

## **Perception and Practice of Public Relations among Municipality Employees in Ethiopia**

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The main focus of this study was to assess the perception and practice of public relations by municipality employees in Ethiopia. This study used mixed method of research approach (qualitative and quantitative). Purposive sampling was applied to collect data from 45 employees of the various municipalities from the 11 zones in Ethiopia. Additionally 12 top managers were purposively chosen for interview to ascertain the practice of PR. Observation was also applied in addition to the interview to supplement and triangulate data. The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results of the quantitative data showed that, the employees had positive perception of public relations. The interview result showed that the practice is limited due to the lack of funds and expertise.

**Keywords:** Perception, practice, public relations, Ethiopia

Public relations research is an academic discipline which is active for the last fifty years. Several researches have been conducted on the way how public relations is perceived and practiced in public and private organizations. Harlow's (1976) definition is mostly quoted one and appropriate for this particular study: "Public relations is the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; help management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasize the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound ethical communication as its principal tools".

(Mersham et al., 2009) perceptions of public relations vary among practitioners and academics people. Perceptions are important to the practice of public relations, especially the perceptions of those who are attached with it on a day-to-day basis and whose decisions directly affect its practice. As this study deals to a high degree with perceptions of employees public relations and its practice, it is important to define what perception is. Perception can be defined as a "complex process by which people select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world" (Berelson & Steiner, 1964, p.88). Perceptions affect the way public relations practitioners are treated, spoken about and portrayed. Ironically, as an industry which deals in building positive perceptions, public relations do not enjoy a favorable perception itself (Coombs & Holladay, 2007).

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Sallot (2002) found that in the United States, public relations is disliked, distrusted, and denigrated for three reasons: conflict with journalists; the unethical behavior of some practitioners; and the intrinsic nature of the public relations practitioner's task of selective representation. Graeme Sterne (2011) has found a misconception of the public relations profession in New Zealand and significant disconnection exists between senior managers perception of the profession to their organization.

In Ethiopia, there are few studies carried out in relation to public relations. For instance, Biniyam Wubishet (2006) studied the treatment of public relations information in Ethiopian news agency. The study investigated the Ethiopian News Agency (ENA), and found out that practitioners do not consult other sources to cross check the information they receive from government public relations professionals. Thus, this study is intended to fill the gap especially about employees' perception and practice of PR from 11 municipality offices in the different zones in Ethiopia which has reciprocal relationship with PR in any organization in the country.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Public relations workers have different responsibilities. For example, the practitioner acts as a counselor to management and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action. Therefore, if public relation is well perceived and implemented in an institution, that institution will achieve its goals and objectives successfully.

This study investigates the perception and practice of public relations among Ethiopian Municipality employees. In simple terms this study examines the perception of PR among employees and the practice of public relations in the municipality. It is in a sense that the degree and the type of their perception can determine the way workers accomplish and perform their work to serve the public. The main objective of this study was to assess the perception and practice of public relations among employees of municipality offices in the 11 zones in Ethiopia. The specific objectives of this study were: (i) to assess the perceptions of public relations among municipality employees, and (ii) to find out the extent to which the municipality employees practice PR.

## **Literature Review**

In Ethiopia, the government is focusing on the significance of public relations department to all the governmental organization throughout the country. However there is little understanding of the profession by the employees. Onabajo (2006) and J. Kitchen (2004) argue that many people know only the small parts of public relations. They claim the negative attitude towards the profession emanates from this half or part knowledge. Onabajo (2006) argues in his article 'Proactive corporate management and the dynamics of public relations' that: the term public relations is widely misunderstood, and misused. Part of the confusion is due to the fact that public relations cover a very broad area. Depending on the context and one's point of view, it can be a concept, a profession, a management function, or a practice". These arguments have considerable connection in the context of Ethiopian public relations. The first thing that comes with the word 'public relations' to an employee of government and private sector is the activity of publicity.

