The impact of position and gender on personal networks: evidence from the UK public relations industry

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Abstract

This paper presents findings regarding the content and process of personal contact networks and networking of practitioners in a UK professional service. The focus of the study is on public relations practitioners operating in a consultancy environment and reveals their network contacts, together with the range of networking activities they undertake, and the role of these contacts in client acquisition and retention. In particular, the study suggests that there may be two influences on practitioners' actor groups and networking activities, namely position and gender. The study appears to identify that managers may have the smallest networks compared to their colleagues and especially lack weak tie contacts in the form of friends, and that female practitioners may have larger and more varied personal contact networks than men. The study thus offers an insight into personal network membership for public relations practitioners, hitherto unexplored, plus a deeper understanding of the interactional dimensions of social networks, which contributes to a neglected area of network theory.

1.0 Introduction

The findings presented here are part of a wider study into understanding personal contact networks for small businesses, and particularly the professional service sector of public relations where such research has not been undertaken before. As there is a lack of research into small business employees and networking, entrepreneurial research is used here as the closest comparative literature. The paper will briefly consider network theory and identify key weaknesses, and offer an overview of the worldwide and UK public relations industry and the research methods used, before turning to the findings and managerial implications.

2.0 Theoretical background

By viewing society as a 'network' structure of overlapping social relationships which bind individuals, groups and organisations together, network theory asserts that social action and behaviour can be understood in terms of actors' position in social networks and the consequences of the interaction they share (Mitchell 1969). However, this understanding does not solely rely on identifying relationships that an actor and an organisation are embedded in (Granovetter 1973; 1982; 1985; 1992). Rather social network theory requires that interactional dimensions between network actors as well as structural aspects of social networks must be considered (Mitchell 1973). Social network theory was developed as a construct for exploring and understanding social behaviour in terms of relationships between social actors (Mitchell 1969) and as the concept offers a way of conceiving the environment in which small firms exist, it can be seen as an appropriate construct from which to approach network studies of such organisations (Shaw, 1999).

Strength of ties

At its simplest, a network is a set of actors connected by a set of 'ties' which represent a relationship, or lack of relationship, between actors. Any individual's set of relationships can be classified as strong ties, weak ties, and those that are apparently inconsequential, for example, ties with strangers (Granovetter 1973, 1982). Strong ties can be understood as intense relations, characterised by a disproportionate consumption of time and energy compared to other relations. They can involve mutual attachments, and many strands of

friendship, advice, support and sentiment. Strong ties are often characterised by a high similarity between actors and those with family and close friends are often mutually beneficial trust-based relationships (Granovetter 1973, 1982). These ties are important for business owners as they provide a means of avoiding the opportunism and uncertainty inherent in market-mediated transactions (Aldrich and Elam, 2000:177). Weak ties are often at arms length, more superficial, involve much less emotional investment, and consequently are subject to high levels of uncertainty, opportunism and exit. Such ties include those with customers, clients, suppliers and casual contacts made during a business career (Birley, 1985). A third type of ties is with 'strangers', which are undertaken primarily for instrumental reasons, of short duration, and with little emotional attachment. Most research into entrepreneurial behaviour addresses strong ties, with less emphasis on weak ties or contacts with strangers (Aldrich *et al.*, 1997).

The value of strong and weak ties for organisations has been intensively debated in organisational studies and is closely aligned with both network studies and studies of organisational change (Granovetter, 1973; Krackhardt 1992). For example, strong and weak ties were seen to support sales growth for new business (Bruderl and Preisendorfer 1998), yet Rowley, Behrens and Krackhardt (2000) found that strong ties increase performance in the stable steel industry, while weak ties increase performance in the more dynamic semiconductor industry. It can be argued that a strong tie offers a great depth of knowledge, as actors are likely to share contacts and information. However, reliance on them may hinder the creation of new information or fresh perspectives, leading to little diversity of knowledge. Indeed, weak ties are perceived as more important for yielding knowledge, information and resources (Granovetter 1973; Chell and Baines 2000). A business' social or informal network can be seen as the sum of its external contacts (Gulati 1999) where such a network contains all relations with other organisations, including customers, suppliers, and competitors of all possible industries and countries. Entrepreneurs and small business owners and managers may develop both strong and weak ties, increasing their access to information and resources, and multiplying what they can access through direct contacts. However, while this social network analysis offers interesting insights into entrepreneurial and small firms, it is rarely applied to the networks of established professional service firms.

Personal network construct

Research into the process of entrepreneurship in its environmental context (e.g. Aldrich and Zimmer 1986; Johannisson 1986; Birley, Myers and Cromie 1989; Blackburn, Curran and Jarvis 1990; Curran and Blackburn 1992; Donckels and Lambrecht 1995; Joyce, Woods and Black 1995; Gilmore and Carson 1999) gave rise to the use of the personal network construct in entrepreneurship research. This appreciation of the social context of entrepreneurial activity was coupled with the opinion that entrepreneurs place great importance on meeting and conversing with people, leading to the belief that 'business know who' is at least as important as 'business know how' (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2001:752). Such understanding can also be carried into the small business arena, where many researchers have explicitly investigated the networks in which small firms are embedded to identify their role in the survival and growth of small firms, with interest in personal networks increasing in recent years (Dodd 1997).

