Canadian public relations students’ interest in government communication
An exploratory study
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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to determine Generation Y communicators’ interest in government communications.
Design/methodology/approach – This paper outlines the results of a descriptive quantitative survey conducted with 39 students and recent public relations graduates at Calgary, Canada’s Mount Royal University.
Findings – The results from the small, purposive sample confirm some assumptions employers have about Generation Y and challenge others. The results identify key themes requiring future research.
Research limitations/implications – The research is limited in its sample size, but is not meant to be representative. It is a purposive, exploratory study that provides valuable insight into future research.
Originality/value – The paper sheds further light on this important topic and fills a gap in the research specific to Generation Y government communicators, offering valuable insight into the recruitment and retention of Generation Y staff in Canadian governments.

Keywords Government, Public relations, Communication, Recruitment, Retention, Generation Y, Canada

Paper type Research paper

The importance of government communication for a democracy cannot be overstated. In fact, Lee (2008) cites it as being integral to public administration. If government communication is important then so too are government communicators. In democratic nations one of the main links between the state and its people is government communication (Fairbanks et al., 2007). In Canada, government (provincial, national, municipal) employs more communicators than any other industry (Government of Canada, 2010), and as such, is an important target audience for communication scholarship. A major challenge facing government communicators is recruitment and retention of younger staff, those under the banner of Generation Y. According to a 2006 study there are more than 70 million Americans who fit the age requirements for Generation Y and they account for more than 20 percent of the overall workforce (Spiro, 2006). By 2020, it is estimated that 40 percent of the US workforce will be made up of Generation Y employees (Human Capital Institute, 2008). In British Columbia, its government communications arm is facing a future staffing crunch, with just 12 percent of employees under the age of 30 (Human Resource Management Plan, 2007/2008). Currently in governments across Canada, there is a shortage of government communicators from Generation Y. The Government of Canada is having numerous policy discussions on the topic:
In 2000, the ratio of labour force entrants to departures was 10 to 6 in Canada; after 2015, it is predicted that the ratio will shift to eight entrants for every ten departures – resulting in an under-supply of younger workers (Public Service Commission, 2009).

Before examining the issue of Generation Y in government communication within Canada, it is pertinent to put Generation Y into context. There is much debate on when certain generations start and end, but for the purpose of this study the date ranges from Canadian researcher Tapscott will be used. According to Tapscott there are three generations of working age: Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964); Generation X (born between 1965 and 1976); and Generation Y (born between 1977 and 1997) (2009). The oldest member of Generation Z or the next generation, according to Tapscott, would be currently 16 years-of-age (born 1997-present). The term “generation” stems from sociologist Mannheim and is defined as people “who share a common habitus” (Morgan and Ribbens, 2006).

**Context**

There is much past and recent scholarly work on government communication (Lee, 2008; Garnett, 1992; Grunig, 1997; McCamy, 1939). The topic of Generation Y in the workforce has been covered extensively in academic journals and books (Tapscott, 2009; Bauerlein, 2008; Bosco, 2005; Arsenault, 2004; Vyncke, 2002; Florida, 2009). Canadian governments have studied the need for Generation Y in the workforce (Public Service Commission, 2009) but not specific to the communication function.

Anecdotally, there is widespread belief that Generation Y is less interested in politics and government than previous generations – voting data supports this. In Canada’s 2008 federal election 78.3 percent of people over 18 reported that they voted. When broken down to those aged 18-24 the number who reported that they had voted is just 55.9 percent (Statistics Canada, 2011). These statistics can be misleading however, as only 58.8 percent of eligible voters and 37 percent of the 18-24 demographic actually voted in the 2008 election (Statistics Canada, 2011), meaning there is a disconnect between the number of people who reported voting versus the number of people who actually voted[1]. However, based on census data and self-reporting on voting, there has been a steady decline of the youth vote (18-24, 25-29) for the past three decades (Parliament of Canada, 2010). It is worth noting, even if some members of the younger generation do not vote, data supports that they are indeed engaged in politically related activities. A survey done in Canada found that just under 60 percent of people in their twenties had voted in at least one election immediately preceding the survey, well below the average of other age groups:

