

**MANAGING MATERNITY LEAVE: THE IMPACT OF MATERNITY LEAVE ON
REATIONSHIP BUILDING AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT FOR FEMALE
PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS IN CANADA**

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Course: MCM 740 Capstone Course

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March 11, 2018

Abstract

In Canada, new parents who meet requirements outlined by the federal employment insurance program have the option of taking up to 18 months of maternity leave. As more women are becoming pregnant later in life, many women are taking maternity leaves after spending years working and establishing careers. Through in-depth interviews with 17 women currently working in public relations and communications who have taken one or more maternity leaves in the last ten years, this study explores how female practitioners perceive maternity leave impacts them professionally in terms of their ability to maintain and build relationships with stakeholders and remain connected to their organization and profession.

Keywords: Public Relations, Maternity Leave, Relationship Management, Strategic Management

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Introduction

According to Grunig's Excellence Theory, in order for an organization to be effective, "it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as of management" (Grunig, 2008, p. 1). The accepted principles of the excellence theory include involvement in strategic management, and access to an organization's dominant coalition; additional research on gender's role in excellence theory supports the idea that "organizations with excellent public relations valued women as much as men for the strategic role" (Grunig, 2008, p. 1). There is also a significant amount of data that supports the fact that the majority of public relations students and practitioners are female: a 2017 survey on the gender pay gap conducted by Global Women in PR found that "women represent two thirds of the global PR industry" (The Organization of Canadian Women in Public Relations, 2017). Yet, according to a report from McKinsey & Company (2017) on the status of professional Canadian women, "35 percent of women believe their gender had a role in their missing out on a raise, a promotion, or a chance to get ahead, compared with 15 percent of men" (McKinsey & Company, 2017, p. 9).

All of the elements described for effective leadership and excellence in public relations make sense, but in order for a practitioner to be able to truly engage in the kinds of behaviours that facilitate or leverage those skills, the prerequisite is to be on the job and engaged with their teams and stakeholders. This ultimately impacts women in a very direct way, as they must face the question of how they develop and grow public relations and management competencies if they are leaving the workforce for maternity leave, especially since women are more likely than men to take parental leave. In Canada in 2012, 63.8% of new mothers took parental leave, versus 28.0% of new fathers (Hou, Margolis & Haan, 2017, p. 19).

Practitioners have more audiences than ever to consider, and more channels than ever to monitor and be fluent in. This is especially true for practitioners who are at a stage in their career when they are either on the management track or already in the management team (dominant coalition). This is primarily due to the practitioners' role, which often requires them to be establishing and managing relationships with stakeholders external to the organization, who could impact or influence business decisions, as well as internal teams from a performance management perspective.

The Canadian Public Relations Society (2017) recently released a white paper examining current and future trends that will impact the profession. The paper posits that two future implications on the profession are: "(1) The future of PR isn't just about content; it's about relationships, and (2) The C-suite is open to PR – but getting there requires different thinking" (Canadian Public Relations Society, 2017, p. 3). For women who are mid-career and have advanced from technicians to managerial roles, these potential implications may influence how they approach their work in the coming years relative to their relationships with both stakeholders and the dominant coalition within their organization. But how do or should they manage their practice of "excellent" public relations during maternity leave(s)?

Research Problem

In Olga Khazan's (2014) article for The Atlantic "*Why are there so many women in public relations?*", LinkedIn's Shannon Stubo explains her day-to-day role in a global public organization's communications team: "I have between 12 and 14 meetings each day, and I am a member of our company's Executive Team. I am up to speed on nearly every important issue at the company and am called upon multiple times per day for guidance" (Kazan, 2014, para. 45).

This job description will likely sound familiar for anyone in the communications field who holds a managerial position in their organization. For those in a communications management position where they are responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of communications programs, and for providing counsel on the organization's overall direction, relationship management is a key competency required for professional success.

A significant amount of research already exists in the areas of the feminization of the field, relationship management, and strategic management in public relations. Much of the research on the role of gender in excellence in public relations supports the idea that “organizations with excellent public relations valued women as much as men for the strategic role” (Grunig, 2008, p. 1).