However, although social networks have been identified as an appropriate construct from which to approach network studies of organisations, Shaw (1999) concludes that such research is more typical of small entrepreneurial firms (e.g. Grandori and Soda 1995), as networks in which smaller firms are embedded are more easily identified and explored, given the inherently fewer number of staff employed (Donkels and Lambrecht 1995). Thus in terms of the unit of analysis, most studies of entrepreneurial personal networks view the network as all relations extending from or converging on the entrepreneur, a perspective referred to as a 'fan-like' structure, and most often employed when investigating newly-created firms (Shaw

1999). Such research may be limited however, as it does not consider the networks of those who run and manage more established firms or the employees within them who may not be entrepreneurs but whose personal networks are less understood in terms of the type of contacts they have built within their networks, the strength of ties and relationships with these contacts, the networking methods and activities used, and the benefits of networking that are perceived by small firm employees, which this research seeks to address.

Neglected areas of network research

Further, much research concentrates on structural dimensions of networks to the neglect of understanding interactional dimensions between network actors (Mitchell 1973). Seminal work by Mitchell (1969) identified a social network as a set of morphological dimensions involving structural dimensions, which consider the pattern and structure of the network, and interactional dimensions, which consider the network process. According to Mitchell (1969) there are four structural dimensions (anchorage, density, reachability and range) and five interactional dimensions (content, intensity, frequency, durability and direction). Less is known about the interactional dimensions of networks in which small and entrepreneurial firms engage, especially the contents of the relationships in which small firms are involved (Shaw 1999). Thus this research seeks to address this area by exploring the content of networks in terms of the activities and actor groups within personal contact networks in public relations consultancies as part of the wider professional service sector.

As a consequence of the structure of networks attracting more research interest than processual aspects, network size has been especially considered an important criterion. For example, network literature frequently reports that network size is positively related to an organisation's initial performance (Hansen 1995). Many studies of entrepreneurial networks have counted entrepreneurs' contacts with other actors (e.g. Birley, 1985; Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Bryson, Wood and Keeble 1993; Wilkins 1997). Yet as O'Donnell *et al.* (2001) point out, it is not simply the size of the network that is a correlate to business success but also diversity. A bigger network may not necessarily lead to the focal person receiving more information. Therefore the question of quality rather than quantity arises, with a balance of strong and weak ties seen by some as more likely to ensure firm survival than a mass of one or the other (Uzzi 1997).

Furthermore, the issue of gender remains a relatively neglected area in network studies although there is a slowly growing body of work in this area. Singh, Vinnicombe and Kumra's (2006) research on individuals' networking and personal network configurations emphasises the gendered nature of networking and networks in the corporate world. Indeed, social networks are important to both men and women's advancement to hierarchical levels (Metz and Tharenou 2001) and networking is seen as essential for success in any professional career (O'Leary and Ickovics 1992). Although earlier studies such as those by Ibarra (1992a; 1992b; 1993) suggest that differences in personal networks of male and female employees favours men, more recent studies have identified that females engage more in both formal and informal networking than males (Van Emerik, Euwema, Geschiere and Schouten 2006). However, more needs to be understood about the gendered nature of social networks and networking, and the extent to which differences may exist in alternative settings and sectors.

Exploring the dynamics of social networks and understanding how they work requires more than observing and recording the size and structure of the network. Despite the increasing volume of research in network studies, key areas as highlighted above remain relatively neglected. Further, only a limited number of studies have been undertaken into the networks of professional service firms (e.g. Wilkins 1997; Shaw 1999; Silversides 2001) despite these representing one of the fastest growing economic segments of most Western and European economies, expanding at an annual rate of 20 per cent (Boojihawon and Young, 2001) with the UK market ranked as the fourth largest concentration of professional service providers in

the world (Nachum 2000). The focus on network size has been to the neglect of understanding the interactional influences of networks and networking. Less is known about the contents of relationships in which small firms engage. Although some research has identified the networking mechanisms used in small companies, such as the use of introductions and referrals by owner-managers and staff to acquire new and repeat business from clients and develop long-term trading relationships in small advertising and design consultancies (Shaw 1999), such studies are rare. Where they are undertaken, research suggests that professional service practitioners engage in networking which includes accessing a variety of networks and performing networking actions and activities (e.g. Wilkins 1997; Shaw 1999; Silversides 2001). However, such research has not extended to the public relations industry. A greater insight into social networks in this sector – in particular the key actors within public relations practitioners' personal networks and their networking methods - will provide a deeper appreciation of the interactional dimensions of personal networks in a different context and increase understanding of the content and process of networking (O'Donnell *et al.* 2001). Furthermore, an understanding of the content and nature of these relationships may also be of strategic advantage to firms, as managing key relationships, for example between buyers and sellers, will help a company to build strong and enduring bonds with its partners and may also result in the company being less vulnerable to attack from competitors (Turnbull and Wilson 1989).

Neglected areas of small business research

A further weakness which can be identified lies in small business and networking literature, where many studies on networking and small firms centre around the networking activities of owner-managers or entrepreneurs (e.g. Birley *et al.* 1991, Blackburn *et al.* 1991; Carson *et al.* 1995; Curran *et al.* 1993) and particularly those engaged in new venture creation. Less attention has been paid to those who are neither business owners nor entrepreneurs, but rather employees who make up the largest proportion of people working for and in small firms in the UK, such as directors, managers and junior employees. The key actors within their personal networks and their networking activities are less well understood, as indeed are the differences in networks of employees occupying different levels within a small firm.