Public relations makes an organization more effective; when it identifies the most strategic publics and conducts communication programs to develop and maintain effective long-term relationships between management and those publics (Grunig & Hon, 1999).

Public relations practitioners must be sensitive to the public or organization's needs when they are given a role to play within the organization they represent. Such sensitivity, which involves role taking, is especially important when a practitioner acts as a communication manager—assessing, reacting to, and devising ways of relating to publics and clients in a dynamic, ongoing way (Broom & Dozier, 1986).

Public relations managers tend to participate in the organizational decision making process. Broom and Dozier (1986) argued that participation in the organizational decision-making process is characterized as the extent to which practitioners participate in meetings with management about adopting new policies, discussing major problems, adopting new procedures, implementing new programs, and evaluating the results of programs. They argued that such participation has important implications for the professionalization of the practice, as well as for the professional growth of individual practitioners. Based on the results of their 1986 study, Broom and Dozier found that public relations managers generally experience high levels of job satisfaction. Johnson and Acharya (1982) said practitioners in the manager role predominantly make policy decisions and are held accountable for program success or failure. Lauzen (1994) found managers are typically responsible for issue identification and analysis and are responsible for incorporating the issues information into a strategic plan, making public relations practitioners very involved in the decision making process.

## **Research Design**

In this study, a descriptive research design is applied; the primary data was gathered from the employees of the municipality using mixed approaches (quantitative and qualitative). Creswell and Clark (2011) observe that mixed methods research is “practical” in the sense that the researcher is free to use all methods possible to address the research problem.

## **Sampling and Technique**

Since the number of employees was manageable; purposive sampling was applied to gather data through questionnaire from 45 employees at the municipality offices located in the 11 zones in Ethiopia. Also, purposively 12 top managers who were the core work process owners of different municipality were interviewed from the 11 zones, one manager was additionally interviewed from Addis Ababa being the capital of Ethiopia summing unto a total of 12. According to Palys T. (2008) purposive sampling strategy is useful to identify the major stakeholders who are involved in designing, giving, receiving and administering or will be affected by the program or service. This may increase the credibility of the result of this study.

## **Data Collection Tools**

In this study, a questionnaire was used to collect reliable quantitative data related to the perception of PR by the employees. To collect qualitative data related to the practice of PR an interview has been administered. Additionally a non-participants observation had been used to supplement and triangulate the information gathered through questionnaire and interview. A questionnaire with closed ended (Likert scale) was applied to collect data from the employees of the municipality. The extensive quantitative survey instrument allowed for an analysis of public relations perception by the employees in the Ethiopian municipality offices. The questionnaire was prepared in two languages English and Amharic.

Though various studies were available concerning public relations, the way they have measured the perception of PR was not suitable for this study. Objective scales provide reliable and valid measures of the variables in question and with scope to ascertain their various properties in quantitative terms. Hence, the researcher developed appropriate scale to obtain empirical scores to measures of perception of PR by the respondents. In order to examine the perception of PR, the researcher developed a "Total Perception Scale". To ascertain the objectives of the study, a set of questions related to perception of PR was asked: (i) Do you have a positive opinion about public relation in your organization, (ii) Does PR help in having a better relationship with the public, (iii) Is PR instrumental in building a better visibility and image for the organization, (iv) Does the organization involve the employees in the decision making process, (v) does the organization collect feedback from the customers on their service, and (vi) Are the employees contented with their role in dealing with the public.

The above six questions for the Total Perception Scale were scored by Likert scale. Strongly agree and agree indicates an employee's positive orientation and response of favor where as strongly disagree and disagree indicates an employee's negative orientation and response towards public relations. Thus the assigned score for Total Perception Scale were cumulated. All the positive items were given positive score and negative items were given reverse score. The Total Perception Scale was then compared across the independent variables of age, sex, education, field of study and level of work. To determine the validity and reliability of the instrument, pilot test had been conducted at Mizzan town municipality with 5 respondents. The perception on public relation was 0.67 Cronbach alpha coefficients. According to Stacks (2001), Cronbach's alpha of .70 is considered very reliable and value above .625 is acceptable.

