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**The Role of the Global  
Capability Framework  
within the Strategic  
Communication Profession  
in an Emerging Post  
COVID-19 Context: A  
South African Perspective**

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**Abstract:** This paper presents the findings of a South African pilot study based on the Global Capability Framework (GCF) and aimed to explore the perceptions of senior Public Relations and Strategic Communication academics and industry leaders of the influence COVID-19 had on their personal capabilities to practice communication; determine their assumptions about the Global Capability Framework and its application within given contexts; and reflect on the future of the communication profession in South Africa. The focus was on the role of the individual Public Relations and Strategic Communication professional as leader and influencer in their respective context. The participants consisted of 10 senior academic and industry leaders who engaged in qualitative interviews. Data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis as identified by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.82) which include “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns [themes] within data.” The findings of this paper contribute to the current understanding of Strategic Communication practice and the influence that COVID-19 had on personal practice of both industry and academic participants. This pilot study revealed a limited awareness of the GCF but unequivocally confirmed the relevance and value of the framework and its contribution to both the academic and industry practice. Although many of the participants indicated an awareness of GCF, it was evident that a Strategic Communication mindset is required when the principles of the framework are applied within their respective contexts. Participants reflected on the various crises they encountered but one industry participant specifically reported on the need to implement a transformational approach to address the strategic change required to deal with such disruptive events. Both the academic and industry participants also highlighted the detrimental effects the pandemic had on the mental health of practitioners, academics and students. However, the adoption and effective use of technology in navigating the disruptive influence of COVID-19 was explicit in portraying its advantage to industry.

**Keywords:** Global Capability Framework (GCF), COVID-19, Strategic Communication, Public Relations (PR), future trends

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*Le rôle du Global Capability Framework au sein de la profession de la communication stratégique dans un contexte post Covid-19 émergent : Une perspective Sud-Africaine*

**Résumé:** Cette article présente les résultats d’une étude pilote sud-africaine basée sur le Global Capability Cadre (GCF) et visait à explorer les perceptions des hauts responsables des relations publiques et les universitaires en communication stratégique et les chefs de file de l’industrie de l’influence du COVID-19 sur leurs capacités personnelles à pratiquer la communication; déterminer leurs hypothèses sur le cadre mondial des capacités et son application dans des contextes donnés; et réfléchissez à l’avenir de la profession de la communication en Afrique du Sud. L’accent était mis sur le rôle du professionnel individuel des relations publiques et de

la communication stratégique en tant que leader et influenceur dans leur contexte respectif. Les participants comprenaient 10 hauts dirigeants universitaires et industriels qui ont participé à un entretien réflexif. Les données ont été analysées à l'aide d'une analyse thématique telle que décrite par Braun et Clarke (2006, p. 82) qui incluent "l'identification, l'analyse et la communication des modèles [thèmes] dans les données." Les conclusions de ce document contribuent à la communication et de l'influence du COVID-19 sur la pratique personnelle des deux participants industriels et universitaire. Bien qu'il ne s'agisse que d'une étude pilote, elle montre qu'il y a une connaissance limitée du GCF mais le plus important est le fait que la pertinence et la valeur, la structure et la manière dont elle peut contribuer à la fois à l'industrie et à la pratique universitaire ont été réalisées. Bien que de nombreux participants aient indiqué une connaissance du GCF, il était évident qu'un état d'esprit de communication stratégique est nécessaire lorsque les principes de la structure sont appliqués dans leurs contextes respectif. Les participants ont rendu compte des différentes crises expérimentées, mais un seul participant de l'entreprise a signalé la nécessité de mettre en approche transformationnelle pour aborder le changement stratégique nécessaire pour faire face à ces événements perturbateurs. De plus, l'adoption et l'utilisation efficace de la technologie pour naviguer dans l'influence perturbatrice du COVID-19, énonce clairement son avantage pour l'industrie. Les deux participants de l'académie et de l'industrie ont souligné l'effet néfaste de la pandémie sur la santé mentale des praticiens, des universitaires et des étudiants.

**Mots-clés :** Global Capability Framework (GCF), COVID-19, communication stratégique, relations publiques, tendances futures

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### **Introduction**

"Instead of asking what practitioners can already do, we asked what the profession – collectively and individually – is capable of" (Fawkes et al., 2018).

Fawkes et al. (2018) conducted a global study now known as the Global Capability Framework (GCF) which asked three primary questions, namely: (1) Is there a shared set of Public Relations (PR) capabilities that define the profession globally?; (2) What, if any, are the variations by region/culture and by stakeholder groups?; and (3) How can such a framework(s) be of practical value for professional development, at individual, national, regional and global level?

The latter encouraged this pilot study as the issues associated with the GCF coincide with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the global industry. The aim was to explore perceptions of senior Public Relations and Strategic Communication academics and industry leaders to determine their assumptions about the GCF and its application within their given contexts; their perceptions on the influence COVID-19 had on their personal communication, organizational and professional capabilities to practice; and to explore their reflections on the future application of the GCF on the

strategic communication profession in South Africa.

