# Comparing the Roles of PR Practitioners in the Public and Private Sectors in the UAE

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper compares public relation practices of experts working in public and private sectors of the UAE based firms. It casts light on the challenges that practitioners face in both sectors and the necessary skill set they need to excel in their field. Qualitative research techniques were used to get insights into the research problem. Qualitative questionnaires and in depth interviews with the target respondents were conducted. Questionnaires were filled by government institutions, public sector insurance companies, schools, private banks, and other organizations. In depth face to face interviews and qualitative questionnaire were used in this study. Out of 60 questionnaires, 30 were distributed and collected face to face in 15 different workplaces in the public sector and 30 were distributed in 12 workplaces in the private sector. The research concluded that the PR sector is well developed in private firms who cater to their publics at an advanced level using the tools and devices necessary for physical and virtual world practice. When it comes to the public sector, PR departments and PR practitioners were not very aware of the contemporary PR concept, and they need better qualifications to improve their PR practices.*

*Keywords:      PR Departments, PR Employment, PR in Private and Public Sectors, PR Practitioners, United Arab Emirates (UAE)*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the nature, importance, and role of the public relations department has been debated since the concept was born, its status in the UAE holds particular interest considering its relatively late development (Abbas, 2001), and given the UAE's unique political, economic, and socio-cultural positioning. "The last two decades have seen a huge expansion of public relations in various domains of economic, political, social and cultural sectors in the Arab World" (Kirat, 2005, p. 324).

The UAE is a collection of emirates occupying a total area of 82,880 sq km. It has a population of approximately 4.1 million, the national language is Arabic, and the national religion is Islam. Nationals comprise only 21.9 percent of the population, while the non-nationals are 78.1%, with females accounting for 49.3 percent and males 50.7%. Some of the main industries in the UAE are aluminum, cement, oil and gas, fertilizers, construction, tourism and food processing. An important resource is natural gas and oil, most concentrated in Dubai, a major city. GDP per capita is Dh139, 000, and

the illiteracy rate is nine percent. There are 1.26 million fixed lines and 4.9 mobile line subscribers. There are forty two TV stations, and there are twenty six radio stations, nine newspapers and over one sixty magazines (Interact, 2012).

In the UAE, as in other non-Western countries, the term public relations is often misappropriated from its Western incarnation. With the exception of some forward-focused organizations, public relations t is often considered to be concerned with public service or departments involved in arranging for visas, transport, and other hospitality functions. This is a far cry from its current Western conception (Harris, 1991), and does little to keep pace with vast societal changes in the UAE in recent decades. The 1970s and 1980s saw a transformation in various sectors in the UAE, including transportation, health, vocational/higher education, agriculture, sports, and, most interestingly, media (Babbili & Hussain, 1994; Al Hashimi, 2002), all with implications for the conduct of public relations.). By the mid-1980s, almost 63% of public and private firms in the UAE (UAE Yearbook, 2005) had their own public relations department, some more structured than others. The organizations and the institutions that did not have departments of their own assigned the PR role to other departments in their firms, like marketing, human resources, sales, or finance (L'Etanga, Falkheimerb & Lugo, 2006; Anker, 1997). Some firms outsourced the PR function to third parties (Al Khaja, 1985; Haan, 2004). Though unique, PR in the UAE was well established by the 1990s.

In the 1990s the UAE turned into a trade center for many international entities. Leading media companies like CNBC, MBC, CNN started operations there, and it became a boom period for PR practitioners as well. Dubai Media City had attracted more than 24 foreign and local media firms. The interest level in PR increased, and multiple organizations and consultancies were started to provide PR services as third party providers. It was a time when commercial, specialised, private and public companies realised that PR could make or break them, and competition became

fierce. The pioneering Emirates Airline, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, and the Dubai municipality particularly benefited from the new energy in public relations practices (Ayish & Kruckberg, 1999).

At present the UAE is undoubtedly considered a hub of PR agencies that offer a wide variety of services in the tourism, telecommunication, trade, real estate, and transportation sector, among many others (Badran, Turk, & Walters, 2004). Today there are 76 PR agencies just in Dubai alone.

Because of the growth of PR agencies in the UAE, the PR as a field appeared in the UAE in 1995 in the UAE University (Noor, personal communication, 2013). The state of education in PR is an indicator of the robustness and direction of the field in a given country. The Arab World has more than 80 mass communication programs in colleges, higher education institutions and universities. Over 50% of the students enrolled in these programs are public relations majors (Kirat, 2005, 324). As PR was gaining importance in the Middle East, the University of the UAE in Al Ain developed an academic discipline in mass communication, where public relations and journalism along with radio and television were taught (Noor, personal communication, 2013). This step was critical in order to produce the local employees that would work later on in the public and private sector, and was followed by PR programs at University of Sharjah, Ajman University, and the American University in Dubai. PR appeared as a major at UAE University in 1996 (Badran & Ayish, 1996). Demographically, as PR departments have flourished, females enrolled in degree programs make up two thirds of the total population.

## 1.1. Comparison of Private and Public Sector PR Employment in UAE

The relationship between PR and the public vs. private sector is of special interest here because of the way the unique demographics of the UAE impacts public vs. private sector PR employ-

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