However, young adults are just as likely as older age groups to engage in alternative activities. In the year prior to the survey, about 58 percent of those aged 22 to 29 engaged in at least one non-voting political activity, virtually the same proportion as that among people aged 30 to 64. The report notes that researchers have suggested various reasons that young adults are not as likely to go to the polls. Among them are questions of motivation, marginalization from mainstream politics and a lack of relevance (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Bauerlein (2008) argues that youth are not interested in civics or politics and data confirms this (Levine, 2007; Pryor et al., 2006). The data also shows that when youth are offered a real chance of being involved in civic engagement, specifically cause related movements, they become interested (Youniss, 2009). Cox’s (2010) survey of youth voter disengagement in British Columbia and Canada offers additional support to
this research. Cox engaged young people in focus groups and branding exercises to get a sense of what voting messages resonate with youth and why. She found that the tactics and strategies being used by government bodies, such as Elections Canada and Elections BC, did little to encourage young people to vote:

Unfortunately, rather than taking advantage of youth’s knowledge as subjects of expertise, the focus on deficits (of knowledge, of moral character, of dispositions) is likely to result in a continued understanding of youth in deficient terms, while the material and cultural effects of the current context in which they live – including the creative, innovative aspects of today’s much-discussed experiential shifts, which might be integrated into our (faltering) political system – receive little or no attention (2010, pp. 154-155).

As evidenced by the work of Tapscott (2009), engaging Generation Y has indeed become an important topic of research in Canada. Governments are also changing – not necessarily as a result of Generation Y – but because of new technologies that make public reporting easier and more efficient. This too may prove to be appealing to prospective Generation Y employees in the future. The push to make governments more electronic is a means of making government more efficient and better equipped to deal with new technologies, and could be seen as a means to allow Generation Y to use their existing knowledge, skills and understanding to become valued members of the workforce. Some, like Gladwell (2011), argue that social media gives the illusion of participation without substance. Chadwick and May (2003, p. 273) use a similar argument when addressing the delivery of e-government:

We conclude that the democratic potential of the internet has been marginalized as a result of the ways in which government use of such technology has been framed since the early 1990s. An executive-driven, “managerial” model of interaction has assumed dominance at the expense of “consultative” and “participatory” possibilities.

Even Canada, once a leader in e-government delivery, has seen its share of challenges:

According to the four criteria (cost reduction, accessibility, retrieval, and security), the Government of Canada, although it has made valiant strides to make e-government in Canada a universal reality, has not yet been able to achieve the full potential for online government (Fraser, 2009).

Canadian political scientist Small (2011) has reviewed new information technologies in relation to political engagement and has found, specifically with Twitter hashtags, that online conversations are not two-way and are asymmetrical. She concludes that Twitter hashtags are a useful dissemination tool, but less effective for dialogue.

Words like “managerial” appear in a negative light in relation to governments; terms like “participatory” and “consultative” remain yet to be realized ideals – something that may have an impact on appealing to Generation Y. In Convergence Culture, Jenkins (2006, p. 256) argues that the convergence of new information technologies is “enabling new forms of participation and collaboration” but that these new forms exist alongside – and do not replace – the power of the state. Bennett (2008) believes there are two ways to approach youth in politics – the disengaged youth paradigm where we chalk up their failure to engage in the system to technology or the engaged youth paradigm, where we use the tools they use to engage them in collaboration.

Lastly, it is imperative that we examine some of the assumptions scholars have about Generation Y, as this will help frame the data in the subsequent discussion. The defining characteristic of Generation Y, according to Tapscott (2009, p. 17), is that they have grown up with computers and are the “first generation to be bathed in bits”. Lipkin and
Perrymore (2009, p. 16) state: “This generation is multi-talented, over-stimulated, socially aware, demanding and resourceful”. Others, like Bauerlein (2008), are not as generous, dubbing the generation the dumbest ever. Of course, none of these authors reside under the parameters of Generation Y, perhaps leading to “gencentrism” or the belief that their generation is the best and brightest (Lipkin and Perrymore, 2009, p. 17). Cameron (2005) studied first year undergraduate students at Australia’s Charles Sturt University and found that they were not yet fully digital natives, lacking in web design and digital video editing skills in addition to resisting web-based learning.

