

# JOB SHADOWING

## A Pilot Study of Public Relations Undergraduates

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores job shadowing as an experience-based component of public relations undergraduate education. After being paired with public relations professionals for one day in the work guide's professional environment, senior-level public relations students reported that shadowing was a constructive activity and overwhelmingly recommended that the program be continued. Findings indicate that the value of shadowing should not be to gain specific work skills as in the internship scenario, but simply to provide opportunities to observe working professionals in working environments. Contextualization, the degree to which students understood how academic course work would apply to the professional environment, emerged as the aspect of job shadowing most highly correlated with reported changes in each of the three confidence measures: ability confidence ( $r = .8388, p < .001$ ); career confidence choice ( $r = .7997, p < .001$ ); and education choice confidence ( $r = .6183, p < .001$ ).

Job shadowing is a one-on-one participatory activity that allows a student to spend several hours with a host work guide in his or her day-to-day working environment. As an experienced-based learning activity, shadowing enables students to gain insights about careers and professional environments as well as to interact personally with work guides. On the surface, shadowing appears to be a highly desirable activity to integrate into the public relations curriculum for undergraduate students. This pilot study investigates the utility of job shadowing, provides insights regarding the development and execution of shadow programs, and contributes to the body of knowledge relating to job shadowing as a component of public relations education. Such research is vital given the rapidly increasing demand for public relations education (Johnson & Ross, 2000) and for persons trained in public relations (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999).

While job shadowing is intuitively appealing as a way to enhance public relations undergraduate curriculum, no literature was found that specifically examines the utility of job shadowing in public relations education. The lack of literature is not surprising, however, given that job shadowing is a relatively young concept in the United States. In 1988, for example, Herr and Watts wrote that, while job shadowing had been assertively applied in British educational institutions, the term was "virtually unmentioned in American career development literature" (p. 80). Since then, job shadowing has gained momentum in the U.S. over the last decade and especially since the School-to-Work Act of 1994.

Job shadowing has been most common in the United States on the junior high and high school levels as a tool for youngsters to explore alternative career options (Mariani, 1998). One reason that it has been so successful at the junior and high school level is that many local chambers of commerce coordinate job shadow programs as a way for members to demonstrate good corporate citizenship. In addition, industries with high demands for human resources, such as health care and high-tech industries, have implemented shadow programs as a recruiting tool (Bucci, K. K. 1993; "Teaming Up"; Wilson & Mitchell, 1999). Perhaps the most widely known job shadowing event is Groundhog Job Shadow Day—a program

sponsored by Monster.com; America's Promise; the American Society of Association Executives; Junior Achievement; and School-to-Work Opportunities, a collaborative program of the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Labor. Groundhog Job Shadow Day coordinators reported that over one million young people shadowed working professionals on February 2, 2000, the date of the program's third annual event ("Groundhog Job Shadow").

Unfortunately, these efforts have not been duplicated widely at the university level. This is surprising because an experienced-based educational model for students of public relations has generally been respected both by industry and academia. In fact, the Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education recommends that supervised work experience in public relations should be required in the ideal undergraduate public relations curriculum (Commission on Public Relations Education, 1999, p.23). Internships, for example, have long been recognized and utilized as an experienced-based learning activity in undergraduate public relations curriculums, and several studies have addressed internships as undergraduate public relations learning experiences (Beard & Morton, 1999; Gibson, 1998; Maynard, 1999).

Evidence exists that students gain more from interaction with real people in real working environments. For example, using case studies to simulate real-world scenarios in public relations education is frequent (Adams, 1993). Furthermore, Aldoory and Wrigley (2000) examined the use of actual clients in public relations campaigns courses and concluded that students, clients and educators benefited from the experience over the use of fictitious clients. Aldoory and Wrigley's study would indicate that shadowing would be more beneficial than any pretend scenarios conducted in the classroom.

In the current study, students shadowed a public relations professional in the workplace for one day and reported their experiences, which are presented here. Moreover, specific aspects of the job shadowing experience (including participation, the degree to which students participated in work activities; integration, the degree to which students observed their work guides' assimilation into the workplace; and

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contextualization, the degree to which students related how their course work would apply to the professional environment) are examined in relation to changes in students' confidence levels and the development of short and long-term career objectives. This examination should shed light on the usefulness of a shadow program as part of the undergraduate public relations curriculum.