3.0 Public relations

The professional service of public relations is witnessing significant growth in the UK. It is a flourishing management function (CIPR 2005), with a growth rate in the number of jobs in public relations at all levels higher than that of any management function over the last fifteen years (CIPR 2005). The UK public relations industry is the most highly developed in Europe. The industry more than doubled in size between 1988-2005, with current estimates of 55,200 people employed in public relations in the UK and an annual income for consultancies of £345 million (CIPR 2005). The UK is a major centre of the European public relations industry and accounts for approximately £10 billion of the world market (DTI 2004).

However, the rapid growth of public relations has resulted in consultancies facing increasing competition from several quarters. The industry is very permeable to new entrants, public relations is perceived as an easy start-up business (Lages and Simkin 2003), and recent reports suggest consultancies face competition from undercutting freelances (ICCO 2004). Competition also stems from the growing ability of advertising, sales promotion and management agencies to offer public relations skills (White and Mazur, 1995). In the face of increasing competition, public relations consultancies need new strategies to attract and retain clients. Thus this research sought to explore if and to what extent practitioners use their social networks to either retain their clients or win new business. Similarly, although a frequent conclusion with regards to network theory is that membership of a business network offers participants the opportunity to add greater value and benefits to their products or services (e.g. Carson *et al.* 1995; Hill and McGowan, 1996; Shaw 1998) with many authors citing the

relationship between networking activity and small business performance (e.g. Shaw 1999; Chell and Baines 2000; O'Donnell *et al*. 2001), there is little understanding of the extent to which networks and networking have value for public relations consultancies.

One of the key reasons for researching the public relations industry is its dependence on relationships for its very existence and survival. A key influential perspective brought to bear on issues of public relations form and function to emerge in recent years is that of relationship management, which holds that public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the public on whom its success or failure depends (Cutlip, Centre and Broom 1999). Further, the notion of organisation-public relationships as central to public relations is the focus of scholarship operating from varying approaches. For example, Grunig, Grunig and Ehling (1992) view public relations' focus on relationship building as directly contributing to organisational effectiveness, where public relations helps reconcile the organisation's goals with the expectations of its stakeholders, and builds quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies. Given this focus, it might be expected that networks and networking find a role within public relations research. Disappointingly, few studies have been conducted on public relations from a network perspective and relationship building through formal or informal networks is hardly addressed in the public relations literature. Network building is not identified as a specific business tool or strategy to maintain, enhance or create relationships between the public relations practitioner and their personal contacts. Furthermore, no role for networks or networking is recognised in terms of relationship acquisition, including the acquisition of clients, although there is a call for new research into understanding relationships within public relations (e.g. Lages and Lages 2005).

4.0   Methods of Research

The study used qualitative research methods involving practitioners in seven public relations consultancies around the UK, in Manchester, London, Yorkshire and Cheshire. Small consultancies were selected, based on the DTI (2004a) definition of 'micro' and 'smallness'. Purposive sampling was used as an effective way of selecting firms 'rich' in data pertinent to understanding the research problem (Marshall and Rossman 1995). Consultancies were geographically dispersed, and included firms from within and outside concentrated clusters of public relations activity. To gain as wide a perspective on networking practices as possible, consultancies also operated in different client sectors, specialising in business-to-business, consumer, professional services, property and financial markets.

The study was conducted with three practitioners in each consultancy, working at different levels: a junior member of staff (account executive); a middle manager (account manager); and a senior director (account director, managing director or owner-manager). In total, 21 public relations practitioners from seven different consultancies were involved in the study – seven directors, seven managers and seven executives. In terms of gender, interviewees consisted of six men and fifteen women. These proportions reflect the fact that women constitute the majority of employees in the public relations sector, as 70% of practitioners are women (Tench and Yeomans 2006). For example, of the seven consultancies participating in this study, two were owned and entirely staffed by women, and female employees largely dominated the remaining five.

The study used three different qualitative research methods. The main method was semi-structured in-depth interviews, analysed using template analysis and NVivo. These were supplemented with additional research instruments – network mapping and repertory grid technique. Network mapping involved the interviewee constructing a network 'map' or diagram, devised to elicit a full picture of practitioners' personal networks and their contacts within these networks. The map was drawn in a number of stages, based on an individual's strong ties, weak ties and ties with strangers, with practitioners first indicating contacts most

helpful to them in their work to enable an inner tier of strongest network contacts to be created. Interviewees created a second tier of weaker contacts within their network map, which comprised of contacts with whom they had less strong relationships, who were not as well known or less useful to them in their jobs. Practitioners then indicated a third level of contacts who were more periphery in their networks and who might be described as looser contacts to create a third tier of strangers. Throughout the mapping exercise, interviewees were also asked to explain how and why contacts were placed in various positions within their maps; the nature, duration and quality of their relationships with their contacts; and to indicate which contacts were known to each other so as to identify the interconnectedness of their networks. The mapping process allowed a pictorial representation of practitioners' networks to emerge and enabled the interviewees to describe more fully the contacts in their networks, how they knew them, the nature of their relationships with them, and the extent to which they perceived these contacts to help them in terms of their work. The technique was based on Granovetter's (1973) theory of network relationships, and proved both popular with the interviewees and as an excellent instrument for encouraging discussion and uncovering rich data.