In Managing the Millennials the authors heard stories from employers of Generation Y such as: they do not care about customers, if you correct them they quit, and they want a trophy just for showing up (Espinoza et al., 2010). The authors identify nine orientations for Generation Y: autonomous, entitled, imaginative, self-absorbed, defensive, abrasive, myopic, unfocused and indifferent (2010). In the same book, and this is consistent with other research, Generation Ys’ believe they are not defined by their job, they are very optimistic about their futures and they want critique delivered in a friendly way (2010). The authors note that Millennials tend to have high perceptions of themselves – they feel they work better and faster than others. This assumption is confirmed in research by Berry et al. (2011) where they found younger, entry-level public relations (PR) staff across the USA and Canada rated their writing skills – almost across the board – higher than their supervisors did. According to Benko and Weisberg (2007), Generation Y values challenging and interesting work over pay. Lipkin and Perrymore mention that this generation is self-inflated, creating problems for management. This is underpinned, according to the authors, by getting trophies for tenth place, a feeling that they can do anything they want, and ultimate protection from helicopter parents who are ready to swoop in and shift the blame off of their children (Lipkin and Perrymore, 2009).

According to Tapscott (2009, pp. 35-36), there are eight defining characteristics of Generation Y:

1) They want freedom in everything; 2) They love to customize, personalize; 3) They are the new scrutinizers; 4) They look for corporate integrity and openness when deciding where to work; 5) They want play and entertainment in their work, education and social life; 6) They are the collaboration and relationship generation; 7) They have a need for speed, and; 8) They are the innovators.

This is a polarizing scholarly debate and one that is in its infancy, at least on an academic timeline. I will attempt to approach it and view it the way Strauss and Howe (1991, pp. 17–18) did landmark publication, Generations: “[…] you will learn, as we have, how every generation has its own strengths and weaknesses […] but our object here is less to judge than to understand”.

Questionnaire

This paper sets out the results of a descriptive study (based on a quantitative electronic survey). In the spirit of Grimes and Schulz (2002), it identifies trends and forms a reasonable hypothesis for future research, but does not present data that can be used as any type of predictor for larger populations or that is representative of larger populations. To that end, the sample is purposive (Hansen et al., 1998) and exploratory, aiming to collect data from a small sample that could later be compared against other similar samples. Data will be presented for the entire sample and then broken down between those entering year 3 of Mount Royal University’s (MRU)
PR program, those entering year 4 of the same program and recent graduates (the November 2010 class) of the MRU applied degree program[2].

The research question I set out to answer is: What aspects of government communication appeal to MRU PR students who fall under the Generation Y banner? Those who decided to participate in the survey were asked 48 questions – from Likert-scale questions, to ranking questions, to polar questions requiring a yes or no answer. The remainder of this paper will focus on select themes that are prevalent in the survey, including: PR sector of choice, personal abilities and those required in government, role and function of government, punishment and reward in the workplace, public service values and students’ opinion of government communication. Questions relating to the nature of government work and government values were informed by the work Glor (2001), Perry and Wise (1990) and Vakil (2009). Questions specific to personal skills in PR were designed based on the work of Wilcox and Cameron (2011).

