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# THE 2017 IPR AND PRSA REPORT:

KSAs and Characteristics of  
Entry-Level Public Relations  
Professionals

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Institute for Public Relations and the Public Relations Society of America conducted a study of 386 entry-level professionals in public relations to better understand their level of knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as their attitudes toward professional development opportunities. The report explores two areas that have received much attention in business and psychological literature but have rarely been applied to public relations: emotional intelligence and grit.

## FINDINGS INCLUDE:

### **Entry-level professionals identified having advanced levels of knowledge in multiple areas of writing.**

Entry-level professionals rated themselves high in terms of writing ability, critical thinking, and public speaking. This contradicts some of the research that finds professionals rate the writing skills of entry-level professionals as low (see Appendix). On the other hand, entry-level professionals rated research capabilities such as research instrument design and environmental scanning as low. Surprisingly, results relating to skills and abilities of social media platforms for business use were mixed; some touted an advanced level of knowledge while others rated their skills as low.

### **Entry-level professionals need to improve their business skills and ability to apply theories.**

Entry-level professionals need to be able to apply business acumen, including financial literacy, to their everyday job responsibilities. Professionals should also be seeped in theories to help understand attitudes and what drives behavior. On the other hand, entry-level professionals scored themselves high in terms of action-oriented skills and abilities, including creating content and managing projects/events.

### **Professional development support improves retention.**

More than three-quarters of respondents said their employer's funding (or lack of it) is a significant factor in their decision to stay at their organizations over the next year. Entry-level professionals are willing to learn new skills if employer pays. Nearly all respondents said they are willing to learn new skills if their employers paid for all or part of their training. The most cited training sources included graduate school, online education courses, YouTube, and volunteer work.

### **Female entry-level professionals rated themselves higher than men on their level of grit.**

Women rated themselves grittier than men, meaning they rated themselves higher on their ability to work strenuously toward challenges despite failure, adversity, and lack of progress. Overall, both male and female entry-level professionals rated themselves lower compared to other studies.

### **Of the factors relating to emotional intelligence, entry-level professionals rated themselves lowest in "emotionality."**

"Emotionality", or the ability to perceive emotion and express emotions, was the weakest factor that entry-level professionals rated themselves on in terms of emotional intelligence. Individuals with lower scores on this factor find it difficult to recognize their internal emotional states and to express their feelings to others.

# INTRO

As the public relations industry evolves in this rapidly changing and complex environment, understanding the knowledge (K), skills (S), and abilities (A) of entry-level professionals is critical. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2015, the 16-to-24 and 25-to-34 age groups will make up nearly 24 percent of the labor force in 2024. Knowing the gaps of entry-level professionals is beneficial to planning professional development programs and helps organizations better prepare for industry changes. In 2016, the BLS reported the median tenure of workers (10.1 years) ages 55 to 64 was more than three times that of workers ages 25 to 34 years (2.8 years). Identifying strengths and weaknesses aids long-term growth and retention of talent.

IIPR and PRSA partnered to survey entry-level public relations professionals in the first five years of their career to better understand how they merge their education with their on-the-job experience as well as professional development opportunities. This report also explores two areas that have received much attention in business and psychological literature, but have rarely been applied to public relations: **emotional intelligence** and **grit**.

# KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES

One of the most extensive sources for the knowledge (K), skills (S), and abilities (A) of public relations professionals is the **Global Body of Knowledge** (GBOK) project by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management. Dustin Manley and Jean Valin analyzed 31 global credential schemes, educational frameworks, and scholarly articles to create a comprehensive list of KSAs for entry and mid/senior-level, public relations practitioners. **These KSAs lay the foundation for this analysis.** For a complete discussion and past research concerning KSAs, please see the Appendix.