Given the paucity of literature examining public relations job shadowing, an obvious question addresses the overall utility of undergraduate public relations students participating in job shadowing.

Specific research questions addressing this issue include:

RQ 1 Do students perceive job shadowing as a useful activity?

RQ 2 Does job shadowing aid students in developing short and long-term career objectives?

Herr and Watts (1988) wrote that the educational benefits of shadowing may lie in incidental learning rather than systematically planned learning objectives associated with the classroom. They asserted that observation was an important element of the shadowing experience, allowing students "to gain access, albeit vicariously, to the feeling and emotions of the real worker who is observed across a range of work relationships and events" (p. 82). This research asks if specific aspects of the shadowing experiences would be correlated to respondents' assessments of the experience's impact on their confidence levels.

RQ 3 Do participation, integration, and contextualization correlate with reported changes in students' confidence levels?

#### METHOD

This pilot study was conducted with senior level students enrolled in the capstone public relations campaigns course at a small Southern regional university. They were paired with working public relations and communication professionals for one day and completed a written survey evaluating their shadowing experience.

#### PARTICIPANTS

Eleven females and five males were enrolled in the capstone course and all shadowed a work guide and completed an evaluation instrument. Eleven participants anticipated graduating within three months from the time in which the study was conducted. Three others anticipated graduation within one calendar year. Two did not anticipate graduation until one year after the semester in which the study was conducted, and two respondents did not report anticipated graduation dates.

TABLE 1  
Correlations Between Aspects of the Shadowing Experience and Reported Changes in Confidence Levels (N=16)

	Education Choice Confidence	Career Choice Confidence	Ability Confidence
PARTICIPATION .....	.5079a	.5577a	.4669a
INTEGRATION .....	.6293b	.6329b	.4819a
CONTEXTUALIZATION .....	.8388c	.7997c	.6183b

Note: ap < .05, bp < .01, cp < .001

TABLE 2  
Correlations Between Integration, Contextualization and Short and Long-Term Career Objective Development (N=16)

	Short-Term Career Objective Development	Long-Term Career Objective Development
INTEGRATION .....	.5987a	.5540a
CONTEXTUALIZATION .....	.6498b	.6492b

Note: ap < .05, bp < .01

#### INSTRUMENT

An evaluation instrument (see Appendix) was developed to document participants' characteristics, to assess the participants' perceptions and reactions, and to assess specific aspects of the shadowing experience itself. Three specific aspects of the shadowing experience explored as variables were participation, integration and contextualization. The first aspect, participation, was defined as the degree to which shadows contributed to the work guides' job responsibilities. Integration, the second aspect, referred to the degree to which the students made observations that allowed them to draw conclusions about how the work guide copes with the stresses and pressures in his or her workday. The third aspect, contextualization, was defined as the degree to which the shadow experience aided students in understanding the relationship between mass communication courses and the professional world.

Participation was measured with the question:

*Did your job shadowing experience include opportunities for you to contribute to the work guide's job responsibilities (such as writing ad copy or making recommendations regarding a specific situation)?*

Integration was measured with the question:

*Did your shadowing experience allow you to draw conclusions about how your work guide copes with the stresses and pressures of his or her work day?*

Finally, contextualization was measured with the question:

*Did your job shadowing experience help you to understand the relationship*

*between your mass communication courses and the professional world?*

In all three cases, participants responded to the questions using a 5-point scale with 1 being "definitely no" and 5 being "definitely yes."

Several factors were examined in relation to respondents' assessment of their shadowing experiences including how much participants liked their work guides on personal and professional levels, the amount of time spent with the work guides, and the amount of time that lapsed between the shadow experience and the date of program evaluation. None of these factors were correlated with respondents' assessments of the usefulness of their shadowing experience.

#### PROCESS

First, the course instructor selectively chose work guides, made initial contacts and secured consent to participate by phone. Second, a letter to the work guides explaining the program and a form requesting meeting information followed. Students next chose the volunteer work guides they wished to shadow, thus allowing students a voice as well as an opportunity to pursue personal interest areas. Lastly, following the shadow experience, students completed surveys that included both quantitative and qualitative questions assessing the students' job shadowing experiences. Sixteen useable surveys were collected.