### **1. The Role of Disruption**

Following significant disruptions in the economic, social, political and natural environment, the world woke in January 2020 to the announcement of a global health crisis, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The pandemic spread quickly infecting millions of people and delivered an enormous global economic shock (The World Bank Group, 2020, p.3). On 12 March 2020 the Director General of the World Health Organization declared the Coronavirus outbreak a pandemic and three days thereafter, South Africa's president Cyril Ramaphosa declared this a national disaster and announced a national lockdown to curb the spread of the disease. This announcement had a devastating effect on most sectors.

COVID-19 is not just a health crisis but exposes issues in economics, education, social inequality and much more (Mirchandani, 2020). Many countries have gone into partial or total lockdown for months and global unemployment is increasing significantly. This pandemic is a watershed event and has detrimental effects on individuals and business due to its socio-economic impact. Citizens worldwide have experienced self-isolation and social distancing while many are faced with job losses, travel restrictions, remote working and closing of schools and tertiary institutions (Heffernan, 2021).

The Edelman Trust Barometer 2021 shows that COVID-19 has led to a wave of mistrust in institutions such as government, business and the media (Moore, 2021). John (2021) corroborates this and states that trust in governments and media are crumbling as citizens feel that they are misled. Society is increasingly turning to the private sector and asking that companies respond to societal challenges (Fink, 2018). Organizations are now considered as institutions integrated intrinsically into the social fabric of society (Bersin, 2018; Kanter, 2011). Deloitte (2018) agrees that this has led to companies that were once considered business enterprises, now being seen as social enterprises which "... listens to, invest in, and actively manage the trends that are shaping today's world" (Agarwal et al., 2018, p.2).

Shifts in the business environment over the last few years were also influenced by the need for employees to learn new skills due to the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). This is amplified by the challenges posed by living and working in a pandemic. The World Economic Forum stated, "Half of us will need to reskill in the next five years, as the "double-disruption" of the economic impacts of the pandemic and increasing automation transforming jobs takes hold" (Whiting, 2020). This also means that current disciplinary boundary-setting practices and paradigmatic fixation – along with outcomes-based pedagogical approaches to education – will not adequately prepare people for the new world of work.

## 2. The Role of Education in Making Theory meet Practice

Education must respond to this unprecedented and urgent need of the world of work by producing graduates with the skills and competencies to thrive in a dynamic and changing environment (Flynn, 2020). Lancaster University vice-chancellor Mark Smith concurs and states that: "... universities are the engines of research and innovation and need to engage with the future of society by equipping students to be adaptable to the emerging workplace and their role in it" (KPMG, 2019).

In South Africa, academia and industry are often regarded as opposing forces operating in their own isolated world with limited engagement. Concerted efforts are needed to develop a balanced view of theory and practice relevant to the South African business context. Current economic shifts are compelling these two worlds "to come together to address and solve some of the real-world challenges" (Shrivastava, 2017). To assist these efforts, the international PR industry benefitted from various research projects commissioned by the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management (GA), with the 2018 GCF being one of the most recent contributions to the body of knowledge.

Capabilities, as an educational framework replaced a competency-based approach implied in normative knowledge, skills, attitude and behavior (KSAB) frameworks used to guide professional development and inform curriculum development (Tsetsura & Vengara, 2021). Competencies imply a reactive set of predetermined knowledge, skills and abilities practitioners need to master before they qualify, i.e. during formal tertiary studies. Capabilities, on the other hand, shift the focus to potential and future abilities to cope with change, innovate, lead and demonstrate impact (Hirt, 2020). Thus, the focus moves away from a list of pre-determined, often isolated, abilities traditionally listed as competencies, to the multi-disciplinary, integrated development of professionals capable of practicing within this diverse and dynamic industry, collectively utilizing resources to grow the organization, practitioner and profession. The movement from competency to capability was necessitated by a need to integrate knowledge and skills while adapting to contextual demands (Hirt, 2020). Capabilities redress the limited personal development of the practitioner evident in most educational programs and PR qualifications by focusing on potential, innovation and adaptability of the individual practitioner. This also speaks to the transdisciplinary nature of strategic communication which requires a strategic communication practitioner (SCP) to become a symbolic intermediary capable of reflective practice, developing strategic partnerships with stakeholders to create meaning in a dynamic, polycontextual environment (Benecke & Verwey, 2020; Verwey, 2015). It highlights the relevance of the practitioner understanding that a metamodern approach is needed which acknowledges the questioning of truths and narratives, understanding the complexity of poly-contextual environments and the role of strategic counsel that the practitioner plays to the organization. In addition, it means that the practitioner should then be able to navigate the organization through chaotic and turbulent times with flexibility.

Capabilities include the ability to adapt and blend knowledge and skills between contexts to be most effective (Hirt, 2020). The GCF is grounded in the notion that practitioners should be equipped to deal with a disruptive environment and the need for change in the future (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019). Furthermore, ordinary capabilities refer to the short-term ability to be effective within organizations i.e. solving a current crisis, while dynamic capabilities refer to entrepreneurial attitudes and the development of “new forms of competitive advantage”, i.e. developing resources to prevent possible crisis (Gregory & Fawkes, 2019:3).