The interview questions with special reference to the practice of PR were orderly asked to all the managers, individually in the municipality at their specified zone in their offices. Qualitative data was collected in order to gain further knowledge about factors that cannot be quantified. Each interview was given 45 minutes for each of the 12 top managers. The interview was recorded by audio tape for later analysis. Graeme Sterne (2011) argued that semi-structured interviews are an excellent way to maximize personal interaction. The data collected through questionnaire and interview was supplemented by non-participant unstructured observation. The observation took one month. The observation was undertaken on the perception of PR and practice of PR. This was conducted by determining how the employees handle the public, experience of producing communication materials, conflict resolution while dealing with the public and interacting with the media houses.

## **Data Analysis**

To analyze both quantitative and qualitative data, different procedure had been followed. Mean, standard deviation and t-test statistical analysis had been used to analyze quantitative information using SPSS version 20. After quantitative data analysis, the interview and observation data had been triangulated with the information gathered through questionnaire.

*Demographic:* With reference to sex, 75.6 per cent of the respondents were male and the rest 24.4 per cent were female. Thus, one can understand that the majority of the employees in the municipality were males. With reference to the age category of the participant, 42.2 per cent were under the age of 31, 35.6 per cent were between age group 31 to 40 years, and

the remaining 22.2 per cent were between 41 to 50 years. Therefore, it can be concluded that large numbers of the municipality’s employees were young. The educational status of the municipality’s employees showed that 84.4 per cent of the employee had BA/BSc degree, the rest 15.6 per cent had college diploma. From this we understand that employees were reasonably educated to handle the task. It was essential to understand the employees’ field of study, accordingly the data showed that 6.7 per cent were from language, 6.7 per cent were from public administration and 86.7 per cent were from other fields like sociology, psychology, geography, business and engineering. Therefore, it can be concluded that large numbers of employees were from other field of study. Sadly, we could not find any employees having a degree related to public relations or communications. The data also showed work division of respondents in the organization, 73.3 per cent of the employees were blue collar workers and 26.7 per cent were managers in the municipality. Therefore, the majority of the respondents were employees in comparison to managers.

### Perception of Public Relation across Gender

Table 1 compares female and male employees’ perception of PR using mean and standard deviations. The respondents’ average score on perception of public relations scale was 3.76 (SD=.46), while the average score for females was 3.69(SD=.68), that of the males was 3.79(SD=.36).From the mean value, it is evident that they do not have significant difference in their perception of PRs. As to the t-test analysis, there was no statistically significance difference between male and female employees ( $t(43)= -.642, p>.05$ ). In both cases both male and female employees had positive perception toward public relation.

Table 1. Total perception of PR across gender

Sex	Mean	No. respondents	SD
Female	3.6909	11	.68914
Male	3.7941	34	.36840
Total	3.7689	45	.46015

### Perception of Public Relations across Age

Table 2 shows the average score on perception of public relation by the employees across age. Respondents whose age was below 31 years was 3.76(SD=.44), between 31 and 40 was 3.72 (SD=.50), between 41 and 50 was 3.86(SD=.47), ANOVA analysis also showed absence of statistically significance difference in the perception of public relations activities among the three age groups ( $F(2,42)=.283, p>.05$ ). This proves that all of the three age groups have similar positive perception towards public relations.

Table 2. Age difference in perception of public relations activities

Age	Mean	No. respondents	SD
<31	3.7632	19	.43743
31-40	3.7187	16	.50096
41-50	3.8600	10	.46952

## Perception of Public relation across Educational Status

Table 3 shows the relationship between educational status and employees' perception of PR. The average score on' perception towards public relation for employees who have college diploma was 3.52(SD=.63), and for those with BA/BSc degree was 3.8(SD=.42). The t-test analysis also showed that there was no significance difference between college diploma holders and BA/BSc degree holders' perception of public relation ( $t(43) = -1.526, p > .05$ ). Hence, it is possible to conclude that college diploma and BA/BSc degree holders equally and positively perceive PR.