Method
The survey was available between March 28 and April 24, 2011. Students selected for this anonymous survey were full-time PR students at MRU who were to enter third and fourth year, respectively, (as of September 2011) and the most recent graduates of the PR program at MRU (applied degree students convocating in November 2011). An e-mail was sent to 52 students entering their third year of study producing a response from ten students (a 19 percent response). The same email was sent to 52 students entering their fourth year of study producing a response from 18 students (35 percent). And finally, an email was sent to 39 recent graduates evoking a response from 11 of them (28 percent). This group of students was selected over first or second year students because their ideas and values around the ideal workplace would be more developed due to the nature of the sequenced curriculum. Overall, 39 out of a possible 143 students and recent graduates responded for a mean average of 27 percent. This sample is small, purposive and by no means representative but it gives a good indication of how a group of students and recent graduates at MRU feel about working in government communication. Given the small sample size, care is taken in the analysis; however, the research is valuable in that significant themes are visible and will prompt future research.

Data was collected using TooFAST (2011), a Calgary-based company that allows for anonymous online surveys of students. Using an online survey was an appropriate way to engage with the Generation Y audience because it preserved anonymity and because the survey was not meant to be applied to the general population, which can often be an issue with online data collection (Best and Harrison, 2009). The data was analyzed using statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). The survey was anonymous and students were free to leave the survey at any time without any risks or consequences.

Characteristics
All respondents were born between 1977 and 1997 and therefore part of Generation Y (Tapscott, 2009). Little data were collected in the way of background information about the respondents to ensure the researcher could not identify specific students based on the responses. This was a critical element due to the instructor/student relationship and the possibility of teaching some of these students again in the future. Questions pertaining to race, ethnicity, birthplace and gender may have produced interesting results but would have jeopardized student anonymity.
95 percent of the respondents (37) indicated they had a grade point average (GPA) between 3.0 and 4.0 (MRU is on a standard 4.0 grid). The remaining 5 percent, or two respondents, indicated they had a GPA of between 2.0 and 3.0. Research has shown that self-reported GPA is reliable and consistent with actual GPA (Cassady, 2001) so it would appear that the survey was responded to by many of the top students in the MRU PR program. While this would be a concern in a representative, probability sample, it is less so in this smaller, purposive sample. Having the best students respond is, arguably, beneficial for government, as its goal is to recruit and retain the best and the brightest. Ten of the 39 responses, or 26 percent, came from students entering the third year, 18 of the 39 responses (46 percent) from fourth year students and the remaining 11 responses were from the most recent graduates (28 percent).

Students and recent graduates were asked about their level of comfort with new technologies (Web 2.0 applications, smart phones), specifically their level of agreement with the statement “When it comes to the use of new technology, I would generally describe myself as very skilled and knowledgeable.” 37 of the 39 (95 percent) were in agreement or strong agreement with that statement.

Students and recent graduates were also asked if they were working a part-time or full-time job (again, between March 28 and April 24, 2011). 33 of the 39 respondents (85 percent) indicated they were working; six said “no” they were not working a part-time job (15 percent). This is consistent with other studies, including a 2006 Australian study that found 71 percent of full-time university students working part-time (James et al., 2007). Respondents were asked if they thought PR should be part of the decision making arm of government instead of acting simply as advisors to government – 100 percent of respondents (39) agreed with this (not surprising because they are all educated in PR and this is an integral part of PR education in North America). Also not surprising given the PR curriculum at MRU is that 33 of the 39 students (85 percent) and graduates interviewed chose two-way symmetrical (28) or two-way asymmetrical (5) as their first choice for most “professional” PR model[3]. Government has historically been operating under a one-way information or press agentry model (Grunig and Jaatinen, 1999; Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Pollack, 1984) which may be one of the barriers to engaging Generation Y, especially those educated in PR. Furthermore, when asked which model they would most want to work under, 32 of the 39 or 82 percent who responded to the survey chose two-way symmetrical (28) or two-way asymmetrical (4).

Values are also important to the students and graduates surveyed with 27 of 39 (69 percent) saying they would quit a higher paying job to take one more aligned with their values. Students and recent graduates were unanimous when it came to rewards and punishment in the workplace with 100 percent (39) agreeing that you should be rewarded when you do good work frequently and 100 percent (38) agreeing that you should be punished when you do poor work repeatedly. Where they differ is in how rewards and punishments should be delivered (Tables VI and VII).