The third research instrument used to elicit rich data was repertory grids (Kelly 1955). These are useful for investigating areas that 'are hard to articulate' (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 2002:97) and uncovering an individual's view of the world (Fransella and Bannister 1977; Stewart and Stewart 1981; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Holman 1996; Goffin 2002; Bryman and Bell 2003). The technique was analysed using visual focusing analysis (Easterby-Smith *et al.* 1996; Stewart and Stewart 1981) and was appropriate for eliciting rich details of respondents' networking activities and their perceptions of these activities to supplement the in-depth interviews and network mapping.

5.0   Research Findings

The study identified public relations practitioners' key groups of network actors, and the range of networking activities that practitioners undertook. The study also suggested the influence of two variables on practitioners' network actors and activities, namely position and gender. Not only do the findings offer an insight into the range of contacts public relations practitioners engaged with and the membership of their personal networks, hitherto unexplored in this sector, they go some way to providing additional understanding of the content and process of personal networks.

5.1   Network Actors – which type of actors are important to public relations practitioners in their personal contact networks?

Practitioners' network maps revealed that they networked with nine key groups of actors to specifically help them with their jobs. Of these nine, the largest group emerged as the media, followed by clients, business associates, suppliers and colleagues. Also present within practitioners' networks but less recurrent were friends, family, other public relations practitioners and ex-colleagues. These findings emphasise the role of strategic business contacts for practitioners in their networks, these being media, clients, business associates, suppliers, colleagues, public relations practitioners and ex-colleagues. Although two social network groups - friends and family – were present, these social groups had a lesser role overall as practitioners' sixth and seventh most useful group of contacts.

Further, the study suggests that practitioners' position may influence who they network with. This emerged firstly in terms of the volume of network contacts practitioners had, indicated by the size of the network maps they created. Directors seemed to identify the largest networks with an average of 154 contacts, followed by executives with an average of 109 contacts. Managers seemed to have the smallest networks, with an average of 84 contacts. This suggests that seniority or experience may not necessarily be factors in practitioners'

network size. Indeed, the study suggests that network size is smaller for practitioners at a managerial level, compared to more junior executives. It further suggests that networks are at their largest size at directorial level, possibly indicating network 'development' as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Differences in Network Size by Practitioner Position
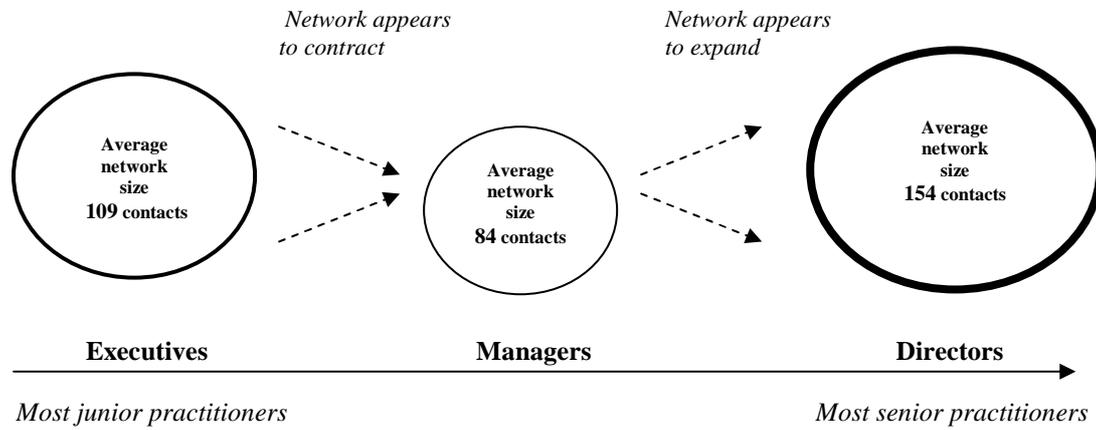
However, network size is only one measure of a network and the study showed that practitioners' position also appeared to influence the strength of their network, when comparing the level of strong ties, weak ties and ties with strangers that they contained. This is summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Strength of Network Ties by Position

Strength of Ties	Position	Combined No. of Contacts	Highest Individual No. of Contacts	Lowest Individual No. of Contacts	Average No. of Contacts
Strong	Directors	87	21	8	12
	Managers	81	20	6	12
	Executives	69	12	7	10
Weak	Directors	837	282	14	120
	Managers	439	129	13	63
	Executives	627	242	5	90
With Strangers	Directors	140	115	0	20
	Managers	66	21	0	9
	Executives	67	32	0	10

Although the study revealed that directors and managers held a similar number of strong contacts in their networks, directors outstripped managers and executives in terms of weak ties in their personal networks. However, not only did managers indicate fewer weak ties than directors, they also appeared to have far fewer than executives. The study suggests that the contraction of networks at the managerial level was due to the lack of weak ties these practitioners held when compared to more junior executives, and conversely, that it was in terms of weak contacts that executives' networks were larger than managers'. One reason for this may be that practitioners 'lose' their weak contacts when working at a managerial level, or it is possible that they no longer recognise such contacts as important within their networks. As seen in Table 1, practitioners appear to expand their networks at directorial level where they have nearly twice as many weak tie contacts as managers and significantly outnumber both managers and executives in terms of contacts with strangers.