In Canada, where women are entitled to take up to 18 months of maternity leave, there is limited research or professional resources on how this extended absence from the workforce affects a communicator's ability to manage relationships, ascend into management or ensure that communications is a valued and influential component of their organization. Many organizations and/or their human resources departments have processes or best practices in place to hire and train replacements or additional resources to backfill a position during maternity leaves, but for the woman who is actually taking the leave, reintegration back into the workforce after an extended leave can be a challenge as “women with children continue to lag men in leadership roles, despite their aspirations for promotions” (McKinsey, 2017, p. 9).

While maternity is just one reason that a practitioner may take an extended leave from the industry or the workforce during their career, it is worth exploring given the number of women in the field, and the evolving nature of how parents are balancing children with careers.

Literature Review

Maternity Leave in Canada

Paid parental leave has been available in Canada since 1971, with the intention of giving parents job protection and financial support in leaving work to care for infants (Hou, Margolis & Haan, 2017). The policies have evolved over the years. As of December 2017, eligible new parents have the option of taking up to 18 months of maternity leave (Government of Canada, 2017) through either the Employment Insurance (EI) maternity and parental benefits or the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan. Biological mothers are entitled to a maximum of 15 weeks of EI maternity benefits, after which time parents can access EI parental benefits for the remaining weeks. In order to be eligible, applicants must have at least 600 hours of insurable employment and face a reduction in weekly earnings by more than 40%, among other criteria (Government of Canada, 2017). Once approved, parents outside of Quebec can access a weekly benefit rate of “55% of the claimant’s average weekly insurable earnings up to a maximum amount” (Government of Canada, 2017) for up to 35 weeks. As of December 3, 2017, parents outside of Quebec who have adopted or given birth after that time, also have the option of extending their federal benefits over an 18-month period. Parents who opt for this longer leave are entitled to a benefit rate of “33% of the claimant’s average weekly insurable earnings up to a maximum amount (Government of Canada, 2017). In Quebec, benefits are determined based on the applicant’s: qualifying period, income, type of benefit and selected plan, as well as an increase for low-income families (Government of Quebec, 2010). In March 2018, the federal government introduced a change to the employment insurance program that will include an additional five weeks of parental sharing benefits for two-parent families who share parental leave that will become available in 2019 (MacLean’s, 2018).

Women in Business

According to Statistics Canada (2016), most management positions in Canada are held by men, with the exception of certain professional services where “women outnumbered men in managerial occupations in finance, in advertising, marketing and public relations” (p. 13). However, in McKinsey & Company’s (2017) study on the status of women’s equality in Canada, the data suggests that moving the needle towards gender parity has stalled somewhat, “notably on making women equal participants in work” and that females continue to be underrepresented in managerial positions (McKinsey, 2017, p.4). This is despite the fact that Canadian women make up more than half of the working age population, and hold more than 50% of all university degrees. Given that there are sufficient numbers of educated women in the workforce, the report suggests that women in managerial positions is one area of business in which “high or extremely high inequality” (p. 6) remains and recommends that, “individual corporations need to improve gender diversity within their organizations. They should concentrate on attracting, retaining, and advancing women through the corporate pipeline” (McKinsey, 2017, p.6).

Simultaneously, the average age for women to have children in Canada has been on the rise since the 1970s, and as of 2011 was 30.2 years (Statistics Canada, 2017). This increase in age means that more women are taking maternity leaves after spending a number of years in the workforce. What has not been examined in-depth in studies about gender parity and women in management is the effect on women who take one or more maternity leaves during their formative years in management positions, and whether or not it later impacts their ability to gain entry to that corporate pipeline in the first place. For women in communications, this means they have invested years in building experience or areas of expertise prior to starting a family, and

have moved from entry-level technician roles to management positions whereby they are managing others and engaging with other senior leaders in their organizations.

Excellence in Public Relations

The Excellence Study outlines 14 characteristics of excellent public relations, one of which is “involvement in the overall strategic management of the organization” (Grunig & Grunig, 2000, p. 308) as being critical to the contribution of public relations to an organization’s overall success. The Excellence Theory also “emphasizes a relational orientation characterized by two-way symmetrical communications; that is, dialogue, compromise, and shared power” (Berger, 2008, p. 226).