The COVID-19 pandemic increased job insecurities and limited career prospects. Norton (2020), states that the COVID-19 virus “changed our ways of working and being, perhaps irreversibly.” This is evident in the literature which reflects on the impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education and highlights the status quo regarding communication tactics and strategies that cannot remain unchanged, as according to Crous (2020), “a crisis can threaten to disrupt a system, structure, a way of doing/living, accepted values and/or people.”

Several scholars (Orzeata, 2020; Xifra, 2020) reflect on the impact of COVID-19 and its continued effect on the practice of corporate communication. It is evident in these works that the areas of specialization, such as internal communication, crisis communication, media relations (specifically social media), and corporate social responsibility (CSR) seem to be the most affected (Xifra, 2020). Another view of the impact of the pandemic on the practice of corporate communication, PR and strategic communication, is the realization that organizations are at risk and that this risk must be strategically managed utilizing the correct approach and tools. The COVID-19 crisis revealed the importance of organisations in managing trustworthy relationships with stakeholders (Xifra, 2020).

This paper explores the perceptions of various academic and industry leaders on the GCF and the effects of COVID-19. Strategic communication will be used to describe the profession and include the various disciplines. This “encompasses all communication that is substantial for the survival and sustained success of an entity ... is the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals” (Zerfass et al., 2018, p.493) and will be applied for contextualization. The role of the strategic communication practitioner (SCP) therefore needs to be aligned with this definition in becoming innovative, interactive symbolic intermediaries who socially construct alternative realities and meaning (Benecke, 2019).

### **3. The GCF and its Influence on Strategic Communication Teaching**

In order to understand the influence of the GCF on the PR and Strategic Communication teaching philosophy in South Africa it is necessary to look at events preceding the GCF research project.

In 2010 a Curriculum Think Tank took place in Cape Town where the Canadian

Public Relations Society’s Pathways document (The Canadian Public Relations Society Inc., 2011) was discussed as a model to structure PR and Communication Management education. This model described four pathways, namely the technical, career, management, leadership and scholar pathways.

The first three Pathways correlated with local research of Steyn (2000), who identified three roles for the Corporate Communicator in the South African organization, namely the technician, manager and strategist roles. Subsequently the GA launched a research project between 2016 and 2018 to answer three important questions regarding the capabilities needed as a communication practitioner in the current organizational context. The resultant GCF indicated a set of three main capability categories, with sub-categories, that were shared by professionals globally. The three main capability categories are as follows:



**Figure 1. Global Capability Framework**  
(Fawkes et al., 2018)

The GCF, with locally identified country specific capabilities, provided an ideal practical summary to use as a resource when teaching, and to provide to post-graduate students who are already practicing to give them a clear, categorized framework to measure and structure their own professional development.

**4. Research Methodology**

This study is exploratory in nature and utilized a qualitative research design which

incorporated reflexive thematic analysis based on in-depth interviews to explore the viability of the GCF to both academic and industry professionals. Research sub-questions were as follows:

To explore the perceptions of senior PR and Strategic Communication academics and industry leaders:

1. about the influence COVID-19 had on their personal capabilities to practice,
2. to determine their assumptions about the GCF and its application within their given contexts, and
3. to reflect on the future of the strategic communication profession in South Africa.

Industry leaders were selected from a PRISA membership database based on the designation and level of expertise, namely, Accredited Public Relations (APR) level, years of experience, current leadership role, and South African citizenship. The APR members were extrapolated from general membership lists of 2018, 2019 and 2020. This was done as the names were not repeated on every list. Members involved with agencies or corporate organizations were further selected and placed on another list. This non-probability, purposive sampling method addressed the criteria set as it ensured that these industry leaders were all APR designated PRISA members, that they have at least 10 years of experience and are employed within a formal organizational context. This systematic sampling yielded 40 candidates and through purposive sampling selection of every third name, the final list of participants was identified. In accordance to the privacy requirements of South African legislation, six names were presented to PRISA management in a bid to formally invite these members to participate in the study. Invitations were distributed by Victor Sibeko, PRISA CEO, outlining the project and the request for participation. Further engagements with participants were facilitated by the research team leader who is the immediate Past-President of PRISA and also the chairperson of the Education, Research and Training (ETR) committee of PRISA.

Academic leaders were identified through personal contact with senior academics through the networks of the researchers. The selection criteria included: individuals on senior lecturer or higher designation, involved in teaching and research in the strategic communication discipline, employed in both University and Applied University (also known as University of Technology in SA) environments. A total of ten in-depth, semi-structured online interviews were conducted, five with industry professionals and five with the academy. The data analysis was done utilizing a reflexive thematic analysis, specifically the process as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2020).



## 5. Findings

The objective of this pilot study was to explore the assumptions that academic and industry strategic communication leaders held of the GCF and its application within their relevant contexts; as well as their perceptions on the influence COVID-19 had on their communication, organizational and professional practice; and their reflections of the future challenges presenting strategic communication and the implementation of the GCF. The research findings and themes, supported with quotes from the participants follows.