## KNOWLEDGE

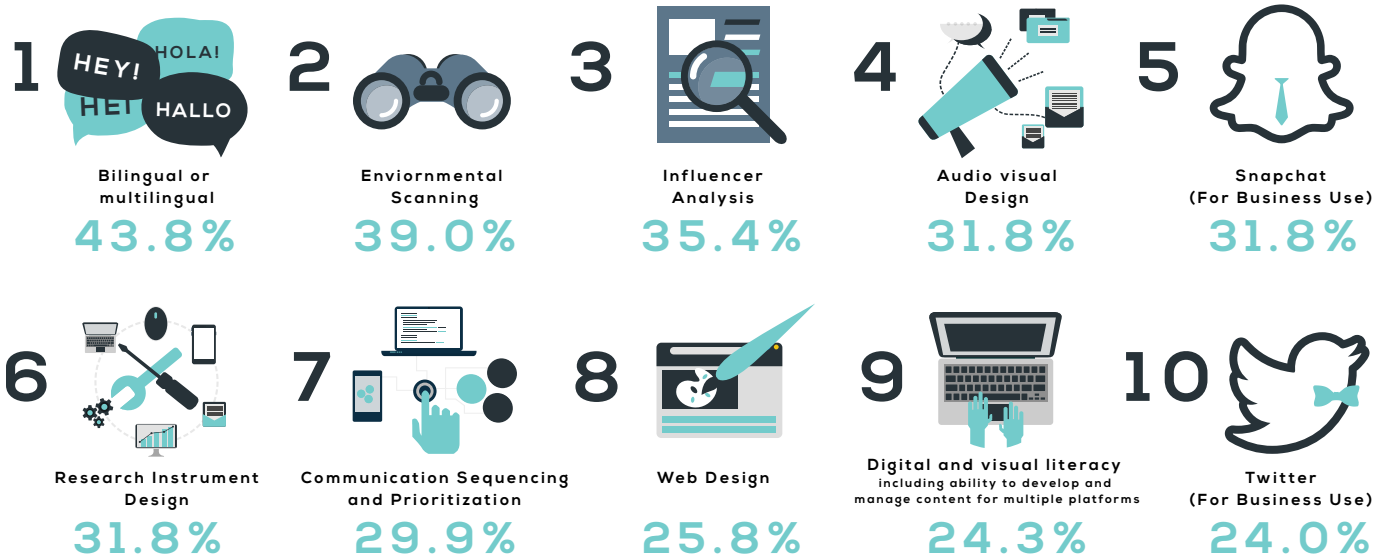
Respondents were provided with a list of 44 Knowledge areas and asked to rank them in terms of their own level of expertise: no knowledge, fundamental awareness, intermediate, advanced, and expert. **We identified the top 10 areas where respondents demonstrated they had no/limited knowledge or advanced/expert knowledge** (see Table 1 and 2).

Results indicate specialized areas were the key places where respondents demonstrated a lack of expertise. Technological design was mentioned three times: **mobile, web, and A/V**. In several research components, respondents lacked more than a fundamental level of awareness, including research instrument design, influencer analysis, and environmental scanning. These aforementioned areas **may require more training and experience for users to become more proficient**. Nearly a quarter of respondents also noted gaps in their ability to pitch to the media, manage Twitter for business use, and manage relationships with external stakeholders.

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that self-report surveys may provide inflated results in terms of the respondents' ability to perform a task. Please see the Appendix for studies demonstrating how respondents may be overconfident in their KSAs.

**TABLE 1: TOP 10 LOWEST RANKED AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE**

Percent of respondents reporting “no knowledge” and “fundamental awareness”