Practitioners' position also appears to influence the groups of network actors that are largest or dominant in their personal networks. The study indicates that for directors, the three main types of network actors with whom they had the strongest ties were clients, media and colleagues. For managers, this was the media, colleagues and suppliers, and for executives, the three main types of network actors with strongest ties were colleagues, media and friends. In terms of their weakest ties with contacts, directors identified business associates, media and clients as their three main types of network actors, compared to media, suppliers and business associates for managers, and media, friends and suppliers for executives. Finally, both directors and managers identified business associates, suppliers and the media as their dominant type of network actors with whom they had ties with strangers, compared to executives who identified media, suppliers and clients as their main three types.

The study thus suggests both similarities and differences for the largest groups of network actors as influenced by position. Overall, the largest type of network actors with whom practitioners had strong ties was clients for directors, media for managers and colleagues for executives. In terms of weak ties, the most dominant type for directors was business associates, and then media for both managers and executives. In terms of ties with strangers, business associates was also the most dominant type of actor for directors and managers, and the media for executives. Thus, while different types of network actors were largest or dominant for practitioners in terms of strong ties, similarities emerged in terms of weak ties for managers and executives who indicated the media as their main contacts. Further similarities emerged for directors and managers who identified business associates, suppliers and the media as their main network groups with whom they had ties with strangers. These findings again suggest that the key network contacts are strategic ones, underlining the predominance of this type of network actor for public relations practitioners in their personal networks and increasing understanding of influential network contacts.

The influence of position on practitioners' networks also offers further insight into the development of networks, which indicated that practitioners lose a significant proportion of their contacts due to network contraction at a managerial level, or at least do not recognise such contacts as important within their networks. Managers' missing contacts were mainly in the area of weak ties. The study indicates that executives' greater number of weak contacts specifically exceeded managers in terms of three types of network actors – predominantly friends, then business associates and other public relations practitioners to a much lesser extent. Thus the research suggests that practitioners' personal networks seem to be smaller at a managerial level than at the more junior executive level, as they have fewer weak tie contacts and in particular, seem to be missing or no longer recognise friends as important contacts within their personal networks who help them with their work

5.1.1 Influence of Gender on Network Size, Strength of Ties and Network Actors

Furthermore, in terms of the type of actors who play a key role in practitioners' personal networks, the study also seemed to suggest that gender may influence practitioners' network size and the strength of their ties within their networks. In terms of network size, women appeared to have larger networks with a greater number of contacts than men. As Table 2 illustrates, women identified more contacts individually and had a higher average number of contacts than men in the study.

Indeed, male and female practitioners appear to have a wide difference in overall network size. For males, this ranged from the largest network with 194 contacts to the smallest with 13 - both executives' networks. A similar finding was evident for females, where network size varied from the largest with 295 contacts to the smallest with 26, both the networks of directors. Not only does this suggest that gender may be a factor in determining the size of a practitioner's network, with women seeming to have larger networks with more contacts than

men overall in the study, it further indicates that seniority and experience may not determine network size, as junior practitioners had the largest and smallest networks for men, and senior practitioners had the largest and smallest networks for women.

Table 2: Network Contacts Overall by Gender

Gender	Highest Individual No. of Contacts	Lowest Individual No. of Contacts	Average No. of Contacts
Male	194	13	99
Female	295	26	121

The study further suggests that gender may influence the strength of ties in practitioners' networks, as Table 3 shows. Although male and female practitioners indicated a very similar number of strong contacts in their networks, in contrast, women identified more weak contacts in their personal networks and a significantly higher number of contacts who were strangers. This suggests that male and female networks particularly differ in terms of their weak ties and ties with strangers, which adds to the understanding of the influence of gender on personal networks, particularly in this professional service.

Table 3: Strength of Network Ties by Gender

Strength of Ties	Gender	Highest Individual No. of Contacts	Lowest Individual No. of Contacts	Average
Strong	Male	20	7	12
	Female	21	6	11
Weak	Male	152	5	80
	Female	282	14	95
With Strangers	Male	31	1	8
	Female	115	1	15

5.1.2   Influence of Gender on Network Actors Leading to Client Acquisition and Retention

Practitioners also identified a range of benefits of networks and networking. Two key benefits to emerge were client acquisition and retention, with the study suggesting again that gender may influence the range and type of network actors practitioners draw upon within their personal contact networks to access these particular benefits.

5.1.2.a   Influence of Gender on Client Acquisition

The study suggested that gender may influence the types of network actors which practitioners identified as leading to new clients - summarised below in Table 4. Here, both genders cited clients as their most influential contacts regarding client acquisition. However, men cited business associates and friends as their next influential groups, whereas women cited colleagues and media contacts.

Furthermore, gender appeared to influence the variety of types of network actors leading to client acquisition. Whereas men cited five types of network contacts leading to client acquisition – clients, business associates, friends, media and ex-colleagues - women cited nine types, thus identifying nearly twice as many network actors types as men which lead to new clients. Women's four additional types of network actors were colleagues, suppliers, family and other public relations practitioners. This difference in variety may suggest women are more aware – or at least have a different awareness - of the origin of their consultancy's

new clients, and implies an acknowledgement of the role played by colleagues, whether male or female, in client acquisition, which male participants did not recognize.