### 5.1. *Research Question 1: To Determine the Assumptions about the GCF and Its Application Within Their Given Contexts*

An analysis of the data resulted in the identification of nine themes in relation to research question 1 which are listed in no predetermined order of importance.

#### 5.1.1. Theme 1.1: Limited Awareness of the GCF

Many participants were made aware of the existence of the GCF through announcements made by PRISA. Industry Quote (I-Q): "...only by virtue of some of the updates I would get from PRISA."

The participants demonstrated limited awareness of the GCF but recognized the value of the framework. Those who confirmed awareness of the GCF related it to member communication received from PRISA which highlighted the importance of professional alliances both locally and internationally. Some academic participants included the framework content within their curriculum development or teaching and learning practices. Industry participants regarded the GCF as an important guide for benchmarking practices related to communication, organizational and professional levels.

This theme references the challenges experienced by academic curriculum developers in ensuring that human skills and capabilities are developed to meet the requirements of professional practice during the disruptive context in which strategic communicators operate; and to prepare future professionals who will be viewed as key drivers of economic success, individual well-being and societal cohesion (Whiting, 2020).

#### 5.1.2. Theme 1.2: Limited Application of GCF

Industry participants indicated a limited application of the GCF while some academic participants stated their inclusion of the GCF to guide their curriculum development.

Academic Quote (A-Q): "...I think it guides universities or an institution to ensure that the type of student you deliver has the ability to contribute to the societal context, we need it to be globally relevant."

"It's an ongoing process [of improvement] as it influences your personal brand,

influences the brand of the school, faculty, and the university...”

A significant finding was that although all participants recognized the value and importance of the GCF, most academics did not relate their own professional practice as strategic communicator to the various framework pillars, but mostly regarded it as a ‘teaching aid’, guiding curriculum development and in teaching and learning. Only one academic participant reflected on her own role as a strategic communicator during COVID-19 within her university. She fulfilled these roles prior to the pandemic and demonstrated a strategic communication mindset when she shared her experiences as trusted advisor within the university as a symbolic and cultural intermediary enabling relationships with her colleagues, students and parents (Benecke & Verwey, 2020).

#### 5.1.3. Theme 1.3: The Value of the GCF in Personal Practice as SCP

Industry participants identified with the value GCF offers to guide their personal practice while academic participants related the value of GCF to the influence it has on curriculum development.

A-Q: Academic/course alignment and awareness of GCF: “I’ve taught first, second and third year. And there is a strong emphasis on some of the elements that are in the framework.”

I-Q: “A framework is critical. It gives you a frame of reference. However top-level management needs to be aware of it. Framework can give guidance so that you don’t need to bring in external people i.e. consultants.”

#### 5.1.4. Theme 1.4: The Application of GCF Differed Between Corporate and Agency Participants

The level of application of the GCF can be related to the seniority of the participant within the various contexts. Corporate participants related it to other professional standards of practice such as AA1000 and the King Report’s guide on relationship building.

Agency participants of GCF related the application to international affiliations such as with the Public Relations Global Network.

I-Q: “It can assist us as communication professionals, in tandem with other standards to be recognized as a science.”

#### 5.1.5. Theme 1.5: Academics Must Include the GCF into Curriculum Development and Utilize It to Enhance Content

The GCF has significant relevance and value and should be included in curriculum development as it does not just enhance content but also offers good case material. It could offer value to both formal qualifications as well as continuous development programs (CPDs).

This theme highlights not only the need for the GCF to be included by academics into curriculum development, but also being considered in the crafting of CPDs. A

significant number of participants appealed for the consideration of integrating the GCF's content into curricula when preparing professionals for their future roles in the Strategic Communication industry as this framework could assist academics in aligning curricula to practice. The value of the framework in contributing to content enhancement was highlighted, specifically through creating valuable material for case studies. When reflecting upon the literature, these findings corroborate with the sentiment of Flynn (2020) and KPMG (2019) in emphasizing that education is being called upon to respond to the unprecedented and urgent needs of the current world of work to produce graduates with the skill and competencies to thrive in a dynamic and changing environment. In light of this, the inclusion of the GCF's content in higher education curricula could significantly contribute in preparing professionals for futuristic roles within the Strategic Communication industry by enhancing the content offered.

I-Q: "Your students must be made familiar with the framework. I've had the opportunity of having interns from the universities but I find that the curriculum focuses more on the academic side and then the practicality of our environment is not really emphasized. When they come here, they do have the qualification, but the qualification doesn't speak to what is happening in the corporate environment in as far as communication is concerned."

#### 5.1.6. Theme 1.6: A Strategic Communication Mindset Is Lacking When Engaging with Capabilities as Defined in the GCF

A Strategic Communication mindset is lacking when industry engages with the capabilities as defined with the GCF. Similarly, academics do not acknowledge the value of the GCF and do not adopt a strategic approach in their adoption thereof. Generally, no consensus exists on the concepts of capabilities as defined by the GCF.