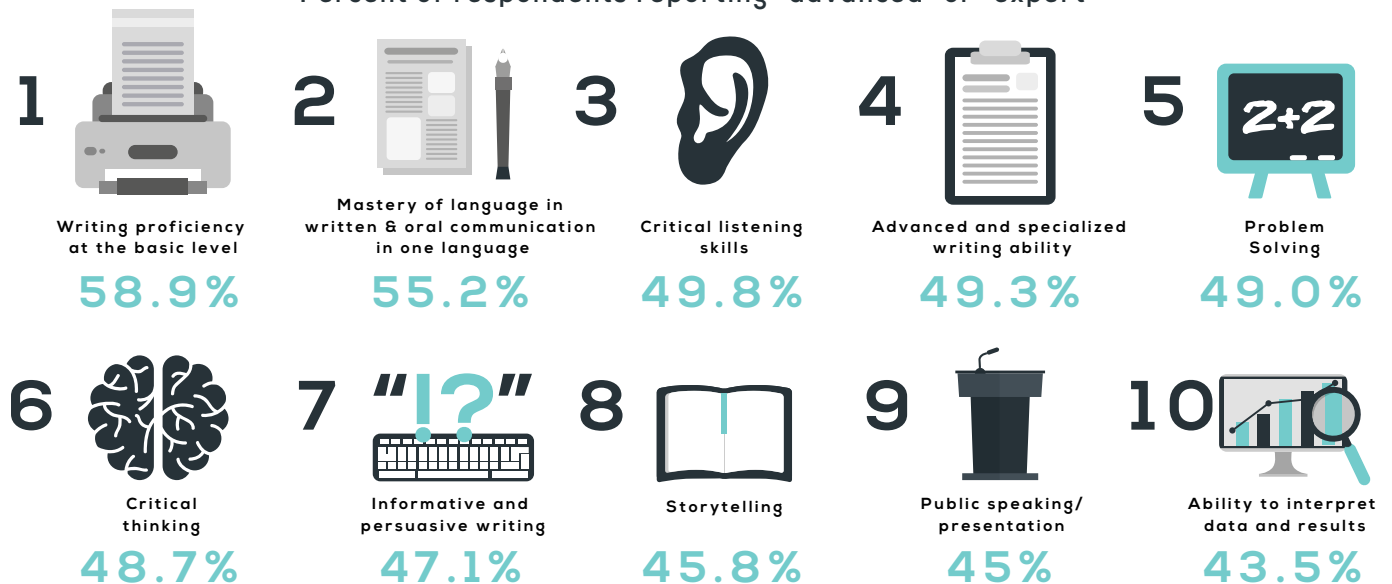


Surprisingly, writing showed up four times in terms of respondents’ level of expertise. **Nearly half of all respondents** said they, at a minimum, have an “advanced” level of expertise in several areas of writing, including: informative and persuasive writing; advanced and specialized writing; mastery of oral and written communication in one language; and proficiency of writing at the most basic level. Additionally, respondents rated their ability to solve problems, think critically, and listen as high.

**More than 40 percent of respondents said they had an advanced knowledge of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, respectively, for business use.** Fewer people (35%) recognized an advanced level of expertise using Snapchat for business use. Nearly 40 percent recognized their advanced level of knowledge in strategic planning, social media measurement, and content curation.

**TABLE 2: TOP 10 HIGHEST RANKED AREAS OF KNOWLEDGE**

Percent of respondents reporting “advanced” or “expert”



# SKILLS AND ABILITIES

Respondents were provided with a list of **34 skills and abilities** and asked to rate their own level of expertise on the following scale: no knowledge, fundamental awareness, intermediate, advanced, and expert. **We identified the top 10 areas where respondents reported they had no/limited knowledge or advanced/expert knowledge** (see Table 3 and 4).

Gaps in skills and abilities were evident in the results. Deficiencies in business aspects such as legal and financial were indicated by more than **30% of respondents**. Theory was also a needed area of improvement. Other areas that more than a quarter of respondents said they no had awareness or only had a basic awareness of were integrated communications, crisis management, audience segmentation, and global issues.