According to Grunig’s Excellence Theory, in order for an organization to be effective, “it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as of management” (Grunig, 2008, p. 1). The accepted principles of the excellence theory include involvement in strategic management and access to an organization’s dominant coalition, and research around excellence in public relations often explores “how must public relations be practiced and the communication function organized for it to contribute the most to organizational effectiveness?” (Grunig & Grunig, 2000, p. 304).

Another component that is central to a practitioner’s ability to achieve excellence in public relations is the ability to establish and manage relationships with key stakeholders. This could include internal or external stakeholders, depending on the organization’s goal or specific communications objectives. The IABC Excellence Study, in particular, “provided evidence that there is a correlation between achieving short-term communications effects and maintaining long-term relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 9). And according to Hon and Grunig’s

Guidelines for Measuring Relationships in Public Relations (1999) “the literature showed that effective organizations are able to achieve their goals because they choose goals that are valued both by management and by strategic constituencies both inside and outside the organization” and that the reason organizations are able to identify and successfully work towards those goals is because of the relationships developed with key publics (p. 8).

Grunig’s research has also found that organizational culture may impact the role and influence of public relations, in terms of access (or lack thereof) to the dominant coalition, participation in strategic management planning or decision making, or the existence of communications separate from other organizational functions, and overall support from the dominant coalition for the existence and influence of public relations within the organization (Berger, 2008).

Stakeholder Management

A practitioner’s ability to identify key stakeholder groups and then build and maintain productive relationships with them is crucial to achieving communications objectives, but it can also be helpful in identifying opportunities or risks that may impact an organization’s ability to achieve its overall goals. According to Hon & Grunig (1999), “public relations makes an organization more effective, as it identifies the most strategic publics as part of strategic management processes and conducts communications programs to develop and maintain effective long-term relationships between management and those publics” (p. 9). In a 1995 study, Wood identified four factors that lend themselves to successful interpersonal relationships: investment, commitment, trust and comfort with relational dialectics (Wood, 1995, pp. 180-189).

One of the major outcomes of the Excellence Theory research was that “communication has value to an organization because it helps to build good long-term relationships with strategic publics” (Grunig & Grunig, 2000, p. 314). They found that:

When public relations helps the organization build relationships with strategic constituencies, it saves the organization money by reducing the costs of litigation, regulation, legislation, pressure campaigns, boycotts or lost revenue that result from bad relationships with publics – publics that become activist groups when relationships are bad...Good relationships with employees also increase the likelihood that they will be satisfied with their jobs, which makes them more likely to support and less likely to interfere with the mission of the organization. (p. 309)

The fact that relationship management is an increasingly important competency for today’s public relations practitioners was also articulated in the CPRS whitepaper on the “*Future of Public Relations*” (Tisch, 2017), and according to Hon and Grunig (1999) “a growing number of public relations practitioners and scholars have come to believe that the fundamental goal of public relations is to build and then enhance on-going or long-term relationships with an organizations key constituencies” (p. 2). O’Neill (2004), describes the role of public relations practitioners as being at the intersection of an organization’s various stakeholder groups and target audiences:

Public relations practitioners function as communications liaisons at the interface of employees, external publics, and the dominant coalition, a group of powerful, influential people in the organization who typically set the strategic direction and define the organizational mission. Because they are supposed to

shape the negotiation processes of the dominant coalition, they depend upon their upward influence tactics for success (p. 129).

In Ledingham and Bruning's 1998 study on the dimensions of an organization-public relationship, the research found that "an organization-public relationship centered around building trust, demonstrating involvement, investment, and commitment, and maintaining open, frank communication between the organization and its key public does have value in that it impacts the stay-leave decision in a competitive environment" (p. 61). Further, Place (2012) made a connection between a practitioner's relationships and their ability to access and influence information, finding that "interpersonal interactions in an organization affected practitioner power and control over factual information. Being seen as a credible, trustworthy person further empowered practitioners by allowing them greater access to information" (Place, 2012, p. 437).