Table 4: Male and Female Practitioners' Network Contacts leading to Client Acquisition

Contacts Enabling Acquisition	Male Practitioners			Female Practitioners		
	Executive	*Manager*	*Director*	*Executive*	*Manager*	*Director*
1. Clients	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓✓
2. Colleagues				✓✓✓✓	✓	✓✓
3. Business Associates			✓✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Media		✓		✓	✓	✓✓✓
5. Friends		✓✓				✓
6. Suppliers					✓	✓✓
7. Family				✓		✓✓
8. Ex-colleagues			✓	✓		
9. PR Practitioners					✓	✓

circle indicates contacts only identified by female practitioners

5.1.2.b   Influence of Gender on Client Retention

The study also suggests that gender may influence the type of network actors practitioners identified as helping retain client accounts, as illustrated below in Table 5. Here, each gender differed as to their most influential contacts regarding client retention, as men cited clients and then media their most influential groups, whereas women cited media contacts and then colleagues.

Table 5: Male and Female Practitioners' Network Contacts leading to Client Retention

Contacts Enabling Retention	Male Practitioners			Female Practitioners		
	Executive	*Manager*	*Director*	*Executive*	*Manager*	*Director*
i. Media	✓✓	✓✓		✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓
ii. Clients	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓✓✓
iii. Colleagues		✓✓		✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓
iv. Family	✓	✓✓		✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓
v. Suppliers	✓	✓		✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓
vi. Ex colleagues				✓✓	✓	✓✓
vii. Friends		✓		✓✓✓	✓	✓✓✓
viii. Business Associates				✓	✓	
ix. PR Practitioners				✓		✓

circle indicates contacts only identified by female practitioners

Furthermore, gender appeared to influence the variety of network actor types leading to client retention. Men cited six types of personal network actors leading to client retention, mainly clients, followed by media, family, colleagues and suppliers, then friends. In contrast, women identified nine types of personal contacts leading to client retention, mainly the media, followed by colleagues, clients, family, then suppliers and friends, ex-colleagues, business associates and other public relations practitioners. This could again suggest women have accessed or have a different awareness of a greater range of network contacts who enable valuable client retention. Also seemingly emphasised again is the greater role of colleagues for women practitioners, who cited them as their second most influential type of network actors enabling client retention, compared to men who cited colleagues as their fourth most influential type of actors.

5.2 Networking Methods – what activities are used by public relations practitioners in their personal contact networks?

The networking activities that public relations practitioners undertook were also identified from the study, using in-depth interviews, network mapping and repertory grids. These revealed the methods practitioners used overall and the extent to which the study suggests that methods were influenced by the position and gender of the practitioner in the organisation. Through the repertory grid technique, practitioners identified their most preferred networking activity, their least preferred activity, a method successful for winning clients, a method successful for keeping clients, and a method which they frequently used. The findings are summarised below in Table 6. The study revealed that practitioners consistently cited eight key activities as networking methods. These were events, meetings, email, hospitality, cold calling, writing, research, and phone calls.

Table 6: Summary of Networking Methods Overall

Type of activity	Ranked 1st	Ranked 2nd	Ranked 3rd	Ranked 4th
Most preferred	Events	Meetings	Email	Hospitality
Least preferred	Events	Cold calling	Meetings	/
To win clients	Meetings and Writing	/	Events and Research	/
To keep clients	Phone calls	Hospitality	Events	Meetings
Other frequent	Meetings	Email	Hospitality	/

Practitioners' most preferred networking activity overall was 'events' - formal, informal, intimate, social and business; followed by 'meetings' – planned, personal, informal and brainstorming; then 'email' and 'hospitality'. As a female executive pointed out: "I prefer going to networking events, an evening where you can have a drink and things. A prearranged event, a business one where you can…drink and have fun and chat to people. It's formal but it makes it informal." However, conversely, practitioners also identified 'events' as their least preferred activity, especially in terms of formal and business network events. As a male manager explained: "It just feels like going to a singles bar, going to a networking event."

Practitioners cited two networking activities as particularly rewarding in terms of winning clients. These were 'meetings' and 'writing', especially letters, mailers and proposals. As a female director said: "To win a client, what is most successful is to meet clients beforehand. When I say meet, I mean really get to know them…finding out more about their industry, their products, the challenges they face, their internal problems…I call it a chemistry meeting."

Overall, practitioners preferred 'phone calls' as a method for keeping clients, followed by 'hospitality', 'events' and 'meetings'. As this male executive explains: "To keep clients…I'd

probably phone them and speak to them. Find out how they are doing, how the business is doing…and is there anything I can do to help them." Finally, practitioners identified their most frequent networking activity overall as 'meetings', especially social, informal, unplanned meetings and those with the media. This was followed by 'email' as a frequent activity, and then 'hospitality'.

Thus practitioners ranked 'events' as their most preferred and least preferred networking activity, indicating a 'love-hate' relationship with this method, which steered more towards 'hate', as more practitioners identified 'events' as least preferred. A similar situation emerged with 'meetings' as a networking activity. Perceptions of the usefulness of this networking method regarding clients was divided, with practitioners ranking it first as a method to win a client but fourth as a method to keep a client. Indeed, 'phone calls' emerged as the strongest method for keeping clients, indicating the importance of individual contact for client retention, albeit using the more distant method of telephoning rather than meeting.

5.2.1 Influence of Position on Practitioners' Networking Methods

The study also suggested that position may influence practitioners' networking methods. The findings are summarised below in Table 7. Practitioners at all levels agreed on networking activities most successful in two areas – those that were least preferred, namely 'events', and those used to keep a client, namely 'phone calls'. In comparing activities indicated by each level of practitioner, a high level of similarity seemed to emerge for the most junior and senior practitioners. Executives and directors provided the same networking activities in four out of five of the categories – methods that were most preferred, least preferred, to keep a client and other frequent activities.

