

Essential Career Skills for Public Relations

A student's choice of a major in college is important, but equally important is participating in campus clubs, taking internships, and even working part-time at jobs that develop essential skills for a successful career in public relations. The essential skills are (1) writing skill, (2) research ability, (3) planning expertise, (4) problem-solving ability, (5) business/economics competence, and (6) expertise in social media.

1. Writing skill. The ability to put information and ideas onto paper clearly and concisely is essential. Good grammar and good spelling are vital. Misspelled words and sloppy sentence structure are unacceptable. The importance of writing skill is emphasized in a career advice column in *Working Woman*: "I changed careers, choosing public relations as having the best potential, but found it difficult to persuade employers that my writing and interpersonal skills were sufficient for an entry-level job in the profession."

2. Research ability. Arguments for causes must have factual support instead of generalities. A person must have the persistence and ability to gather information from a variety of sources, as well as to conduct original research by designing and implementing opinion polls or audits. Too many public relations programs fail because the organization does not assess audience needs and perceptions. Skillful use of the Internet and computer databases is an important element of research work. Reading current newspapers and magazines also is important.

3. Planning expertise. A public relations program involves a number of communication tools and activities that must be carefully planned and coordinated. A person needs to be a good planner to make certain that materials are distributed in a timely manner, events occur without problems, and budgets are not exceeded. Public relations people must be highly organized, detail-oriented, and able to see the big picture. Caryn Alagno, vice president of Edelman Worldwide, adds, "Pay attention to details . . . and when it comes to the 'small stuff,' make sure you treat all tasks like a big deal."

4. Problem-solving ability. Innovative ideas and fresh approaches are needed to solve complex problems or to make a public relations program unique and memorable. Increased salaries and promotions go to people who show top management how to solve problems creatively.

5. Business/economics competence. The increasing emphasis on public relations as a management function calls for public relations students to learn the “nuts and bolts” of business and economics. According to Joel Curren, senior vice president of CKPR in Chicago, “The greatest need PR people have is understanding how a business and, more importantly, how a public company operates.” Rachel Beanland, a professional interviewed by Public Relations Tactics, noted that almost all of the recent public relations grads she talked to wished they had taken a marketing course. In sum, students preparing for careers in public relations should obtain a solid grounding by taking courses in economics, management, and marketing.

6. Expertise in social media. Employers still value expertise in mainstream media relations, but it’s now just as important to have social media savvy. A survey of employers by online MarketingVOX found 80 percent of the respondents agreed that knowledge of social networks is either important or very important. The three most important skills for job applicants are social networking, blogging, and tweeting. Employers also prefer job applicants who know about podcasting, search engine optimization (SEO), e-mail outreach, Web content management, and social bookmarking. It should be noted, of course, that all jobs in public relations don’t require all these essential skills in equal proportion. It often depends on your specific job responsibilities and assignments.

Students should not only know how to use social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter, but also how to apply critical thinking to the selection, implementation, and evaluation of such tools in achieving client or employer goals (Commission on Public Relations Education).

Do You Have the Right Personality for a Career in Public Relations?

Take a look at this checklist. How many of the personality traits do you have? Check each item that you think accurately describes you. If you check fewer than 15 of the 25 items, a career in public relations may not be the best fit for you. If you check 20 or more, then such a career may fit you like a hand in a glove.

Do you have a good sense of humor?

Are you generally positive and optimistic?

Is it easy for you to meet people?

Do you consider yourself “friendly”?

Do you converse easily with most anyone?

Do you handle rejection and frustration well?

Are you able to easily persuade people?

Do you present yourself professionally?

Do you maintain a well-groomed, businesslike appearance?

Are you a showman?

Do you like creative endeavors?

Would friends describe you as considerate and tactful?

Are you a skilled wordsmith?

Are you able to gain and maintain the trust of your boss?

Do you like being with people?

Are you a good listener?

Do you like solving problems for people?

Do you consider yourself curious or interested in a variety of subjects?

Do you enjoy reading on diverse subjects?

Do you have a determination to bring projects to completion?

Are you a high-energy person?

Do you deal well with emergencies or crises?

Do you view mistakes as a way to learn?

Are you good at being factual and objective?

Are you respectful of others' points of view?

Do friends think you're perceptive and sensitive?

Are you a quick learner?