Strategic Management

The idea that public relations should be viewed as a strategic management function by organizations and their dominant coalition is one that is prevalent amongst both practitioners and academics. The theory of strategic management and public relations, as outlined by the excellence team, found that "excellent public relations managers help to bring the values and goals of different functional managers together by working with them to build relationships with relevant publics and to bring the perspectives of those public into strategic management" (Grunig & Grunig, 2000, p. 307) and results from the IABC Excellence Study showed that "involvement of public relations in strategic management was the best predictor of excellent public relations" (Grunig & Grunig, 2000, p. 304).

The Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) use the definition developed by Flynn, Gregory & Valin (2008), that public relations as the “strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest” (CPRS, 2016). This definition upholds the idea that public relations best serves the organization when it is considered by that organization as a strategic management function, and highlights the importance of relationship development and management to a practitioner’s ability to succeed and deliver upon organizational objectives. In fact, findings from the section of the Excellence Study that included feedback from interviews with senior leaders indicated that “the arena of strategic management may represent the greatest difference between excellence and mediocrity in public relations” (Grunig & Grunig, 2000, p. 319).

The Excellence Theory also reinforces the notion that for the public relations function to be effective, it must be empowered by the organization, and that “public relations professionals are more likely to be so empowered if they possess managerial skills and a managerial worldview and subsequently enact the managerial role” (Berger, 2008, 227).

A 2012 study by Place that examined how women public relations practitioners make meaning of power in their organization found that the idea of power was intertwined with relationships, and that “relationships and relationship-building were integral, valuable, and powerful to public relations practice” (p. 442), and that “relationships can also strategically obtain public relations practitioners a seat at the table – or membership in a key decision-making group. Public relations practitioners, through relationships, can then be contacted by decision makers and have an opportunity to demonstrate their value” (pp. 442-43).

Organizational Power

To understand how public relations practitioners may be able to access power through relationship building, it is important to understand the concept of organizational power. Berger (2008) describes power as it relates to public relations practitioners as something that “in many forms shapes what practitioners do, how they are perceived, and what public relations is and might be” (p. 221), and influence as “the process through which power is used to get things done, or to accomplish something, for some purpose in organizations” (p. 222). According to O’Neil (2004), obtaining power can happen through a number of means, including one’s: “organizational role, place within the organizational hierarchy, the number of employees supervised, gender ratio of work groups, participation in influential networks, relationships with influential mentors, and favourable perceptions of others” (p. 128).

In terms of how public relations practitioners fit within an organization’s power structure, at the executive level, Grunig (1992) found that “CEOs and other organizational leaders spend most of their time on external affairs and community and political processes; therefore, understanding the CEOs in terms of their leadership capabilities is important to public relations’ role as boundary spanners” (as cited in Aldoory & Toth, 2004, p. 163).

In Aldoory and Toth’s (2004) study on leadership and gender in public relations, reporting from focus groups held with practitioners indicated that “teamwork and leadership within teams was often discussed as an important part of public relations leadership” as well as the need to stay on top of changing business environments” (p. 173). Further, more women than men felt that “effective leaders know that good rapport with employees is key, that leadership is about creating personal connections with employees, and that the best leaders share decision making power” (p.175). There was agreement across the focus groups – which were held with

both men and women – that while leadership was gendered in nature, and many of those traits were favourable to women, that “for social, structural, or environmental reasons women do not have the same leadership opportunities as men do in the industry” (Aldoory & Toth, 2004, p. 177).

The challenge, according to Berger (2008) is that there is a disconnect between an organization’s dominant coalition, those who hold the most power, and the public relations practitioners, who “need a seat at the table, or at least the attention of organizational leaders, when important decisions are being made or implemented. Yet, they are often absent during these strategic moments” (p. 222). Power is also something that remains elusive to many female public relations practitioners, despite the fact that women make up the majority of the field. According to Place (2012), “Scholarship suggests that women public relations professionals continue to experience a glass ceiling, receive lower pay, and lack organizational forms of power, employee support, and inclusion in business networks” (p. 435).