Results and discussion
Of the 39 students, 33 surveyed said they were currently working a full or part-time job. Of that group, 39 percent (13 of 33) said the need to be productive motivates them most in their current job, with the need to make money a close second (11 of 33, or 33 percent). When it comes to their first PR job out of school, a question for the sample
as a whole, 33 percent (13 of 39) said the need they will be fulfilling most is the need for money, followed closely by the need to be mentored (11 of 39, or 28 percent).

The need to stay in a place for a long-time is not great. Students and recent graduates were asked to rate their level of agreement with the following statement: When it comes to my first PR job out of school, it is important it is a place I can stay for at least five years. Once you remove the 17 respondents who chose “neither agree or disagree,” 15 of the remaining 22 (68 percent) said they strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. Seven out of 22 (32 percent) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Another question of note looked at creativity versus money with students and graduates being asked to rate, on a Likert-scale, this statement: when it comes to my first PR job out of school, I would value the ability to be creative over the need for high pay. Once the six respondents who chose “neither agree or disagree” are removed, the result is a strong majority of agreement, with 22 of 33 (67 percent) strongly agreeing or agreeing and 11 of 33 (33 percent) disagreeing.

**PR sector of choice**

Table I shows 16 of the 39 (41 percent) respondents choosing “publically traded company” as their first choice for employment. Government only garnered three of 39 first place votes (8 percent). It is worth noting, however, that MRU is a Calgary, Alberta-based university where the majority of PR graduates end up working in the oil and gas sector. The oil and gas sector dominates the local economy with little in the way of government offices. Had the survey been done in a city with a government-driven economy like Ottawa, Ontario or even Victoria, British Columbia, the results may have been different. Though, as will be outlined later, even though government was not the number one sector chosen, a majority of PR students sampled at MRU said they would still consider working in government.

**Personal abilities and those required in government**

Table II outlines the top three personal abilities according to each of the students and graduates surveyed; Table III asked students and graduates the same questions, but specific to the importance of those abilities in a government communication role. In both cases, writing received very high scores, which will be welcome news for the people who have studied PR writing in North America (Berry et al., 2011). Behind writing, students and grads were most comfortable with creativity (32 total points) and working in teams (30 total points). When it comes to what is most important in a government role, writing ranked second behind political literacy which had 50 total points; third was business

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Entering year 3</th>
<th>Entering year 4</th>
<th>Recent grad</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonprofit</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publically traded company</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table I. Which sector of PR would you most like to work in)

**Note:** This table represents the respondents’ first choice and is broken down by year of study.
literacy, receiving 31 total points. When assessing their own abilities in Table II, students and graduates had business literacy and political literacy at the very bottom of what they were comfortable with (four total points and five total points, respectively). MRU students and graduates gave creativity 32 points in total when assessing their own abilities yet creativity only received one total point when it came to importance in a government position. These findings suggest that future research in this area would add value to the discussion in which the following questions could be explored more fully: if students were more comfortable in the areas of political literacy and business literacy would they be more likely to choose a career in government PR? Furthermore, are business literacy and political literacy necessary for a career in government PR?

**Role and function of government**

Table IV represents students’ and graduates’ response to the statement: government plays a significant role in my life. Just three of 39 (8 percent) had no opinion, meaning...
36 of those surveyed felt something about this statement. Six of 10 (60 percent) students entering third year strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 17 of 18 (94 percent) of the students entering fourth year agreed or strongly agreed with the statement with the majority (13 of 17) strongly agreeing. Of recent graduates, eight were in agreement and three disagreed.

Research has shown that the nature of work in Canadian governments is shifting, though the changes may be slower and less seamless than those in the private sector. Glor’s (2001, p. 525) research shows that in the past, public service values “were commitment to the public interest or public good, public service, equality and due and fair process”. According to Perry and Wise (1990), the main motivation for a public servant was to make a difference. Recently, on both a provincial and national level, governments have shifted to the new public management (NPM) model (Glor, 2001). Vakil (2009) notes that the new values are a reaction to globalization, new technology, fiscal pressures, and customer demands. “Under the influence of the NPM, the focus has shifted to efficiency, flexibility, privatization, entrepreneurialism, customer service/satisfaction, and accountability for results” (Glor, 1994/1995 cited in Glor, 2001). Finding out where students and recent grads stand on this matter is outlined in Table V.