Table 3. Perception of PR across educational status

Educational status	Mean	No. of respondents	SD
College diploma	3.52	7	.63
BA/BSc	3.8	38	.42

## Perception of Public Relations across Field of Study

Table 4 displays the relationship between field of study and perception of PR. Accordingly, while the average score of employees whose educational background Language and Public Administration were 3.53(SD=.72) and 3.73(SD=.29) respectively, the average score for the others was 3.77(SD=.46). On top of that, the ANOVA analysis indicated absence of statistically significance difference among the three groups' perception of PRs ( $F(2,42) = .431, p > .05$ ). Thus the employees from the three fields have similar positive perception towards the organizations public relation.

Table 4. Perception of PR across field of study

Field of study	Mean	No. of respondents	SD
Language	3.53	3	.72
Public administration	3.73	3	.29
Other	3.77	39	.46

## Perception of Public Relations across Level of Work

Table 5 compares the perceived average score of managers and employees perception of PR. The perceived average score for managers and Employees (non-managers) were 3.59(SD=.51) and 3.83(SD=.43) respectively. The t-test analysis also showed that the two groups do not significantly differ on their perception of PR ( $t(43) = -1.584, p > .05$ ). Hence, it is possible to conclude that the managers and employees perceived in a similar way.

Table 5. Perception of PR across level of work

Work Division	No. Respondents	Mean	Std. Deviation
Top managers	12	3.59	.51
Employees	33	3.83	.43

To elaborate the above quantitative information the following interview discussion had been administered with 12 managers in the municipality with reference to the practice of PR. Unique and standalone answers are recorded for analysis and repetitive responses are thematically combined.

Q1: What come to your mind with reference the job profile of PR professionals?

The managers said that different ideas come to their mind when they think about PR, the frequently highlighted answers was media relation. Some of them said PR also includes publicizing municipality services to the external public through advertising. It was also registered that 'managing crisis situations' is all about PR. Some of them said it is a combination of marketing communications, advertising and propaganda. A few also said that PR is liaising with stakeholders and standing as bridge between the municipality and its key public. These answers threw significant evidence that the managers in the municipality are reasonably aware of the functions of PR.

Q2: What do you think are the growing trends in PR?

All most all of them said the digital media plays a vital role in the recent era in communicating with the people and therefore knowledge in the field of new media is essential to excel in the field of public relations. Some highlighted that the municipality websites help them communicate with the general public about their proceeding and functions. In fact one of the managers said that the municipality services are communicated to the public via short messages directly sent to the mobile phone of the consumers. He went further to acknowledge that the latest technology helps businesses to be transparent and practice open communication at ease especially at the time of crisis. He added that feedback is instant with the implementation of the latest tools. However, many said that they lack technical expertise to manage and update the website due to the lack of knowledge in the field. These answers proved that the managers in the municipality have good knowledge about the latest trends in PR but there are limitations in practicing them due to shortage of expertise.

Q3: What are the different tools that the municipality uses for PR?

The managers said that apart from the digital media like Facebook, municipality website, they also use traditional tools like press releases to communicate with the media. Writing speeches and scheduling interviews for the top official has also been a practice. Managers say that they have worked with advertisers for various municipality campaigns. Some said they have spear headed feedback meetings with the public to understand the satisfaction level of their services. During the meetings they have promoted the good will of the organization by giving away free gift and conducted lucky draws. The discussion gave the researcher an insight into the various tools that the PR professional are using to communicate with the public.

Q4: Do you have any idea what crises communication plan is?

