

GIFTS

## **Looking Back, Stepping Forward: COVID-19 PR KSA Development and Adaptation Assessment for Post-traumatic Growth**

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### ABSTRACT

Class tested assignments: a sequential series of assignments and an activity developed for senior PR students in a capstone PR management and research class.

*Keywords:* public relations; post-traumatic growth; knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs); diversity, equity and inclusion; career preparation; pandemic

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## **Overview**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a worldwide trauma (Prideaux, 2021). Young people, who make up most of post-secondary student bodies, are experiencing these effects in many ways (Mental Health America, 2021). For example, the US Surgeon General recently announced a mental health crisis among America's youth (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). This assignment helps PR senior students who have been learning in the pandemic access post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth, both a process and outcome, occurs when traumatic experiences result in positive growth (Tedeschi et al., 2018). It is fostered by education, specifically reflexive meaning-building exercises and the development of narratives about what has happened and the opportunities that this provides (Tedeschi, 2020). While the pandemic is not yet over, seniors shed their student identities when graduating, marking an opportunity to reflect on the end of their roles as students during the pandemic and foster such post-traumatic growth.

## **Procedure**

To facilitate this process, this series of assignments has senior students identify KSAs – Knowledge, Skills and Abilities – that they've developed or adapted in their PR courses in response to the pandemic. This occurs through a KSA assessment via a handout and in-class activity with a list of KSAs culled from recent research and industry reports on topics ranging from entry-level PR hiring (DiStaso et al., 2019; Krishna et al., 2020; Meganck et al., 2020) to pandemic KSA development (Cukier et al., 2021; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2021). (See Table 1 in Appendix A and Table 1 in Appendix D). They then analyze how these KSAs provide them with competitive advantages by developing an interview guide and undertaking information interviews with PR professionals on hiring and emergent pandemic PR trends using the list (see Appendices B and D). To facilitate these interviews students

are invited to connect to the professor's LinkedIn profile representative of the course's alumni network, and in-class discussions detail how to research and network with potential interviewees in these networks. Finally students synthesize what they've learned from their KSA assessment and the interviews in a short report (see Appendix C).

### ***Rationale***

Such work enables two particular post-traumatic growth outcomes. The first, personal strength outcomes, occurs when students realize how strong they've been facing pandemic challenges (Tedeschi, 2020). The second, identifying new possibilities, occurs when students assess how their newly developed or adapted KSAs provide them with opportunities in the PR field (Tedeschi, 2020).

### **Student Learning Goals**

- Recognize the strength exemplified in developing or adapting knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) during the pandemic, as well as the opportunities afforded by those same KSAs.
- Adopt a strategic framework to analyze and understand how challenging events provide strategic opportunities.
- Gain actual experience developing, recruiting and undertaking interviews for strategic analytic purposes.
- Ensure equal access to professionalization networks and networking knowledge.

### **Connection to PR Theory and Practice**

This exercise was developed for my senior capstone in PR management and research for PR majors. The course requires students, working in agency teams, to develop a strategic PR plan (SPP) for a client. One of the challenges students typically face in the classroom is how to begin to think strategically. This often occurs when students are asked what opportunities their potential clients face during the client appraisal process as well as in their strength, weakness, opportunity and threat

analyses (SWOTs). This exercise shows them how to assess contextual value and opportunities, and therefore provides scaffolding for how to develop those aspects of the SPP. It also prepares students for the primary research needs of the SPP, such as client briefing interviews or primary employee research, via actual interview development, experience and analysis. These experiences are similar to what one would encounter in professional strategic PR contexts. Additionally, the first activity in this series of assignments, the student KSA assessment, provides students with a researched handout with KSAs that they may have developed or adapted in response to the pandemic. Working with this handout expands students' knowledge of their own pandemic KSA repertoires. Finally, research shows that a key barrier to professionalization for first generation and historically under-represented students involves lack of access to professional networks and networking education (Parks-Yancy, 2012; Stanislaus et al., 2021; Terry & Fobia, 2019). This assignment is one small step toward ensuring that such access and learning occurs, as called for by the most recent Public Relations Society of America report on diversity, equity and inclusion (Blow et al., 2021).

### **Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes**

The assignment's reassessment process ensures students adopt a strategic framework to their pandemic induced KSAs. As one student noted in her final assignment: "Overall, this assignment forced me to reflect on me. It allowed me to see light in all the negative that has happened over the course of the past few years. Most of all it allowed me to take my past experiences and analyze how the pandemic made me even more prepared to enter the industry." (The student has provided permission to have this portion of their work used publicly).

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## Appendix A

### KSA Assessment Exercise for Student Completion

This assignment is done in class and submitted for participation credit.