This theme identified participants' lack of a Strategic Communication mindset, which is imperative for professionals practicing within a postmodern context. It is imperative that practitioners adopt a Strategic Communication mindset that acknowledges the relevance of a metamodern worldview (Meyer & Barker, 2020). This worldview should place emphasis on a multi-paradigmatic approach while taking cognizance of the complexity of the multiple contexts and voices of the organization and the strategic role that the practitioner plays within this system. The lack of such a worldview became evident when questioning how participants engaged with the capabilities. In addition, there was no consensus from the participants on what the definitions of communication, organizational or professional capabilities are, and definitions of the capabilities as ascribed by the professionals did not necessarily correlate with the capabilities as defined by the GCF. This alludes to the fact that the participants do acknowledge the capabilities and their relevance to practice but the participants' definitions of the capabilities when compared to the GCF, do not correlate.

It was evident that COVID-19 had a significant effect on the communication capabilities within the participants' respective contexts. However, it is concerning that

industry participants adopted a modernistic mindset in how the pandemic was addressed within the internal communication activities of their organizations. Most industry participants indicated that a crisis communication approach was taken to COVID-19 in relation to internal communications. However, one industry participant highlighted the relevance of a change management approach to the impact of COVID-19 on the organization which juxtaposed a Strategic Communication way of thinking, i.e. the adoption of a modernistic approach where the relevance of crisis management was emphasized rather than engaging with the idea of change management initiatives in the organization. With this in mind, it is crucial to note that the industry participants did not show a mindset that acknowledges the principles of a metamodern approach which allows emergence of chaotic and ambiguous contexts and the relevance of agile and flexible responses within those situations. Emphasis was more placed on managing the change with rigid crisis plans in place.

Academic participants, however, exemplified the lack of a strategic approach in terms of realizing the value that the GCF can add to their contexts as well as curricula. While these participants are aware of the GCF and integrate many of the principles in their curricula, they are not integrating it as an acknowledged guideline to prepare future professionals for the industry.

A-Q: “We’ve always had a very strong practical component, so we would definitely use these principles and guidelines and the lecturers who are specifically in organizational communication and public relations... they can really use this in the content in their development of the courses when they update their courses.”

I-Q: “We had to pull together a crisis management team. The team had to embark on a strategy. The strategy was and remains incredibly multi-layered. You have to focus on employees from an internal communication perspective. This was a massive element. Helping them to deal with change.”

Literature states that concerted efforts are needed to develop a balanced view of theory and practice and that the rapid change currently experienced is compelling the two worlds of industry and academia “to come together to address and solve some of the real-world challenges” (Shrivastava, 2017).

#### 5.1.7. Theme 1.7: Contextual Influence: As Organizational Leadership Was Affected, Developing Self and Others in Terms of Professional Capabilities Became Essential

Participants felt that their influence in providing contextual influence increased during the pandemic and that they had to develop professional capabilities quickly.

A-Q: “Leadership was lacking/there was no leadership.”

I-Q: “... people’s context changed overnight.”

#### 5.1.8. Theme 1.8: Mental Health and Internal Stakeholder Support, Relationship

and Trust

Mental health and internal communication were emphasized in several conversations as important to motivation and getting work done.

A-Q: “COVID-19 has taught the importance of soft skills. Soft skills include the understanding of the full context of a problem, people’s own experiences, fears and uncertainties. Misunderstanding of vast amounts of messages by various sources i.e. government, WHO etc. Who do they listen too, being paralyzed with fear and hampering optimal functioning.”

I-Q: “Like they say there’s a South African perspective, there’s an American perspective, there’s an African perspective. So it [the framework] gives you that [perspective] because you can’t clamp media into one big folder and say ‘this is how you communicate’. Our communications differ per the communities that we communicate with. Some would like to have their communication in this way, some would want you to have it this way, so we need to package our information in such a way that it appeals to the audience that we’re trying to attract. But then they must know where to tap in. If I’m in South Africa and I want something that speaks to my South African situation, I must know that I can tap here and if the source is from communicators that are residing within South Africa, that have gotten experience with my environment...”

#### 5.1.9. Theme 1.9: Support of Wellness and the Importance of Reflective Adaptable Communication Practice

Participants indicated the importance of constant support for all stakeholders – not just internal stakeholders – through reflective, adaptable communication practice.

A-Q: “... informal surveys of twitter messages between parents, students and university.”

I-Q: “ think we’re going to get to a point where you’re going to have to align your values with your clients, otherwise you know you won’t be able to build the relationship on which a lot of our business relies. It’s very much still a sector or an industry for relationships very much, and I think if you don’t share values, or at least be able to understand and have some insight into the values that drive your client’s business, I don’t think you’re going to be able to do well in the long run.”

### 5.2. *Research Question 2: To Explore the Perceptions of Senior PR and Strategic Communication Academics and Industry Leaders on the Influence COVID-19 Had on Their Personal Capabilities to Practice Communication in Their Respective Contexts*

An analysis of the data resulted in the identification of seven themes in relation to research question 2, which are listed in no predetermined order of importance.

#### 5.2.1. Theme 2.1: The Use of Technology Was Amplified, While the Significant

#### Influence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) Was Acknowledged

Technology and its use was highlighted and the significant value that it offered during the disruption of COVID-19 was noted. This was all seen within the context of the 4IR.