Most of the managers underlined the importance of a crises communication plan. One of the managers define crises communication plan as "a plan which lets a certain organization prepare for a crises before, while and after it happen". The rest showed that they haven't heard about crises communication plan. All the managers believed and said that a crises communication plan is important for any organization; however their organizations do not have a yearly budget or plan. One of the manager said "crises communication plan is like a soldier with all his materials fully ready before the war starts, he will start to fight back, control and win it once the war breaks. The same to an organization with a crises

communication plan which enables the organization to control when a crisis happens.” In general the researcher understood that a crisis communication plan or a spokesperson during time of crisis is not assigned to subdue the pressure.

Q5: To what extent PR professional in your organization have a positive impact on achieving organizational goals?

Many said that, PR office is clubbed with the HR, and they do not have separate office of PR. They admitted that though their role contributes a lot to strategic planning and decision making its importance is still not seen as a mandatory function. The rest half of the managers said the organization does not consider or take opinion of the PR professional while planning or passing a decision. They also said the budget allotted for PR is much lesser than the other departments and many of their initiatives are kept on hold because of the lack of funds. For example production communication materials are limited compared to the actual needs.

Q6. How do you see/evaluate the level of expertise in your organization?

Most of the managers explained that the organization lacks expertise. Most of the employees are from different background of education with little knowledge in PR. There is very little training to handle different issues of PR. We learn most of the technologies associated with PR by trial and error. For instance, the managers gave examples regarding lack of experts in the area of determining how the public react to the organization, producing publications, conflict resolution in dealing with the public and writing news release and feature articles. In many cases we outsource production and designing work to external vendors, since we lack technical expertise.

## **Observation**

Data collected through non-participant observation are presented as follows depending on the guidelines prepared in relation to the survey questionnaire and the interview: Perception of PR and Practice of PR.

*Perception of PR:* The researcher observed that, PR experts at the municipality offices in the 11 zones have high regard for their profession. They enjoy their work and always looking for ways to improve them. It is practically observed that the managers of the municipality have training schedules for their employees since most of them are not educated with a degree in Communications or PR. Internally the employees have a high perception about PR however; the observation shows that the public perception about the PR department is not satisfactory due to the delay in responses or getting the right information.

*Practice of PR:* Though the government has established and appointed several PR staff it is observed that most of them are not technically qualified to do the job. Their educational background is not from the streams related to public relations or communications. With little knowledge of the subject they learn through experience over a period of time. Therefore the practice of PR is not extraordinary. It is still in the traditional way of communicating with the public. The researcher observed that the employee's expertise level is not up to the mark and unsatisfactory. General public's face challenges in getting what they want from the organization through interpersonal communications. The organization does not have budget and infrastructure to produce fliers, brochures, newsletters, press releases etc.

There are also no experts to produce graphic communications. It is also observed that many municipalities do not have an interactive dynamic website to address the needs of the public. Few websites that are live are static in nature and are not updated regularly due to the lack of technical knowledge to administer the site. The frequency of organizing events and exhibitions is yearly and it seems to be a national celebration rather than a PR event.

## Conclusion

The study aimed at investigating the perception and practice among municipality employees in Ethiopia followed a mixed approach research method. The quantitative survey questionnaire was used to examine the employees' perception of PRs as a whole. This paved a way to study the municipality practice of PRs through semi-structured interview and non-participant observation. The quantitative result showed that the employees had positive perception regardless of gender, age, educational status, field of study and employees work division. On the other hand the result of the interview showed that the top managers are well aware of the tools necessary for PR and its importance. Some of the employees perceive that PR as media relation, publicity and as advertising because of little knowledge or half knowledge on the area. The observation result showed that the lack of expertise, absence of budget and infrastructure had played a negative role in the municipality's public relations works. To conclude it can be determined that the perception of PR by the employees of the municipality is satisfactory whereas the practice of PR as a profession is in its infancy in Ethiopia.

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