1. Think back to when the pandemic started. What did you have to do to **shift** to learning online? Bullet points are fine.
2. After you got online, what did you need to do to **keep** effectively learning online? Think about technical skills, communication with classmates/professors, and what you needed to do to take care of yourself during this period of change. Bullet points are fine.
3. The next page contains a list of key PR knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs). Bolded items identify KSAs that research shows are important both for PR and pandemic purposes. Identify your level of experience with all the items in the list.
4. Review these skills again. Are there any items on the list that you had to newly develop because of the pandemic? Are there any items that you had to adapt because of the pandemic? Provide a short explanation next to each identified item.
5. List the skills you've identified using, developing or adapting during the pandemic here. Rank them in order of most to least important. Write a paragraph that details why your top three KSAs are most important to you now as a student. How have they helped you be a successful student during the pandemic? What advantages, if any, have they given you as a student during the pandemic?

**Table 1***Sample of Table for Student KSA Assessment*

<b>KSA and Associated References</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Experience level</b>	<b>Pandemic development? Y/N</b>	<b>Pandemic adaptation? Y/N</b>	<b>Pandemic explanation</b>
Creativity	“Your ability to imagine, develop, express, encourage, and apply ideas in ways that are novel, unexpected, or challenge existing methods and norms.” (Cukier et al., 2021, p. 21).	1 2 3 4 5			

*Note.* The full table that is used with students is found in Appendix D. This table sample shows the headings that are used with that table for students during the first KSA assessment activity.

**Appendix B**

## Information Interview Assignment

When interviewing someone, whether it’s a PR professional or a client for a client assessment or a member of a key public, you’ll want to have an interview guide to help your interview flow. This handout is designed to help you develop an interview guide.

Researchers use interviews to investigate how others see and understand the world. Doing interviews can help us:

- 1) Ask questions that are important for our society or culture;
- 2) Help leverage previous knowledge; and/or

3) Help us learn something new or unexpected.

Information interviews are designed to help you better understand what it's like to work in a field in practice. For career planning purposes, they're useful to assess which of your sets of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) are needed; KSA deficiencies; which KSAs might be in demand in the near future; as well as identifying KSAs that will help you stand out from others in your field.

To find someone to undertake an information interview with, use your network – ask friends and family, search LinkedIn and any professional directory of which you're a member (for instance, PRSSA). When you contact them, tell them that you identified them as someone to potentially chat with based on your mutual connection “X” (name of your mutual connection here). Ask them for a twenty-thirty minute information interview about public relations. Let them know you'll soon be a recent graduate of [*your institution's name here*]'s PR program, and you're undertaking an assessment of KSAs you've developed as a result of the pandemic. After they agree to participate, let them know that you've got a list of key PR KSAs that you'll be using during the interview and will be sending to them in advance of the interview (see Appendix D). You'll also need to ask your participant to let you record the interview so you can use the answers for a KSA value assessment assignment.

To develop your interview guide, take the following steps:

1. Do some research. Generally for any interview you want to identify what is already known about a topic (in this case, KSAs in relation to early career jobs), and what is not known. For an information interview in general, you'll want to:
  - a. Have a general understanding of some of the practices of the person you'll be interviewing. For instance, if you

choose to interview someone who specializes in crisis communication, what are some of the key things that happen in crisis communication versus media relations? PRSA is a good resource for this; see <https://www.prsa.org/about/all-about-pr>

b. Have a sense of some of the trends in the field. For instance, what's been happening as a result of the pandemic that might have affected the person you're talking with? To do this, scan through some industry publications such as PR News or PR Daily.

2. Based on this research, develop some research questions that you want answered by the information interview. For example, one research question might be "What KSAs do I need to start a position in the PR field?" For information interviews, research questions can cover a variety of topics; below is a list of common topics. Please choose which ones you'll cover in your interview and develop at least one research question for each topic that you choose.

***Common information interview topics***

Job fit - common KSAs needed for the job.

What are industry trends? Where is the industry heading?

What KSAs are regularly used?

What KSAs aren't needed?

What KSAs are rare and highly needed?

How are KSAs best gained?

Preconceptions about the everyday job that aren't true.

The everyday job practice.

3. List your research questions here. You should have three minimum research questions.

- a.
- b.
- c.

4. After developing a list of research questions, you'll need to operationalize them into questions that make sense to your participant. For example, a research question that asks "What knowledge do I need to start a position in the PR field?" could generate the following participant questions:

- a. What do you do during an average day?
- b. Thinking about the average day you just described, what skills do you need to do the things you described doing?
- c. Of these skills you just identified, which ones do you think are the most important? Why?