Women in Public Relations

The Excellence Study established a connection between gender and the practice of excellent public relations in an organization, as “on the departmental level, gendered public relations contributed to excellent public relations and that female top communicators enacted both technical and managerial tasks significantly more than male top colleagues” (Aldoory, 2008, p. 399).

According to estimates in The Atlantic’s 2014 article “*Why are there so many women in public relations?*”, women make up between 63-85 per cent of public relations practitioners in

the United States, however there continues to be a discrepancy between the number of women filling the technical roles and those in executive and c-suite positions (Khazan, 2014).

Research into the barriers that women face dates back to the Velvet Ghetto study, conducted in 1986, which included focus groups of women who sought to advance into managerial positions. One of the themes that emerged from that research was a bias that existed around women as “someone who was not part of the game; women as less than effective managers – because they had children, and they couldn’t play the game” (Toth & Cline, 1991, p. 165). In Toth and Cline’s 1991 study *Public Relations Practitioner Attitudes Toward Gender Issues: A Benchmark Study*, more than half of the female survey respondents felt that women practitioners could achieve a work-life balance, but many respondents also felt that there was a double standard and discrepancy between men and women in term of advancement opportunities (p. 168-169). Further, “more than twice as many women as men reported that gender was unhelpful. The age bracket in which feminization had the first major impact – those from 30-44 years, reported the most problems” (Toth & Cline, 1991, p. 172).

Decades later, these perceptions still exist. Increasing numbers of public relations students and practitioners in North America are female, yet, according to a report from McKinsey & Company (2017) on the status of professional Canadian women, “35 percent of women believe their gender had a role in their missing out on a raise, a promotion, or a chance to get ahead, compared with 15 percent of men” (p. 9).

There may be more women than men in the profession overall, with more women in management positions compared to other sectors and professional services (McKinsey & Company, 2017) yet men “continue to hold the senior positions within the profession and have

better access to organizational decision-makers” (Thurlow, 2009, pp. 246-247), while women continue to represent the majority fulfilling technician roles rather than moving up to managerial positions.

Wrigley (2002) conducted a qualitative study that looked at how women in public relations and communications view the glass ceiling relative to their career experiences. Through focus group interviews with female practitioners, she found that “women are still kept out of managerial roles in disproportionate numbers” (p. 32) and suggests five factors that contribute to the glass ceiling: denial, gender role socialization, historical precedence, women turning against other women, and corporate culture (Wrigley, 2002). While this study ultimately found that “hard work and competence are usually not enough to guarantee promotion within the context of the male-dominate power structure present in most corporations” (Wrigley, 2002, p. 52), participants in this study offered a number of strategies to help advance the cause of overcoming the glass ceiling, including: “mentoring, working hard(er), changing jobs, going out on your own, demonstrating competence and efficiency, women taking control of their own futures and creating new work cultures, being a problem solver, and having patience. The overriding pattern in the strategies was one of empowerment for women” (Wrigley, 2002, p. 41). While these strategies may be useful to some women, they all required that the practitioner be at work and actively engaged in their corporate culture in order to successfully implement, which is difficult to do if you are planning for or taking maternity leave; Wrigley (2002) explains that “corporate cultures should not be dismantled; they can merely be reshaped to provide a better, more welcoming environment for women” (p. 47).

In a 2012 qualitative study on how 45 women public relations practitioners perceive power and empowerment, Place found that “women public relations practitioners made meaning

of power as a function of influence, a function of relationships, knowledge and information, access, credibility, and empowerment” (p. 440). In a 2009 study on critical sensemaking in public relations by Thurlow, gender imbalance was cited as an obstacle to improving the reputation of public relations, especially as it relates to practitioner access to an organization’s decision-makers (p. 257). Thurlow’s (2009) study also found that “without that power to influence decisions within organizations, the role of the practitioner seems to be very much compromised” (p. 260).

As such, it can be reasoned that corporate cultures must also evolve to allow female practitioners easier access to power in order to be effective in their role, as “women practitioners can benefit from an awareness of the relations of power at work in the profession in order to increase their personal influence, empower those with whom they work and eliminate gender-based power differences.” (Place, 2012, p. 436).