## TOP 10 LOWEST RANKED SKILLS & ABILITIES



## TOP 10 HIGHEST RANKED SKILLS & ABILITIES



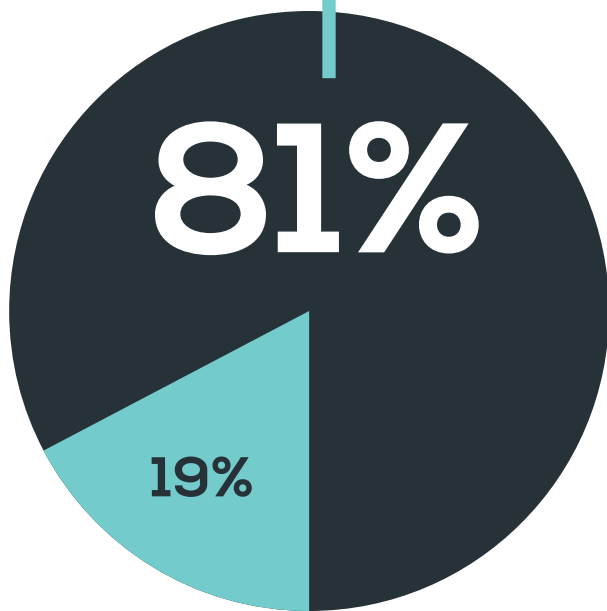
The areas that respondents seemed to have the highest level of skills were **content creation and event management**. Data analysis, qualitative research methods, ethics, brand management, and internal communication were other noteworthy areas. **One-third** of respondents also indicated integrated communications, client management, and marketing were also areas where they had a high level of expertise.

# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

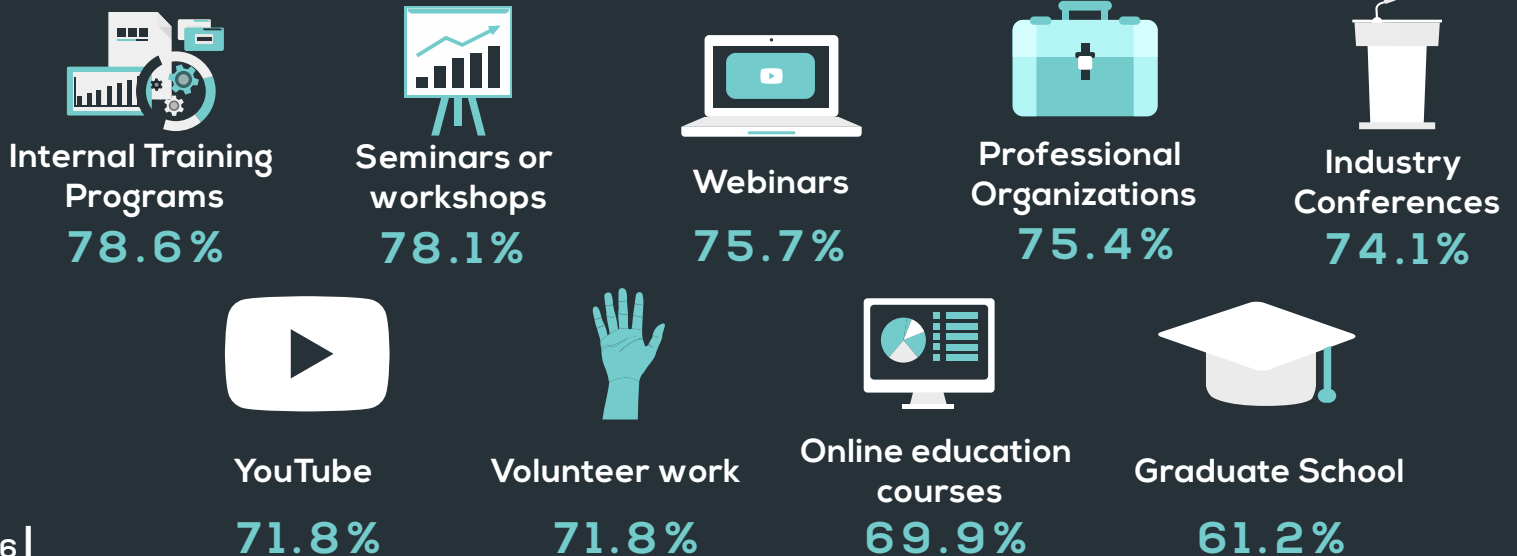
Overwhelmingly, respondents said the degree to which their employer funded professional activities was a significant factor in their retention over the 12 months. The majority of respondents also reported paying out of their own pocket for new training programs. Nearly all respondents said they would be open to learning new skills if paid for by their employer. Respondents also identified the most popular methods for closing the gaps in their KSA deficiencies with internal training programs and seminars/workshops being the most popular.