25 of 39 (64 percent) surveyed chose option B, the option more aligned with the NPM model.

Perry and Wise (1990) call this the economic model of behaviour. Glor goes farther: “incentives have been introduced to influence public servants – positively with rewards, negatively with punishment” (Glor, 2001, p. 525). This new model appears better suited to Generation Y students at MRU, and may be a positive step for government, at least according to the data collected from this small sample size. Positive and constant feedback has been a staple in the literature on Generation Y, as noted earlier.

Table IV.
Government plays a significant role in my life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Entering year 3</th>
<th>Entering year 4</th>
<th>Recent grad</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither agree or disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Likert-scale; split up by year of study

Table V.
Which statement best describes you

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Entering year 3</th>
<th>Entering year 4</th>
<th>Recent grad</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A) Public good, public service, equality, fair process</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B) Efficiency, flexibility, privatization, entrepreneurialism, customer satisfaction, accountability</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Choose A or B; split up by year of study
**Punishment and reward in the workplace**

Managing Generation Y is a popular topic, especially amongst older generations tasked with managing the younger group. Given the level of interest, it is imperative scholars and governments understand directly from Generation Y itself what works and what does not; this small sample is the beginning of that process. Table VI shows the incentives students and graduates of MRU’s PR program would look for as a result of doing good work repeatedly. An “increase in pay” is at the top of the list with 15 of 39 first place votes (38 percent) followed by “positive feedback from manager/boss” at 14 (36 percent). Interestingly, a “commitment from management” is not an important factor, with just one of 39 votes. Alternatively, when it comes to punishment for repeatedly doing work poorly (Table VII), students and recent graduates prefer routes that do not affect the bottom line, as both “pay cut” and “hours cut” received zero first place votes. The most popular forms of punishment for poor performance are “lectured by boss” with 16 of 39 votes (41 percent) and “put on work probation” with 11 of 39 (28 percent).

**Public service values**

Tables VIII and IX come as the result of work done by Vakil at the University of Victoria. She studied the BC Public Service’s changing values as part of her 2009 PhD dissertation. She assessed present and future values of the public service by interviewing current and former managers. Each subject was asked to select five values out of 34 that would be important for the present, and five that would be important in the future. According to Vakil, the list of 34 is based on work done by Dillman (2007), Dwivedi and Halligan (2003),

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Entering year 3</th>
<th>Entering year 4</th>
<th>Recent grad</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase in pay</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-time bonus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive feedback from manager/boss</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A commitment from management</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More freedom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table VI.** When you do good work repeatedly, which is the most appropriate reward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Entering year 3</th>
<th>Entering year 4</th>
<th>Recent grad</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work late/weekends</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put on work probation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved to another work unit</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less freedom</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectured by boss</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pay cut</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours cut</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table VII.** When you do poor work repeatedly, which is the most appropriate punishment

Notes: First choice; split up by year of study
Kernaghan (2007), Langford (2004) and Tait (1996). Table VIII shows the top five present and top five future value choices from a group of 11 former senior managers surveyed by Vakil and is based on Figure 5 in Vakil’s (2009, p. 169) study. Vakil’s (2009, p. 166) list of present values is based on an \( N = 54 \) (11 \( \times \) 5 options) because one of the 11 former senior managers selected a value not on the list; her list of future values is based on an \( N = 44 \) because “four former senior managers did not specify a complete array of ‘future’ values (one person mentioned one value, one mentioned two values, one mentioned three values, and one mentioned four values)”. As a result, Vakil (2009, p. 166) notes that any comparisons between present and future values “should be viewed with caution”.