List your interview questions here:

5. Make sure your interview questions address research questions: list 6 interview questions and identify which research questions they address. For example, if the first interview question is:

'Thinking about the average day you just described, what skills do you need to do the things you described doing?', and the corresponding research question is 'A: What knowledge skills do I need to start a position in the PR field?', you would indicate

- a. Interview Question #1: Thinking about the average day you just described, what skills do you need to do the things you described doing?
- b. Which research question Interview Question #1 addresses:  
A

- i. Interview Question #1:

Which research question Interview Question #1 addresses:

ii. Interview Question #2:

Which research question Interview Question #2 addresses:

iii. Interview Question #3:

Which research question Interview Question #3 addresses:

iv. Interview Question #4:

Which research question Interview Question #4 addresses:

v. Interview Question #5:

Which research question Interview Question #5 addresses:

vi. Interview Question #6:

Which research question Interview Question #6 addresses:

6. You'll want to make sure your interview feels like a conversation, not just a Q & A session. Identify two interview questions from your list of interview questions that each represent introductory, transition, key and closing questions below. Identifying these will help ensure that you're appropriately structuring your interview.

a. Introductory Questions:

i. Question 1

ii. Question 2

b. Transition Questions:

i. Question 1

ii. Question 2

c. Key Questions:

i. Question 1

ii. Question 2

d. Closing Questions

i. Question 1

ii. Question 2

7. Your final task is to make sure your participants will understand your questions, and that they'll get you good responses. Review your questions and make sure that they follow these guidelines:

- a. They ask one question at a time (i.e.: no double-barreled questions)
- b. They aren't leading
- c. They are open-ended
- d. They provide opportunities for participants to provide detailed answers
- e. They're written in plain language and are easy to understand (i.e., they do not use jargon or academic language)

8. Attach your interview guide as a Word document to your submission. It should contain, in the following order:

- a. your research questions;
- b. your interview questions, including:  
introductory, transition, key and ending questions in the order in which you'd like to ask them.

9. After submitting your interview guide, you'll need to add several key questions that are detailed below to your interview guide. These questions **MUST BE ASKED** during the interview. You may need to remove or adapt several questions from your interview guide to make room for these key questions.

1. Using the list of KSAs that I sent, what do you think are the top three KSAs that are needed for an early PR career? Why these three?
2. What are some of the key trends that you see emerging in the PR field as a result of the pandemic?
3. Using the same list of KSAs, what do you think are the

top three KSAs that are needed to take advantage of these key trends? Why these three?

### **Appendix C**

#### KSA Value Assessment

Congratulations! You've undertaken an assessment of KSAs that you've developed or adapted in relation to the pandemic. You've also developed an information interview guide and interviewed a PR practitioner to get information about key career issues and trends in the PR industry during COVID-19. This assignment has you merge this information together to identify which of your KSAs have the most value for your PR career moving forward during the pandemic. In other words, what KSAs should you highlight in career materials and processes like resumes, interviews and career plans?

#### **Learning Objectives**

- Synthesize information to assess the strategic value of pandemic-affected KSAs to your career.
- Strategically reflect on how events can function as opportunities.

#### **Assignment Instructions**

1. Whom did you interview? List their name, position and company that they currently work for.
2. Using the list of KSAs, what did your PR practitioner think were the three major KSAs that would be needed for an early PR career? Bullet points are fine here.
3. Using the list of KSAs, what did your PR practitioner think were the three major KSAs that would be needed in the field in the near future, given industry trends and the pandemic? Bullet points are fine here.
4. Of the six KSAs that your PR practitioner identified as important

for beginning your PR career or for the field's future, list the top three KSAs that you have the most experience with from your KSA exercise sheet. Provide a paragraph on each KSA that describes what the KSA is and how you've used it during the pandemic. This writeup should detail how, if at all, you've had to adapt or learn the KSA as a result of the pandemic.

a. Of these top three KSAs, how do you think you can emphasize them in your career search materials? Think specifically about products or processes that you'll be undertaking as part of your career search, such as resumes, portfolios or interview preparation. Your answer should be a minimum of one paragraph and a maximum of three, and use examples.

5. Of the six KSAs that your interviewee identified as important to your early career or for the field's future, which one was most challenging to develop or adapt during the pandemic? Why? What were some of the specific challenges? How did you successfully deal with those barriers to use or adapt the KSA? Your answer should represent a minimum of one paragraph and a maximum of three paragraphs.

6. Go back to your list of ranked skills from your skill assessment exercise for being a student. Given what you've learned from your interview, re-rank them in order of most to least important for beginning your PR career. Write a paragraph that details why the top three KSAs in this list will be most important to you as you start your PR career. How will they help you succeed at the beginning of your career? What advantages, if any, will they give you as you begin your career during the pandemic?