**TABLE 5**

**Said their employer's funding (or lack of it) is a significant factor in their decision to stay at their organizations over the next year**



Percent of respondents who were willing to close their KSA gaps using the following methods:



# GRIT

**Grit is defined as perseverance or passion for long-term goals.** According to Angela Duckworth and her colleagues, grit “entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007, p. 1088). A gritty individual stays committed in good times and bad. For a full discussion and research related to Grit, please see the Appendix.

This study asked respondents to self-report their level of grit using Angela Duckworth’s grit scale. The results indicate that public relations professionals with fewer than five years experience were found to be less gritty compared to previous studies conducted by Duckworth and her colleagues. However, there were statistically significant differences based on the sex of the respondents.

**Women were found to be grittier (M = 3.41) than men (M = 3.17).**

**TABLE 6**

SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS	SAMPLE SIZE	MEAN	SD
<b>THIS STUDY: PR Professionals with ≤5 years exp</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>3.32</b>	<b>0.53</b>
Study: Adults aged 25 and older (convenience sample of web respondents in 2004)	690	3.41	0.67
Study: Ivy League undergrads	138	3.46	0.61
Study: National Spelling Bee Finalists	175	3.50	0.67
Study: Adults aged 25 and older (convenience sample of web respondents 2006)	1,545	3.65	0.73
Study: West Point cadets in Class of 2008	1,218	3.65	0.53
Study: West Point cadets in Class of 2010	1,308	3.75	0.54

This chart compares the PR professionals to other respondents of studies conducted by Duckworth et al. Note: Means are based on a 1 to 5 scale, 1 = not like me at all to 5 = very much like me.



# EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Psychologist Daniel Goleman who first introduced the term “**emotional intelligence**” to a mass audience contends that truly effective leaders should have a high degree of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Goleman (2014) says that EI is the “key attribute that distinguishes outstanding performers from those who are merely adequate” (1). He found emotional intelligence and measurable business results were **highly correlated**. Researchers at Sam Houston State University suggest emotional and social intelligence training is **essential** for preparing professionals to function effectively with teams, leadership, and complex issues (Sigmar, Hynes, & Hill, 2012).

To test emotional intelligence, this study used the Trait Emotional Intelligence (EI) questionnaire (TEIQue-short form). According to Petrides (2009), the premise of the theory is based on four factors: **emotionality, self-control, sociability, and well-being**. The theory is that when individuals who perceive themselves as emotionally capable (emotionality), they tend to also believe they are socially capable (sociability), have more willpower (self-control), and are better adapted overall (well-being). For more research about EI and a thorough description of each of the factors, please see the Appendix.

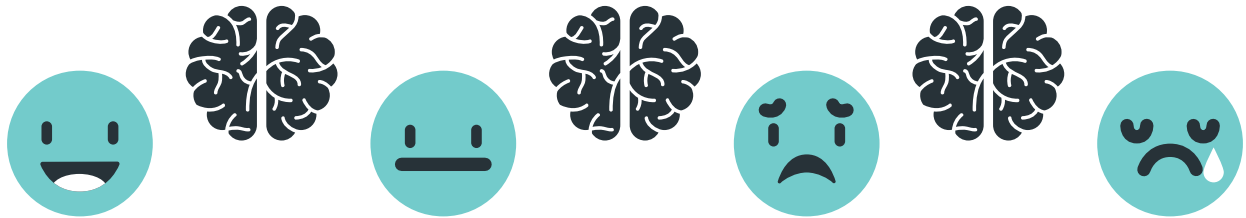
**TABLE 7**

<b>TEIQUE – SF FACTOR</b>	<b>MEAN</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>RANGE (LOW TO HIGH)</b>
<b>Self-control</b>	<b>3.55</b>	<b>0.43</b>	<b>3.07-4.05</b>
<b>Sociability</b>	<b>3.50</b>	<b>0.51</b>	<b>2.96-4.15</b>
<b>Well-being</b>	<b>3.71</b>	<b>0.77</b>	<b>2.60-4.34</b>
<b>Emotionality</b>	<b>3.18</b>	<b>0.64</b>	<b>2.60-4.19</b>
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.49</b>	<b>0.62</b>	<b>1.50-5.00</b>