The same questions Vakil used in her study were replicated in the MRU study as a means for a comparison. In the MRU case, 39 students were asked to give their top five present and future values for an \( N = 195 \) in each case. The tables report the percentages to make the comparison as fair as possible.

Comparing the data – even with the small sample size – makes for valuable discussion on the topic of present and future values among Generation Y and challenges some of the assumptions and preconceptions held by some members of older generations. When it comes to present values, only “accountability” and “leadership” appear in the top five of the Vakil and MRU student list. “Accountability” and “leadership” on the Vakil
list weigh in at nearly 4 percent (T3 on the top five); on the MRU list, “accountability” is the number one present value, with 17 percent. “Leadership” ranks fifth on the MRU list of present values at 7 percent.

The list of future values bears greater similarity with three of the same values represented in each list. The Vakil list has “accountability” at 9 percent (third on the list of five), followed by “effectiveness” and “transparency” in a tie for fifth at just under 7 percent. The MRU list has “accountability” at 14 percent (first on the list of five) followed by “transparency” at 10 percent and “effectiveness” in fifth at 7 percent. Interestingly, “integrity” tops Vakil’s list of present and future values but does not even register in the top five of either MRU list. Paradoxically, “accountability” is number one on both MRU lists by a wide margin (17 percent present, 14 percent future) but only registers at close to 4 percent in the present Vakil list and at 9 percent in the future. Other points of interest: “creativity” and “entrepreneurship” are mentioned in the top five of the Vakil study, but neither makes an appearance on the MRU top five lists – interesting given that these values are often associated with Generation Y as a whole, but perhaps might not be what Generation Y students at MRU think of when they think of government.

**Students’ opinion of government communication**

Question 25 on the survey asked students and graduates to rank a few different statements based on what they first think of when it comes to government communication. Their first choice is outlined in Table X. There are 11 categories to choose from – six are positive attributes, four are negative, and one – “strictly media relations” – is neutral given it could be positive or negative if you liked or disliked this area of PR. Of the responses given, 17 (44 percent) would fall under positive, 21 (54 percent) under negative and one under neutral (3 percent). “Dealing with constant approvals” and “decent long-term employment” were the top selection of round one, gaining nine of 39 votes each (23 percent). “Creativity”, “cutting-edge technology” and “covering up mistakes of politicians” each recorded zero votes. When looking at the top three responses from all 39 students and graduates, 18 of 39 (46 percent) chose two or more positive statements, one student was completely neutral (one positive, one negative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Entering year 3</th>
<th>Entering year 4</th>
<th>Recent grad</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excitement (+)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Functioning team (+)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to high quality mentors (+)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring (−)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strictly media relations (±)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with constant approvals (−)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of freedom as a communicator (−)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decent, long-term employment (+)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting-edge technology (+)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace culture not consistent with my values (−)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity (+)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table X.**

When I think of government communication I think of […] (rank the following)
and one neutral response) and 20 of 39 (51 percent) chose two or more negative statements in their top three. These responses are even more intriguing once we introduce question 48 of the survey (Table XI) which asks students and recent graduates if they would take a job in government PR. 13 of 39 (33 percent) said no and 26 of 39 (67 percent) said yes. Of those who said no to a job in government PR, 11 of the 13 (85 percent) selected two or more negative statements in their top three. Of those who said yes to working in government PR, 17 of the 26 (65 percent) chose two or more positive statements as part of question 25. Making government more interesting and relevant to Generation Y students at MRU would seem like a logical step in the right direction, especially if data from future studies supported the data presented here.

Conclusion

There has long been a disparity between the teaching of government and public administration and the practice of PR (Lee, 2008). Waldo (1992, p. 11) has called PR “a significant but neglected topic” in public administration. Furthermore, there has been a disconnect with teaching of PR and the practice, especially in government. The disconnect between vernacular and codified knowledge is not in the particular tactics used in government, of which there are many, but in overall strategy. Government, at least historically, has practiced the one-way information and press agentry models of PR (Grunig and Jaatinen, 1999; Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Pollack, 1984); students and graduates of PR programs, as shown in this study, prefer the two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical models of PR. With the evolution of e-government, specifically the opening of the feedback loop, the public service is slowly changing the way it does PR – moving to a model that should be more appealing to Generation Y moving forward.