A significant finding emerged in that COVID-19 led to the amplified use of technology to assist in navigating the disruption brought on by the pandemic. The tools, connectivity and virtual experiences available within the 4IR context have been utilized by both industry and academics to assist in navigating the challenges posed by the pandemic, which contributed to uninterrupted business and services delivery. It was clear that academia had no alternative but to rapidly adopt an array of technological tools that would enable them to deliver their programs to their stakeholders. Similarly, findings from the industry prove that the same approach was adopted. This amplified adoption of technology means that people have been required to learn new skills with the arrival of 4IR and is exasperated by the challenges posed by living and working in a pandemic. The findings prove that both academia and industry realize the relevance hereof and their willingness to adopt and strategically use technology has been to their advantage.

A-Q: “People don’t know how to deal with the uncomfortable situations and different expectations but I think you really, as communication practitioners, need to be able to function across different platforms.”

“... other universities now caught up with this online mode of tuition. So that actually brought us to re-evaluate our offering and we actually need to now rethink what we are doing and stand together in order to actually review our practices and to become the best in what we do again.”

I-Q: “...we are now using technology to do most of the things that we would have opted to do face-to-face when being in the office environment.”

#### 5.2.2. Theme 2.2: The Disruptive Influence of COVID-19 Was Acknowledged, and the Context of the 4IR Assisted in Navigation

While the significant influence of COVID-19 was acknowledged by both groups, the effective use of technology resulted in agency operations not being disrupted, while academics, although acknowledging the immense value of technology within this context, noted that their operations were significantly disrupted.

An agency leader commented on the effect on clients, while academic participants emphasized their specific focus on students as stakeholders and how the pandemic forced them to re-evaluate their practices. Academic staff also had to expedite learning to use new technology and findings also revealed that some academic institutions were using technology and digital communication platforms more strategically than others by not just delivering lectures and material but also obtaining input from students, conducting research and utilizing it effectively to listen to their stakeholders with the aim of responding to their needs.

A-Q: "... some of the older lecturers never really used it as they were supposed to, but they used it. But yes, it was a, it was a very steep learning curve for staff, for some, for most staff as well. You know the youngsters were on board very quickly. But the rest had to learn, so we learned a lot this year."

COVID-19 has brought us that realization as an institution and that's why we are looking at new learning management platforms such as Moodle. We are going to integrate that. Something that we should have done ages ago, but nevertheless it brought that realization.

I-Q: "Psychologically I found it very tough on the team. So we spent a lot of time on that kind of how should we say nurturing of the team members from a motivational level, but from an operational level and from a client work perspective, from a strategic perspective, we managed to redirect strategies for clients where it was necessary to do so, and we've definitely had enough work."

I wouldn't say it's impeded my ability as a practitioner as a strategic advisor to clients. We found some opportunities along the way, as I indicated to you earlier on, we use them, and as a practitioner and as a team leader and from my team's perspective, we've been busy.

"... they [clients] were also faced with how to communicate from a pandemic perspective or from working from home perspective or a lock down perspective. So they were to a certain degree caught up in needing to understand themselves. How do they change the way they look and sound and talk and communicate to their clients? And so there was a lot of work that we had to do in terms of guiding them on that."

In light hereof, they were not notably disrupted by the pandemic.

### 5.2.3. Theme 2.3: More Opportunities for Communication to Show Value

The value of organization capabilities to provide contextual intelligence by identifying fake news and functioning across platforms was identified.

The data reflected that both groups were innovative in adding value to the organization in providing contextual intelligence by functioning across platforms. Academic participants indicated that personal communication innovation came about by engaging with students online as well as finding new ways to ensure that work integrated learning programs were completed. However, industry participants indicated that their personal level of technological skills influenced their strategic application and personal capabilities.

The challenges conveyed by industry in reference to the multiple voices and issues identified by stakeholders, however, also brought about elevated needs to address the issue of fake news created on social media platforms.

I-Q: "... so it [fake news] was a very big challenge for us especially if you don't know where the fake news is coming from, as it has different sources."

A-Q: "I think people don't know how to deal with uncomfortable situations and different expectations but I think you really as communication practitioners, you need to be able to function across different platforms."

#### 5.2.4 . Theme 2.4: The Ability to Be Flexible in Strategy, Being Innovative. More Effort Should Be Made to Keep Standards of Practice

Flexible structures assisted in the maintenance of professional practice for both groups. An interesting view from the academic participants was that strategy should be perceived as a communicated practice that is enacted, indicating that COVID-19 emphasized the role individuals have within the departments to ensure strategic value; while industry participants agreed that COVID-19's impact on personal capabilities forced them to rely on the capabilities they developed over the years.

A-Q: "I think strategy is something that is created and realized by the organizational members themselves. I think if you look at the Communicative Constitution of the Organization, strategy should be perceived as a communicated practice that is enacted. I think at different organizational levels as the organization continuously reinvents itself. So those things I think could be considered, and obviously then the multi-voiced context like I mentioned previously, the continuous inputs."