Quantitative data from the small convenience sample were analyzed using the SPSS 10.0 statistical analysis program. The researcher reviewed qualitative data.

#### RESULTS

RQ 1: Do students perceive job shadowing as a useful activity?

Three survey questions directly related to the first research question. The answers to these questions suggest that the answer to the first research question is that students perceive shadowing experiences to be useful activities.

First, respondents rated their overall shadowing experience from 1 to 10 with 1 being awful and 10 being excellent. Responses were generally favorable (M = 7.37, SD = 2.5). Thirteen of the 16 respondents rated their overall experience at 7 or above.

Second, respondents using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 being "definitely no" to 5 being "definitely yes" registered their responses to the question: "Was your participation in the shadow program a useful application of your time?" Responses were favorable (M = 3.44, SD = 1.31).

Third, respondents were asked if they would recommend continuing the shadowing program using the 5-point response scale. Participants overwhelmingly recommended continuation of the program (M = 4.31, SD = 1.4).

Three respondents rated their overall shadowing experience below 7 on a 10-point scale with 1 being awful and 10 being excellent.

Qualitative statements from the three respondents having negative experiences were examined to expound on their sources of dissatisfaction. One's statements indicated that the low rating was "only because it [job shadow] did not pertain to [mass communication] at all" and another dissatisfied shadow wrote, "If the shadowing would have been more related to the field...I would of [sic] learned more." The third student giving the shadowing experience a low rating responded, "I think the shadow program could be beneficial if kept to a strictly volunteer basis. I felt coerced into it and, what's more, so did my work guide, and thus had an unproductive experience."

Qualitative comments from participants having very positive experiences included: "I am not so scared to graduate anymore," and "I learned a lot and gained a friendly face and a great business contact." Another respondent wrote that the most important lesson drawn from the experience was that "I do have a chance of getting a good job" while another respondent wrote that the most important lesson was "I can do anything, I try to."

RQ 2: Does job shadowing aid students in developing short and long-term career objectives?

Two separate survey items addressed the second research question.

Answers to these questions suggest that the answer to the second research question is that job shadowing may marginally impact short-term professional

### APPENDIX Shadow Program Evaluation

Thank you for participating in the Shadow Program and completing this evaluation. Your responses are anonymous and will NOT affect your grade in this course. Results of this evaluation will be used to assess the utility of the program and to direct how the program is implemented in the future. Please provide honest, candid answers.

#### About you

1. I am (circle one)... female male

2. I will graduate (check one)...

- Spring 2000
- Summer 2000
- Fall 2000
- Spring 2001
- After Spring 2001

#### About your work guide

The "work guide" is the person you shadowed. If you shadowed more than one person, choose the one with whom you spent the most time.

3. On a personal level, I perceived my work guide as (circle responses)...

Friendly	5	4	3	2	1	Unfriendly
Sincere	5	4	3	2	1	Insincere
Polite	5	4	3	2	1	Impolite

4. On a professional level, I perceived my work guide as (circle responses)...

Competent	5	4	3	2	1	Incompetent
Enthusiastic	5	4	3	2	1	Unenthusiastic
Professional	5	4	3	2	1	Unprofessional

#### About your shadowing experience

5. Approximate the number of days since your shadow experience (fill in the blank)... \_\_\_\_\_ days

6. Approximate the time (not including commuting time) you spent in the shadow experience (fill in the blank with a whole number)... \_\_\_\_\_ hours

7. Did your shadowing experience include opportunities for you to contribute to the work guide's job responsibilities (such as writing ad copy or making recommendations regarding a specific situation)? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

8. Did your shadowing experience allow you to draw conclusions about how your work guide copes with the stresses and pressures in his or her work day? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

9. Did your shadowing experience help you to understand the relationship between your mass communication courses and the professional world? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

#### About your reactions

10. Did your shadowing experience help you to make decisions regarding your career-oriented activities as you approach graduation? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

11. Did your shadowing experience help you to clarify your long-term career goals? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

12. Did your shadowing experience help you to feel more confident about having chosen the public relations curriculum? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

13. Did your shadowing experience increase your confidence about entering the professional world of public relations? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

14. Did your shadowing experience increase your confidence regarding your own ability to be a professional communicator? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