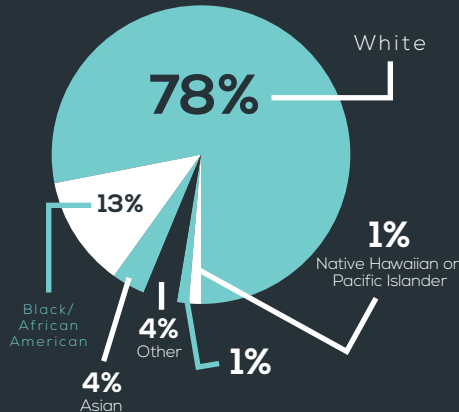
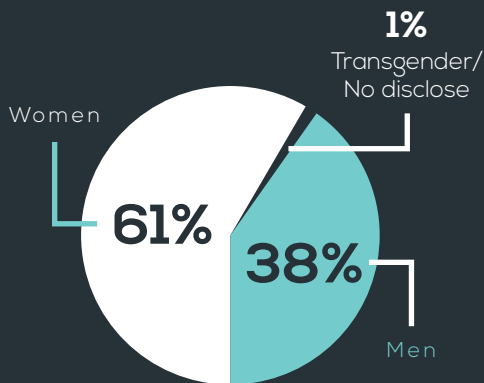
This chart compares the PR professionals to other respondents of studies conducted by Duckworth et al. Note: Means are based on a 1 to 5 scale, 1 = not like me at all to 5 = very much like me.

# EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND GRIT

A Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the amount of **grit** an individual has and their **emotional intelligence**. There was a moderately strong, positive linear relationship between the two variables ( $r = .630, p = \leq .05$ ), meaning grit is strongly related to emotional intelligence.



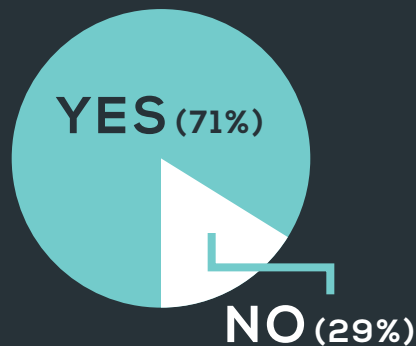
## DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN



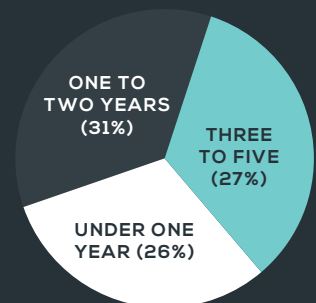
PRSSA	30%
ON-CAMPUS STUDENT MEDIA (NEWSPAPER, RADIO STATION, ETC.)	41%
ON-CAMPUS STUDENT PUBLIC RELATIONS AGENCY	25%
BATEMAN COMPETITION	4%

ASSOCIATION/NONPROFIT	17%
CORPORATION	19%
EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION	11%
GOVERNMENT/MILITARY	4%
INDEPENDENT PRACTITIONER	5%
PR AGENCY/CONSULTANCY	9%
PRODUCTS/SERVICES TO PR INDUSTRY	5%
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES	17%
OTHER	13%

ARE YOU ACTIVE IN GROUPS OUTSIDE OF PRSA?



HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN AT ORGANIZATION?