Table 7: Summary of Networking Methods by Position

Position	Most preferred	Least preferred	To win clients	To keep clients	Other frequent
Director	Events	Events	Meetings	Phone calls	Meetings
Manager	Email	Events	Research	Phone calls/Events	Events
Executive	Events	Events	Writing	Phone calls	Email/Meetings

For directors, 'meetings' emerged as the key networking activity. Together with 'events', this activity was directors' most preferred networking method, the most successful for winning clients, and their other most frequent networking activity. Similarly, executives identified 'meetings' as a key networking activity, where it emerged as their most preferred networking method, together with 'events', and as their other most frequent networking method, together with 'email'. However, executives differed from directors, identifying 'writing' as their most successful activity to win clients.

In contrast, managers identified a wider variety of networking activities, with 'events' emerging as an overall key method, as one female manager explains: "We make sure we have a representative at any of their events… (*the director*) makes sure we all attend all our clients' events because…that's a good way to prove that we care about them." Managers' most preferred networking methods were both 'email' and 'events', and they identified 'research' and 'writing' as activities most successful to win clients, with again 'events' as their other most frequent networking method.

Thus senior and junior practitioners shared more similarities in their networking methods than with managers. Practitioners also exhibited divided opinions on the usefulness of 'events' as a networking activity, citing it as both the most preferred and least preferred method. Further, no one strong method emerged overall for winning clients. However, there

was consensus on methods for keeping clients with practitioners at each level citing 'phone calls'.

5.2.2   Influence of Gender on Practitioners' Networking Methods

The study further suggested that gender may influence public relations practitioners' networking methods. A summary of these is given in Table 8 below. Three areas of consensus were identified overall in terms of networking methods with both men and women citing 'events' as their least preferred activity; 'phone calls' as the most successful way to keep clients; and 'meetings' as their other frequent networking activity. However, differences emerged regarding their most preferred methods, with women preferring 'events' and men citing 'meetings'. As a male executive explained: "What do I like doing most? One-to-ones with people I've met before, chatting things through, finding out what's going on in the sector of the industry with someone who's either a potential client or is a client…a one-to-one social meeting." Differences also emerged with networking methods to win clients, where men identified 'writing' and women preferred 'meetings'. One female director explained: "To win clients? Personal meetings. People trust me hugely when they meet me, I don't know why but they do."

Table 8: Summary of Networking Methods by Gender

Position	Preferred	Least preferred	To win clients	To keep clients	Other frequent
Male	Meetings	Events	Writing	Phone calls	Email / Meetings
Female	Events	Events	Meetings	Phone calls	Meetings

6.0   Managerial Implications

6.1   Recognise the value of social networks

The study has a number of managerial implications. Firstly, practitioners at all levels need to be aware of the size and content of their networks, the valuable resources their networks may hold, and what the repercussions of this may be. Practitioners identified a wide range of contacts within their personal networks which assisted them with their work – nine different actor groups in all – and acknowledged that these social network contacts enabled them to both retain current clients and acquire new business. By understanding the value of their relationships, and managing and developing them, practitioners and their companies may place themselves at a strategic advantage in the marketplace by helping the company to build strong and enduring bonds with its partners and create barriers to competition (Turnbull and Wilson 1989). This could be of specific value in an industry that faces increasing competition and needs new strategies to attract and retain clients (Lages and Simkin 2003). This advantage could be accomplished by understanding what factors bond practitioners with key personal contacts and in turn, what these contacts value in the relationship. Once a practitioner or company understands the factors that are important in the relationship, investments can be made in personal networks to build key social bonds, and relationships can be managed and changes tracked over time.

6.2   Understand how position may influence social networks

Practitioners and consultancies may also consider whether and how position may influence personal contact network size and the strength of ties within that network. Such reflection may well have more resonance with managers in public relations consultancies, who in this study identified the smallest personal networks and the least number of network ties in their network maps, compared to their senior and junior colleagues, directors and executives, with

the possibility that their networks are lacking contacts that are friends. Thus, managers may be at a specific disadvantage in terms of accessing knowledge and resources in their networks, and drawing upon a smaller pool of contacts. If public relations is to be seen as a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the public on whom its success or failure depends, and that it contributes to a client's or organisation's effectiveness by building quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies, then possessing smaller networks with fewer valuable weak ties in them may have a detrimental affect on managers' ability to perform their public relations function and build such key relationships. Access to a narrower field of contacts from which to draw assistance and fewer valuable contacts in terms of weak ties could impinge on managers' ability to run their client accounts as effectively as they might otherwise. Thus managers need to understand their networks and invest in building social bonds with more weak tie contacts to ensure they operate on a par with executives and directors, taking care not to neglect potentially valuable relationships in their personal networks.