## Appendix D

### Handout for PR Practitioners during Information Interview

The following is a list of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that have been identified in research and industry reports as important for PR careers, as well as for careers during the pandemic. KSAs that represent both PR and pandemic concerns have been bolded.

Table 1

*Handout for PR Practitioners that details KSAs*

<b>KSA and Associated References</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Creativity</b> (Cukier et al., 2021; DiStaso, 2019; Krishna et al.; 2020).	“Your ability to imagine, develop, express, encourage, and apply ideas in ways that are novel, unexpected, or challenge existing methods and norms” (Cukier et al., 2021, p. 21).
Crisis response (Krishna et al., 2020; Public Relations Society of America [PRSA], 2022a; 2022b).	“Acts appropriately at pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis stages” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 2).
<b>Critical thinking</b> (Cukier et al., 2021; DiStaso, 2019).	“Making logical and reasoned judgments that are well thought out” (Radford University, 2022).
Diversity and inclusion (DiStaso, 2019; PRSA, 2022b).	“Identifies and respects a range of differences among key publics. Researches and addresses the cultural preferences and/or needs and barriers to communication with key publics. Develops culturally and linguistically appropriate strategies and tactics” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 1).

Ethical behavior (DiStaso, 2019; PRSA, 2022a, 2022b).	“Conducts professional activities in a lawful and principled manner; adheres to commonly accepted standards for professional behavior” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 1).
Evaluation (PRSA, 2022a, 2022b).	“Determines if goals and objectives of public relations program were met and the extent to which outcomes of public relations programs have been accomplished” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 2).
Implementation (PRSA, 2022a, 2022b).	“Develops timeframes, budgets; assigns responsibilities” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 1)
Leadership (Meganck et al., 2020; PRSA, 2022b).	“Motivates and inspires others, builds coalitions and communicates vision” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 3).
<b>Organizational skills</b> (Meganck et al., 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, [OECD], 2021; PRSA, 2022b).	“Integrates multiple dimensions of a public relations campaign. Combines internal and external components, so that messages are synchronized” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 3).
<b>Perseverance</b> (Cukier et al., 2021; Institute for Public Relations [IPR] & PRSA, 2017).	“Persistence toward goal when facing obstacles” (IPR & PRSA, 2017, p. 14).
Planning (PRSA, 2022a, 2022b).	“Develops goals, objectives, publics, strategy and key messages based on research findings” (PRSA, 2022a, p. 1).
<b>Problem solving</b> (Cukier et al., 2021; DiStaso, 2019; PRSA, 2022b).	“Approaches problems with sound reasoning and logic. Distinguishes between relevant and irrelevant information... Makes sound, well-informed and objective decisions in a timely manner” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 3).

Research (Krishna et al., 2020; PRSA, 2022a, 2022b).	“Uses a variety of research tools to gather information about the employer or client, industry and relevant issues. Investigates stakeholders' understanding of the product, organization and issues” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 1).
<b>Self-control</b> (Cukier et al., 2021; IPR & PRSA, 2017).	Manage stress and setbacks well and make measured, rather than impulsive decisions. (IPR & PRSA, 2017).
Sociality (IPR & PRSA, 2017; DiStaso, 2019).	“Good listeners who communicate clearly and confidently with those from different backgrounds” (IPR & PRSA, 2017, p. 16).
<b>Social media literacy</b> (Cukier et al., 2021; DiStaso, 2019; Krishna et al., 2020; Meganck et al., 2020).	“Knowledge of...channels, strategies, analytics” (Meganck et al., 2020, p. 5).
Understands business processes (Krishna et al., 2020; PRSA, 2022a, 2022b).	“Explains how employers/clients generate revenue and how their operations are conducted. Identifies relevant business drivers and how they impact the business” (PRSA, 2022b, p. 3).
Writing (DiStaso, 2019; Krishna et al.; 2020; Meganck et al., 2020).	“Able to write for all platforms (traditional, social media, internal communications, web/on-line)” (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2017, p. 35).
<b><i>Pandemic Specific KSAs</i></b>	
Active learning (Cukier et al., 2021).	“Continuous learning” (Cukier et al., 2021, p. 25).
Adaptive (Cukier et al., 2021).	“Able to adjust to new situations or surroundings” (Oxford University Press [OUP], n.d.a).

Collaborative (Cukier et al., 2021; OECD, 2021).	“A group of people working in collaboration to achieve a common goal” (OUP, n.d.b).
Flexibility (Cukier, et al., 2021).	“The ability to change or be changed easily according to the situation” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).
Resilient (Cukier et al., 2021).	“Tending to recover quickly or easily from misfortune, shock,…” (OUP, n.d.c).
Uses new environments (Cukier et al., 2021).	“Increased virtual connections internally and externally” (Cukier et al., 2021, p. 24).