# FINDINGS

**1** Entry-level professionals identified having advanced levels of knowledge in multiple areas of writing.

**2** Entry-level professionals need to improve their business skills and ability to apply theories.

**3** Professional development support improves retention.

**4** Female entry-level professionals rated themselves higher than men on their level of grit.

**5** Of the factors relating to emotional intelligence, entry-level professionals rated themselves lowest in “emotionality”, or the ability to be in touch with their own and others' feelings.

# APPENDIX

# KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES

Few studies have investigated the qualities of entry-level professionals, with most focusing on Millennials or students. Since 1975, the Commission on Public Relations Education, has presented recommendations on public relations education to colleges and universities about what courses to teach and programs to offer to help prepare students for the profession. The 2006 Professional Bond Report recommended **a minimum of five courses** that should be required in the public relations major: Introduction to Public Relations, Public Relations Research, Public Relations Writing, Internship, and an additional course in law and ethics/planning/case studies/ or campaigns. The Commission will launch a new report at the end of October 2017.

Danny Paskin (2013) surveyed public relations practitioners about the necessary skills of graduating students, and found **writing skills placed first**, followed by strategic thinking and good communication skills. However, research has also found that public relations professionals still complain that graduates lack basic writing skills (Lane & Johnston, 2017).

A 2017 survey by **Plank Center for Leadership and the Institute for Public Relations** found sharp differences between Millennial Communication Professionals (MCPs) and their managers on workplace factors, values, and attributes. In fact, **83 percent** of Millennial Communication professionals said they were ambitious about making progress, while only **52 percent** of their managers said the same about MCPs. Similarly, 83% of MCPs said they were passionate about their work while only 48 percent agreed with that statement about MCPs. Additionally, **62 percent of MCPs said they were attracted to their organization because it offered opportunities for growth and development**; the managers rated this similarly.

A similar pattern of the divide between MCPs and their supervisors was found in a 2014 survey by Vicki Todd. Millennial entry-level employees self-reported their job performance was exceptional, and rated their professional characteristics in the above average range. However, acceptance of criticism, oral communication, and research skills were rated in the average range. It should be noted that supervisors rated the MCPs as **significantly poorer in 75% of the job skills** and all the 16 professional characteristics. However, it should be noted that many studies, including the aforementioned, demonstrate one of the challenges of self-report surveys; respondents may be overconfident in rating their own level of expertise and performance concerning their KSAs.

# GRIT

Grit is defined as **perseverance or passion for long-term goals**. According to Angela Duckworth and her colleagues, grit “entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007, p. 1088). **A gritty individual stays committed in good times and bad.**

However, some studies have found a cost to persistence in that **some grittier individuals may persist for longer than necessary rather than to quit** (Lucas, Gratch, Cheng, & Marsella, 2015).

Education, rather than intelligence or age, has been found to be directly related to the presence of grit. Older individuals tended to have more grit than younger individuals, indicating that grit may be fluid (Duckworth et al., 2007). Another note is that while grit may be related to other variables, such as work ethic, it is distinctly different (Meriac, Slifka, & Labat, 2015).

**Grit is the ability to focus on long-term goals over years**, regardless of challenges individuals may face. Two dimensions of grit include: consistency of interests (maintaining focus until a goal is completed) and perseverance of efforts (persistence toward goal when facing obstacles). In 2014, scholars found that the measure of grit corresponds to persistence across a range of life contexts. For example, the study found grittier individuals were less likely to drop out of their respective life commitments, both personally and professionally (Eskreis-Winkler, Duckworth, Shulman, & Beal, 2013). Research has tested the importance of grit in areas such as the military, professions, marriage, and education.