I-Q: "You had a strategy at the beginning of 2020, by March you had none. Quite honestly, so it's all very new. Change comes with uncertainty. But it is the capability skills that you develop over the years. To think on your feet, to be innovative. Identify opportunities where possible. Be more creative in your communication efforts."

#### 5.2.5 . Theme 2.5: Contextual Influence Was Highlighted in Change

This theme encapsulates findings reflecting the post-COVID-19 role of PR and Strategic Communication in South Africa. Findings amplified the importance of credibility and internal communication from a personal capability viewpoint. Both industry and academic participants acknowledged that COVID-19 had primarily highlighted the importance of credibility in communication on digital platforms and emphasized the importance of internal communication during the pandemic. This aligns to the literature that indicated internal communication, crisis communication, media relations (specifically social media) corporate social responsibility (CSR) seem to be the most affected by the pandemic (Xifra, 2020).

A-Q: "Credibility as such has changed."

I-Q: "Internal communication has evolved in the last year, it is very important that you brand your organization for employees as a place of belonging, a sense of identity and a sense of purpose. Especially now."

#### 5.2.6 . Theme 2.6: Contextual Influence: Organizational Leadership Was Affected and Developing Self and Others in Terms of Professional Capabilities

Participants felt that their influence in providing contextual influence increased



during the pandemic and that they had to develop professional capabilities quickly.

A-Q: “Leadership was lacking/there was no leadership.”

I-Q: “... people’s context changed overnight.”

#### 5.2.7. Theme 2.7: Support of Wellness and the Importance of Reflective Adaptable Communication Practice

Participants indicated the importance of constant support for all stakeholders – not just internal stakeholders – through reflective, adaptable communication practice. An interesting finding that emerged from the data in that senior academics did not report on their own mental health, but rather considered the mental health of their students. However, the industry leaders were extremely aware of the influence COVID-19 had on their personal capabilities to practice. The literature did not address the issue of mental wellness and the impact thereof to fulfill the personal capabilities. However, this can be seen as a point for further research.

A-Q: “Informal survey of twitter messages between parents, students and university.”

I-Q: “I think we’re going to get to a point where you’re going to have to align your values with your clients, otherwise you know you won’t be able to build the relationship on which a lot of our business relies. It’s very much still a sector or an industry for relationships very much, and I think if you don’t share values, or at least be able to understand and have some insight into the values that drive your client’s business, I don’t think you’re going to be able to do well in the long run.”

#### 5.3. *Research Question 3: It Aimed to Explore the Perceptions of Senior PR and Strategic Communication Academics and Industry Leaders to Reflect on the Future of the Strategic Communication Profession in South Africa*

An analysis of the data resulted in the identification of four themes in relation to research question 3, which are listed in no predetermined order of importance.

##### 5.3.1. Theme 3.1: Academics Must Include the GCF into Curriculum Development and Utilize It to Enhance Content

The GCF has significant relevance and value and should be included in curriculum development as it does not just enhance content but also offers good case material. The GCF could offer value to both formal qualifications as well as continuous development programs as it highlights a shift towards a more multi-disciplinary, integrated development of a professional that is capable of practicing in a diverse and dynamic industry while strategically utilizing the resources to grow the organization. This is increasingly becoming important in an increasingly complex, volatile and ambiguous environment that has to deal with the challenges of a global pandemic.

I-Q: “Your students must be made familiar with the framework. I’ve had the opportunity of having interns from the universities but I find that the curriculum

focuses more on the academic side and then the practicality of our environment is not really emphasized. When they come here, they do have the qualification, but the qualification doesn't speak to what is happening in the corporate environment in as far as communication is concerned."

#### 5.3.2. Theme 3.2: Digital Communication in Terms of Engagement and Collaboration

The effect of the digital divide on communication was emphasized. This was a real issue in the academic environment and industry also mentioned the need for new and old employees to build digital capabilities to survive. This theme confirms that the use of digital communication to collaborate and build engagement with stakeholders is now entrenched in the operations of communication practice. The 4IR, in terms of communication can now almost be considered completely supported and some academic participants even referred to possible collaboration with robotics and the need to ensure that students are made aware of the possibilities.

A-Q: "I think you know with IT even engineering. You know the robotics guys you know. Certainly, you know I think there needs to be some collaboration there."

"We have to be more aware of the whole online and automation situation."

I-Q: "The pandemic has emphasized the 4IR and its impact."

#### 5.3.3. Theme 3.3: Mental Health and Internal Stakeholder Support, Relationship and Trust

A theme that emerged strongly from all interviews involved the importance of mental health and internal stakeholder support, as well as the ways of building relationships and trust in this era of digital communication during the time of lockdown and changes such as work from home or remotely.

A-Q: "COVID-19 has taught the importance of soft skills. Soft skills include the understanding of the full context of a problem, people's own experiences, fears and uncertainties. Misunderstanding of vast amount of messages by various sources i.e. government, WHO etc. Who do they listen too, being paralyzed with fear and hampering optimal functioning."

I-Q: "Psychologically I found it very tough on the team. So we spent a lot of time on that kind of, how should we say, nurturing of the team members from a motivational level ..."