15. Was your participation in the shadow program a useful application of your time? (Circle your response.)

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

16. Rate your overall shadowing experience from 1 to 10 with 1 being awful and 10 being excellent. (Fill in the blank.) \_\_\_\_\_

#### About the program's administration

17. Would you recommend continuing this program?

1	2	3	4	5
Definitely No	No	Neutral	Yes	Definitely Yes

18. This program would be most useful for college students who are (check one)...

- Freshmen
- Sophomores
- Juniors
- Seniors

#### About your observations

19. What observation(s) made during your shadowing experience was/were unexpected or most surprising to you?

\_\_\_\_\_

20. What was the most important lesson you drew from your shadowing experience?

\_\_\_\_\_

Your comments. Use the space below to add any other comments or recommendations.

\_\_\_\_\_



considerations. However, no evidence suggests that shadowing contributed to development of long-term career objectives.

Mean responses were near neutral ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) (1 = "definitely no," 5 = "definitely yes") to the question: "Did your shadowing experience help you to make decisions regarding your career-oriented activities as you approach graduation?" Nine of the 16 participants responded "yes" or "definitely yes" to the query.

Responses to the question assessing the shadowing experience's impact on long-term career goals were neutral ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) with half of the responses being "no" or "definitely no."

RQ 3: Do participation, integration and contextualization correlate with reported changes in students' confidence levels?

Table 1 reports one-tailed Pearson's correlations between aspects of the shadowing experience (participation, integration, contextualization) and ability confidence, career choice confidence, and education choice confidence. Significant correlations were found to exist between participation, integration and contextualization, and all three measures of changes in confidence—ability confidence, career confidence and education choice confidence. Moreover, contextualization emerged as the aspect of job shadowing most highly correlated with reported changes in each of the three confidence measures: for ability confidence ( $r = .8388$ ,  $p < .001$ ); for career confidence choice ( $r = .7997$ ,  $p < .001$ ); and for education choice confidence ( $r = .6183$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### OTHER FINDINGS

Because of the findings reported in Table 1, a post hoc question was developed to explore possible relationships between aspects of the shadowing experience and the development of short and long-term career objectives. Pearson's two-tailed correlations showed that participation was not significantly correlated with either short or long-term career objective development. Integration and contextualization, however, were. Results are shown in Table 2. Significant correlations from .55 to .65 suggest a weak positive relationship may exist.

Finally, respondents were asked at what point in college careers would shadowing be most useful. Eight respondents felt the experience would be most useful at the junior level. Four respondents thought the senior year was best, and two thought sophomores would benefit most (2 missing values).

#### DISCUSSION

The value of shadowing lies neither in the acquisition of specific work skills

nor knowledge but in its ability to provide students with opportunities to observe working professionals in working environments. In this study, students who used their experiences to draw conclusions about the work guides' handling of day-to-day work demands and who saw relationships between their course work and the professional world were more likely to report increased confidences regarding career choice, ability level and educational choices.

While the findings indicate that shadowing can be beneficial, limitations of this study include the small number of respondents. This convenience sample was composed of seniors and it is very likely that job shadowing experiences would be perceived quite differently by students who have taken less course work. In the current study, work guides were selectively chosen by the researcher/instructor because of their competence and professionalism. Variations in the work guides could strongly affect student outcomes. Finally, the instrument used in this study was developed by the researcher/course instructor and was not tested for reliability.

The need for a body of literature examining work-related education ex-

periences is critical, and studies examining the educational benefits of job shadowing in public relations are lacking. This pilot study tentatively provides both practical and scholarly contributions, but the need for researchers to question the efficacy of shadowing remains.

First, more research needs to be done to establish shadowing as a useful pedagogical tool. Future studies should also explore the outcomes of shadowing and investigate how shadow programs can be designed and implemented for maximum impact. How, for example, can shadowing programs be designed to better aid students in the development of their short and long-term career goals? At what stage in a student's collegiate career is shadowing most effective, and how will work guide training impact the utility of shadowing experiences? While experienced-based education is intuitively attractive to both academia and industry, shadowing remains an underutilized tool that has potential to positively impact the professional development of future public relations professionals. This pilot study provides grounding to support the validity of shadowing as an innovative and beneficial educational activity.

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