaining information is imperative because "everyone assumes [he] know[s] everything." The media often determines Easton's work schedule. He must always be available to answer questions or handle a crisis. Working overtime is to be expected. Easton explains that there are few people who can handle the chaos within this career. At times it can be a thankless job, but the unpredictability sometimes brings with it a rush of adrenaline.

Lorraine Richards is responsible for public involvement regarding large road construction projects. She communicates to the public what is being done and how it will benefit them, then answers any questions they may have. One of her responsibilities is creating and maintaining a website and a telephone hot-line where members of the community can turn to receive answers to their questions. Like Easton, Richards makes sure a specific message is portrayed regarding the construction project. She also writes and distributes monthly newsletters and fact sheets, prepares weekly progress reports, and creates presentations. Her job requires her to understand people and resolve conflicts.

The responsibilities of a public relations specialist vary from job to job, depending on the industry. Creating print material is required in nearly every industry. These materials include:

- Press releases
- Newsletters
- Fact sheets
- Reports
- Proposals
- Media briefs
- Speeches
- Brochures
- Letters

Public relations specialists have many duties, aside from creating documentation. According to the Occupational Outlook Handbook, they may:

- Attend or conduct meetings
- Create presentations
- Plan activities
- Conduct research
- Deliver speeches
- Design websites
- Set up speaking engagements
- Organize presentations
- Develop business plans
- Maintain contacts
- Answer questions

### ***Job Requirements***

Employers look for many requirements when hiring a public relations specialist. The first thing that Easton looks for is a degree in journalism, communications, public relations, or a similar field. Next, he looks for experience with computer software and the media. Different companies use different software, but proficiency with a computer and knowledge of applications such as Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Outlook, and Excel are imperative. Besides the basic business applications, an applicant should have knowledge of web authoring, graphics design, and database design software (Bureau 2007). Working with the media differs from job to job. Easton works with the media daily and looks for applicants with strong experience in journalism. All public relations specialists must have excellent writing skills and strong editing skills. Not all jobs require journalistic writing, but knowledge of a professional writing style is helpful. Some employers require an applicant to have some previous knowledge or training in a specific field related to the firm's business, such as medicine, engineering, or education. This is especially true for management and upper-level positions. Even in entry-level positions some previous experience is necessary. This experience can typically be gained through internships (Bureau 2007). Many employers require a portfolio containing examples of the applicant's previous work. This can show off the applicant's abilities in design, writing, and creativity.

All of the skills listed above will get an applicant in the door for an interview. At that point, an entirely different set of skills must be demonstrated. Easton said that when interviewing a public relations applicant, he first looks for personality and chemistry. He wants someone who gets along well with fellow employees and will portray his company in a positive way. According to the job listings used for this report, an applicant must be self-confident and creative and must demonstrate

good interpersonal skills, initiative, and excellent listening skills. He or she must also have the ability to:

- Communicate effectively
- Learn quickly
- Make decisions
- Work under pressure
- Motivate others
- Pay attention to detail
- Resolve conflicts
- Handle several tasks simultaneously

### ***Job Outlook***

According to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, there are not enough entry-level jobs within public relations to employ the number of new college graduates. Companies are unwilling to hire anyone who lacks previous experience. Easton stated that of the 44 students from his graduating class and major, only seven have remained in the public relations industry. The first few years will be the most difficult. To gain necessary experience a student must be willing to take an internship, often with little or no pay (Bureau 2007). Students who cannot afford to make such a sacrifice will find it nearly impossible to find a career within this field. Easton states that because the first few years can be so difficult, many public relations specialists look for temporary work in another field. They are then unable to gain the experience they need and it becomes extremely difficult to find work within public relations. There are, however, quite a few jobs available for those with previous experience. Public relations specialists will find that with five or more years of experience, the job opportunities dramatically increase. Employment in public relations, especially referring to management, “is expected to grow faster than average for all occupations through 2014” (Bureau 2007). Easton believes that someone who is truly talented and can trudge through the first few years will advance quickly in their career and will have the potential to make a lot of money.

There are a wide range of salaries within the public relations field. The Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2006) lists the average salary for a public relations specialist at \$53,760 per year. According to Easton, the lowest paying jobs are typically found in the non-profit sector, starting around \$25,000 per year. Government jobs start off with better pay, around \$45,000, but top off around \$80,000. For jobs with salaries over \$100,000, Easton recommends looking into the private sector. The Bureau identifies the following as the top paying industries for this occupation: petroleum and coal manufacturing, the postal service, the federal executive branch, semiconductor and electronic component manufacturing, and natural gas distribution (2006). Within these five industries, the annual salary for public relations specialists range from \$71,720 to \$132,650. It is important to note, however, that there are only a handful of public relations specialists required in these industries.

There are many other industries that need many public relations specialists. Those that hire the most public relations specialists in the United States include advertising; business and political; education, namely colleges and universities; and the local government. Within these industries, a public relations specialist can expect a salary between \$42,000 and \$60,000 (Bureau 2006).

### **Summary**

Not everyone is cut out for public relations. It requires someone who loves working with people and can handle stressful situations. This career is appealing to those who prefer to be in the spotlight and

enjoy an adrenaline rush from time to time. Because some public relations jobs are unpredictable, a person looking into this career must be able to adapt to any situation. It is important to remember that public relations specialists must often work with people who are unhappy and must, therefore, be skilled in conflict management.

Excellent writing and editing skills are extremely important within this field. A public relations specialist must be able to create many forms of documentation. A career with a focus in the media requires considerable experience in journalistic writing. Knowledge of computer applications is imperative for designing websites, presentations, and all forms of documentation.

Previous experience is mandatory for gaining employment in public relations. Remember that the number of upper-level and management jobs within this field is growing, but entry-level jobs are extremely difficult to find and are very competitive.

## **Career Plan**

To be properly prepared for a career in public relations, you should earn a degree in journalism, communications, public relations, or a similar field. A degree in professional writing will work but be sure to present yourself as a professional writer within this field rather than a technical writer. This is due to the common misconception of employers that technical writers only write manuals. Then be sure to minor in public relations or journalism.

Create a portfolio displaying your creativity and talent with written documentation. Consider writing for your school newspaper to gain more journalism experience. Your work for the school newspaper can then be added to your portfolio.

Consider taking the following courses:

- Conflict management
- Journalism
- Professional writing
- Public Relations
- Editing

Be certain to have a strong understanding of the following computer applications:

- Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Excel, and Outlook
- Graphics design software
- Web authoring software
- Database design software

The most important thing a student can do for his or her career in public relations is to work as an intern. A successful internship within a related field will determine the future success of any public relations specialist.

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