#### 5.3.4. Theme 3.4: Support of Wellness and the Importance of Reflective Adaptable Communication Practice

Participants indicated support for the importance of continuous support for all stakeholders – not just internal stakeholders – through reflective, adaptable communication practice.

This was another aspect of the theme of mental health during the lockdown

restrictions. Staff members were even prepared to make allowances for and to adapt to the various skill performance indicators.

A-Q: “Informal survey of twitter messages between parents, students and university.”

I-Q: “It allows people to compromise performance behavior, not everyone is professional online, some people make excuses. The key theme here is about authentic communication.”

“I think we’re going to get to a point where you’re going to have to align your values with your clients, otherwise you know you won’t be able to build the relationship on which a lot of our business relies. It’s very much still a sector or an industry for relationships very much, and I think if you don’t share values, or at least be able to understand and have some insight into the values that drive your client’s business, I don’t think you’re going to be able to do well in the long run.”

#### 5.4. *In a Nutshell*

This pilot study aimed to explore the influence of COVID-19 on the personal practice of South African senior industry and academic leaders in alignment to the GCF (Fawkes et al., 2018). The findings and discussions identified opportunities for further exploration in that the value of the GCF is evident and for that reason it should be promoted through various engagements in both industry and academia.

The research highlighted the need for a guiding framework in the context of industry and academia which are both complex environments characterized by multiple stakeholders and communities who live in polycontextual environments with multiple voices. Currently, the acknowledgment of its intrinsic futuristic value and relevance, but limited application by industry, and even less in curricula by the academy, is concerning. This highlights the need for collaboration and partnership with professional bodies to ensure an awareness of frameworks such as the GCF and its value to industry and academia. Moreover, it emphasizes the need for PRISA to play an active role in promoting and coordinating the implementation of the GCF.

COVID-19 highlighted the need for a strategic focus on all levels of practice. Industry and academics are functioning within a paradigm that emphasizes dialogue and collaboration, the relevance of dissent and influence rather than traditional management. This calls for professionals to pay attention to contextual intelligence and realize that the context they are functioning within requires more than just the identification and management of crises, which is a constant, but acknowledge the need for change leadership. This necessitates that SCPs in industry and academic contexts develop their personal capabilities in line with the GCF and the needs of their respective contexts in order to address the challenges experienced by a polycontextual environment. It highlights the need for professionals to develop a metamodern approach to practice which requires oscillation between principles embedded in modernism and postmodernism while they mediate between them and respond to existing complex polycontextual environments filled with multiple voices. This

approach also allows for awareness and tolerance of differences, ambiguity and conflict while accepting metanarratives and the relevance of grand theory in knowledge (Meyer & Barker, 2020).

The aforementioned highlights the importance of a transformational mindset which has become crucial in the time of a global pandemic. It is recommended that the GCF consider some key aspects in future versions of the framework. In light of the future and post-pandemic world that faces different wicked challenges, future versions should emphasize the symbolic intermediary role of the practitioner in emerging contexts and the relevance of reflective practice and a transdisciplinary approach therein. Furthermore, the framework needs to consider the shift towards corporate sustainability as a key organizational concept and not just building and enhancing organizational reputation as an organizational capability. In turn, this will mean that the relevance of partnerships and the strategic identification and development thereof, is included as a professional capability.

In addition, it is recommended that the GCF future versions consider the development of a new capability considering the new normal in a post-pandemic world. This type of capability will have to highlight the skills needed to deal with the organization as complex environment characterized by disruption. The practitioner needs the capabilities to deal with the organization as an adaptive, self-organizing system where it is crucial to manage emerging risks. Moreover, this will require the recognition of the organization as a social enterprise that focuses on social priorities while creating trusting partnerships with corporate sustainability being a key imperative.

With consideration of the aforementioned, 4IR and the use of digital platforms for stakeholder engagement is an essential new reality. It is however crucial that the emphasis is not placed only on communication platforms, but rather the role that people play in this context and how these tools can be strategically applied to ensure effective engagement and dialogue. It highlights the need for SCPs to ensure that they develop required 4IR capabilities relevant to their personal practice. Ongoing research, conducted by industry and academia, will ensure relevant approaches and assist all to benefit from these developments.

Personal wellness during the crisis was one of the key themes from this pilot study. Personal capabilities of practitioners as well as that of their stakeholders can be addressed with a symbolic intermediary approach. This approach needs further exploration within diverse contexts.

## **Conclusion**

Strategic communication, as an inclusive discipline has at its core collaboration, emergence, codesign and a transformational mindset (Verwey, 2015), and thus offered a fitting foundation to this exploratory, pilot study on COVID-19, changing context and personal practice based on the GCF. Changes brought about by the

pandemic highlighted the need for strategic communication and public relations practitioners, corporate communication managers, communication agency leaders and academics to work together in furthering the capabilities of all professionals. A transformational mindset is needed as stakeholders and society find itself in a constant state of change. SCPs should constantly reflect on their own capabilities, engage change and be innovative in their approach, whilst staying grounded in the principles of relationships, engagement and meaning-making.

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### Authors' contribution

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