6.3 Understand how gender may influence social networks

A consideration of whether and how gender may influence personal contact networks is also suggested for practitioners and consultancies. Women need to understand the strength of their personal networks and the advantages this may bring them, as the research suggested that women's networks were larger than men's, and that women identified a larger number of weak ties and ties with strangers. The implication here is that this potentially affords women greater access to more diverse information than their male colleagues, and enables them to reach more actively outside their close social circle to draw upon information and assistance from a wider array of network actors, which may be an advantage when working alongside male colleagues. Conversely, male practitioners may be operating at a disadvantage compared to women colleagues, and should examine their networks and consider whether and how they can be enhanced. This study suggests that men possess smaller networks than women with fewer weak ties, and thus a potential disadvantage lies in the narrower range of contacts they can access to build the key relationships required in public relations practice. Male practitioners may also need more understanding of their networks and the contribution their contacts make, as gender also seemed to influence the type of network actors who were identified as leading to specific networking benefits of client acquisition and retention. Women identified nearly twice as many actor groups leading to client acquisition in their network maps, and a wider variety of network contacts who enabled client retention. The implication here is that women have either a different or more awareness of the origin of their consultancy's new clients, and of the extent to which personal network contacts impact on and influence their work and client retention as well as client acquisition. Furthermore, this would also be valuable knowledge for consultancies seeking strategies to both retain current clients and acquire new business. Given that women's networks seem to be larger than men's, and that women identified a larger number of weak ties and ties with strangers, consultancy owners and managers may consider investing in the networks of male colleagues to ensure male employees within the same company do not operate at a disadvantage compared to their female colleagues, or else consider recruiting more women into their businesses as they may possess wider networks with a wider range of valuable contacts. Whether this is already taking place – and perhaps accounts for the fact that women dominate the UK public relations industry – is a matter for further research.

7.0 Limitations

There are some limitations to this research. It is an in-depth small-scale qualitative study based on 21 practitioners in 7 public relations consultancies based in the UK and therefore generalisability of findings may be limited by region and country, and by size and type of company. The findings may thus be limited in application to public relations practitioners

operating within an in-house or freelance capacity and may not be transferable to practitioners working in larger firms or to employees in other professional services or sectors.

8.0   Conclusions and Further Research

This paper makes some contribution towards a number of neglected areas in network and entrepreneurial network theory, in particular interactional dimensions of networks and networking (O'Donnell *et al*. 2001), which includes exploring the content and process of networking, particularly networking groups and methods. However, more appreciation of the dynamics and inner working of networks is needed, acquired by qualitative research into observing and understanding how and why networks function.

Although the study also offers an insight into the personal contact networks of non-entrepreneurial individuals in established small firms, particularly in the professional services sector, only a handful of networking studies in this area exists (e.g. Wilkins 1997b; Shaw 1998, 1999; Silversides, 2001) and thus more understanding of the forms that networks take within small firms and of those operating in a professional service environment is still needed. Specifically, research into individuals' personal networks and the variables that may influence them would enable a greater understanding of interpersonal networks in small firms in different sectors. Indeed, a greater focus on networks of employees at different levels within a company may throw some light on whether the findings with regards to managers' networks is specific to the public relations sector or can be found within other businesses.

This study may also enrich knowledge here as it appears to identify two apparently influential factors on personal networks and networking activities, that of position and gender. It suggests that position may influence three areas of networks - their size, the strength of ties within a network and the types of networking activities undertaken; and gender may influence five areas: network size, strength of ties, networking methods, client acquisition and client retention. Thus the study offers insights into gender and networks in a professional service context, and further suggests that gender differences in interpersonal networks may favour women. However, more understanding is needed in regards to the gendered nature of networking and networks. While research in this area is slowly gathering pace, wider enquiries are needed into the extent to which gender specific socialisation experiences may influence the differences in women and men's personal networks and networking activities, and whether such differences impact upon individuals' roles and capabilities, and indeed the fortunes of the companies they work for.

The findings presented in this paper form part of one of the first studies of its kind conducted into networks and the public relations sector. Therefore, further research into the link between networking and public relations consultancy survival and growth is proposed. Furthermore, if such research were carried out into UK consultancies – and into specific types of consultancies such as consumer, business-to-business, financial and hi-tech – it would contribute to the understanding of non-US public relations called for by Vercic *et al.* (2001).

Further research is also required to gain a fuller understanding of networks and networking, and the role of personal contact networks from a gender perspective in professional services sectors. This would enable professional service providers to identify, manage and evaluate their employees' network participation and contribute to the firm's survival and growth. As an identified area of weakness in the network literature, further investigation into the content and process of networking would also provide a deeper understanding of networks and networking – both in the public relations sector and in other professional service fields. Additional research into how small firms use their networks, and the performance implications of different usage patterns and different networking activities and methods, would improve understanding of the impact of networks on small business survival and growth.

More specifically, research into managers' networks and the reasons why they may have the smallest networks with the least number of weak contacts - and in particular why practitioners appear to 'lose' their friends as they move into managerial positions - would provide a deeper understanding of factors influencing the content and construction of personal networks for these practitioners.

Furthermore, this study explored practitioners' descriptions of their networking methods rather than their actual activities. Specific networking behaviour was not observed, so a further development would be to undertake research into actual networking behaviour as an ethnographic study. Linked to this, a number of scholars note that the ability to network should be viewed as a key entrepreneurial skill or competency (e.g. Hill and McGowan, 1996; Gilmore and Carson, 1999). This view might also be applied to non-entrepreneurial employees – whether directors, managers or junior executives, as this study demonstrates that they too engage in a range of networking activities that are beneficial to themselves and their companies. However, there has been a lack of attention to defining the skill of networking or describing how it can be developed, and most critiques of networks and networking fail to even mention that networking as a skill is an area worthy of investigation (Downing, 1998). Considering this omission, a potential future research study is the investigation of professional services practitioners' networking competencies.

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