Yes, this group of students and recent graduates selected “money” as the most important need they want to satisfy upon graduating, but it is worth noting that they selected “the need to be mentored” second, and mentorship is an area where government can attract Generation Y communicators. Also, the majority of students and graduates surveyed said they would value the need to be creative over the need for high pay.

One of the most interesting findings is that while students and graduates gave government high-praise as a place for “decent, long-term employment” (Table X) they also indicate they are not interested in long-term employment. Students were asked to rate their level of agreement with this statement: when it comes to my first PR job out of school, it is important it is a place I can stay for at least five years; removing the respondents who said “neither agree or disagree” of the remaining 22, 68 percent said they strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement.

Students and graduates rated government last on the list of PR areas they would like to work at out of school (16 of the 39 instead choosing “publically traded company” as their

<p>| Table XI. Would you want to work in a government communication role? |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enter year 3</th>
<th>Enter year 4</th>
<th>Recent grad</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Yes or no; broken down by year of study
first choice for employment). This is an area that requires further research, as it may or may not be a reflection of where the MRU program is based, i.e. results may have been different if the survey took place in an area with a more government-driven economy. Additionally, a majority of the sample still said they would work in government communication despite their preference for work within a publicly traded company. Nevertheless, there appears to be a need to better educate Generation Y PR students at MRU about government.

The data presented throughout this paper is very similar across year 3, year 4 and recent graduates of the MRU PR program. Two areas where there are differences are in the role government plays in the lives of students and recent graduates and whether or not they would want to work in government PR. In Table IV it was shown that 14 of the 39 (36 percent) students and graduates strongly agreed with the statement “government plays a significant role in my life.” Of these 14, 13 are from the group of students entering fourth year. This is noteworthy, because Table XI (would you want to work in a government communication role? Yes or No), reveals a similar pattern. Just 30 percent of those entering third year said “yes”, 64 percent of the recent graduates said “yes” while 89 percent of those entering fourth year said “yes”. These groups of students are, by and large, very similar. The only notable difference is in the courses they have had up until this point. The group of recent graduates is from the applied degree program and did not have access to a class on government PR. The group of students entering third year will take a government PR course in January 2012 and the group of students entering fourth year, have already taken their course in government PR – and their results are different. This survey was not designed to determine whether or not a government PR course would play a role in one’s perception of government and in turn one’s desire to work in a government communication role. However, the data, at least in this small, purposive sample, does show that an education in government PR can play a role in shaping student interest in taking on a government communication position. Further research in this area would provide great value to governments and PR educators alike.

This sample suggests that for government to attract the best and brightest young communicators it will need to market itself as creative and innovative. As more data is collected and more research is done, it will be valuable to learn if the findings from this small sample are replicated over larger, more representative samples. So far, the findings suggest that the onus is not just on governments, but on PR educators and researchers to better understand Generation Y communicators.

Notes

1. Voting in Canada remains a confidential act. To collect data on voter turnout, the Canadian Election Study therefore relied upon post-election surveys. Methodologically speaking, these surveys tended to produce higher rates of turnout than official rates because, among other things, of the social desirability of responding as though one had indeed voted. The sample of respondents to the survey also tended to contain more voters than non-voters (Parliament of Canada, 2010).

2. Prior to MRU four year Bachelor of Communication – PR degree it offered an applied degree in PR. The new degree was launched in September 2008 and as a result the applied degree was phased out. The last large group of students from the applied degree convocated in November 2010.

3. When it comes to PR education, there are four models that are featured prominently in the North America curriculum. These models are: press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed these models
while studying the history of PR. “Extensive research has shown that one of these models, the two-way symmetrical, is more effective than the other when used alone or combined with the two-way asymmetrical model” (Grunig, 1997).

References


Further reading


About the author

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