**Grit is not necessarily related to practice or time spent in the field.** Malcolm Gladwell in his 2008 book *Outliers* contends 10,000 hours of “deliberate practice” helps individuals become world-class in any field. However, this may not be the case. A meta-analysis of 88 studies found differences in an individual’s performance are not necessarily related to “deliberate practice” (Macnamara, Hambrick & Oswald). When “professions” were isolated, only 1% of variance is explained by deliberate practice compared to other areas, such as 26% in gaming and 21% in music. The authors specific abilities may explain some of the variance that deliberate practice does not. Therefore, **spending more time in a position does not necessarily make you “world-class” or grittier in that position.**

# EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Psychologist Daniel Goleman who first introduced the term “**emotional intelligence**” (EI) to a mass audience contends that truly effective leaders should have a high degree of EI: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill. Goleman (2014) says that EI is the “**key attribute that distinguishes outstanding performers from those who are merely adequate**” (1). He found emotional intelligence and measurable business results were highly correlated. Researchers at Sam Houston State University suggest emotional and social intelligence training is essential for preparing professionals to function effectively with teams, leadership, and complex issues (Sigmar, Hynes, & Hill, 2012).

In one of the few public relations-related studies, Austin and Jin (2015) contend that high EI is manifested in sensitivity, empathy, and compassion, and is required when communicating with stakeholders in emotion-laden events.

Considerable research has demonstrated the benefits of having a high level of EI, and that it provides the basis for social and emotional skills that are needed for most jobs (de Haro & Castejón, 2014). EI allows people to **cope with life stressors and work difficulties** (Laborde, Dosseville, Guillén, & Chávez, 2014; Siegling et al., 2015), and has an impact on overall career adaptability (Coetzee & Harry, 2014). Additionally, EI has served as an important predictor of coping with task-induced stress (O’Connor, Nguyen, & Anglim, 2017).

To test EI, this study used the Trait Emotional Intelligence (EI) questionnaire (TEIque-short form). It should be noted there are criticisms of self-reporting as well as the ability to measure a form of “intelligence” (Petrides, 2009), which is why the TEIque focuses specifically on EI as a trait. Additionally, critics have contended that emotional intelligence cannot accurately be measured (Petrides, 2009). The premise of the theory is that when individuals who perceive themselves as emotionally capable (emotionality), they tend to also believe they are socially capable (sociability), have more willpower (self-control), and are better adapted overall (well-being).

**Petrides defines these four factors of emotional intelligence as follows (p. 10):**

### **SELF-CONTROL:**

High scorers have a healthy degree of control over their urges and desires. In addition to controlling impulses, they are good at regulating external pressures and stress. They are neither repressed nor overly expressive. In contrast, low scorers are prone to impulsive behavior and may find it difficult to manage stress. **The reliability scores using Cronbach's alpha for this dimension was 0.64.**

### **SOCIABILITY:**

This factor differs from the emotionality factor above in that it emphasizes social relationships and social influence. The focus is on the individual as an agent in social contexts, rather than on personal relationships with family and close friends. Individuals with high scores on the sociability factor are better at social interaction. They are good listeners and can communicate clearly and confidently with people from diverse backgrounds. Those with low scores believe they are unable to affect others' emotions and are less likely to be good negotiators and networkers. They are unsure what to do or say in social situations and, as a result, they often appear shy and reserved. **The reliability scores using Cronbach's alpha for this dimension was 0.62.**

### **WELL-BEING:**

High scores on this factor reflect a generalized sense of well-being, extending from past achievements to future expectations. Overall, individuals with high scores feel positive, happy and fulfilled. In contrast, individuals with low scores tend to have low self-regard and to be disappointed about their life as it is at present (p. 10). **The reliability scores using Cronbach's alpha for this dimension was 0.51.**

### **EMOTIONALITY:**

Individuals with high scores on this factor are in touch with their own and other people's feelings. They can perceive emotion and express emotions and use these qualities to develop and sustain close relationships with important others. Individuals with low scores on this factor find it difficult to recognize their internal emotional states and to express their feelings to others, which may lead to less rewarding personal relationships. **The reliability scores using Cronbach's alpha for this dimension was 0.81.**



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## METHODOLOGY

Participants were recruited from Qualtrics and the PRSA membership. Respondents included 386 full-time communication/public relations professionals with five years or less experience. The study was completed from January to May 2017. The margin of error associated with this level of reporting is +/- 5% at a 95% confidence level.

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