Research Problem

Today, women make up the majority of the public relations and communications industry, and at the same time more women are also starting their families later in life, after establishing themselves professionally. This research examines how female practitioners who have (or want) management positions navigate taking time off from the workforce with the demands of their role and fast-paced nature of the profession.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how and to what extent taking maternity leave impacts female public relations practitioners in terms of their ability to build and manage

stakeholder relationships, and to remain connected to their organization's overall management strategies. This study was built around three main research questions, which together sought to paint a picture of how mid-career females working in public relations in Canada navigate building their career while taking leave from the workforce.

RQ1: *How and to what extent does maternity leave impact a woman's ability to build and manage relationships with internal and external stakeholders?*

This question aims to discover how women approached relationship building and stakeholder management during time away from the workforce. It focuses on relationships within their organization as well as with external stakeholders.

RQ2: *How and to what extent does maternity leave impact a woman's professional development and role in terms of strategic public relations management?*

This question aims to understand how women perceived the short and long term impacts of maternity leave on their professional development path, and what strategies they put in place to maintain or build career momentum while out of the workforce. This question explores how women seek continued involvement with professional development pursuits while away from work and caring for small children.

RQ3: *How and to what extent does having public relations practitioners taking maternity leaves affect the overall standard of practice (levels of excellence) of PR within an organization?*

This question explores how or to what extent having people transitioning in and out of an organization causes disruption to communications planning and what impacts that has on an organization's perception of public relations.

Methodology

Given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the subject matter, the researcher used a qualitative approach to data collection, opting to conduct in-depth interviews, as participants are able to contribute to research by sharing their unique experiences with what they “saw, thought, and/or how they acted in regard to the situation or problem” (Stacks, 2011, p. 179); the situation in this case being their temporary absence from the workforce during maternity leave.

This research method was selected because of its ability to glean “deep information and understanding” (Gulbrium & Holstein, 2001, p. 106) from the participants about their experiences and perceptions around maternity leave. According to Stacks (2011), one of the benefits of the in-depth interview is that it affords the researcher the opportunity to “get an understanding of not only the problem being researched but also the person being interviewed” (p. 174). Because maternity leaves are a highly individual experience, it was determined that this methodology would be the most appropriate way to collect rich data.

Interview participants represented a broad range of ages, sectors and experience. Nearly all of the participants are now in different roles and in different organizations from when they took maternity leave, but all were still working full time in public relations, communications or marketing roles. Positions held during maternity leaves were in a variety of organizations from the public and private sectors, including public, private, industry associations and health care.

Interview questions were designed to encourage the participants to share their experiences and perspectives about how and to what extent the short-term absence from the

workforce impacted their ability to do their jobs and advance their careers and bring value to their organizations as public relations practitioners, marketers or communications managers.

Data Collection Procedures

The researcher used three nonprobability sampling techniques to recruit participants: purposive, volunteer and snowball (Stacks, 2011):

- Purposive sampling was used by the researcher, who issued a call for volunteers through the network of alumni and current students of McMaster University's Masters of Communications Management program. This approach was purposive because the email articulated the eligibility requirements for the study.
- Volunteer sampling was used, in that nine of the seventeen women responded to the call for volunteers proactively offering to participate by contacting the researcher in response to the call for volunteers.
- Snowball sampling was used to identify other participants, who were introduced to the researcher through personal and professional network contacts.

Interview participants were located in British Columbia, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland. Interviews were conducted from December 21, 2017, to January 31, 2018; 15 interviews took place over the phone, and two occurred in person. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours in length. Participants were provided with a Letter of Information (see Appendix C) in advance of the interview that outlined the research and addressed issues related to research procedures, benefits, and confidentiality. Participants were also reminded that their feedback would remain anonymous and they could opt out of answering any questions at the

outset of the conversation, and were reminded that they would receive a copy of the final report once completed.

The interviews were semi-structured with a series of 20 open-ended questions (see Appendix A). Participants were encouraged to recall and reflect on their experiences during the time(s) in their careers during which they took maternity leave(s), and to share related opinions and perspectives. In some cases, not all of questions in the interview guide were used, because they were not all applicable to every participant (e.g., those who had changed jobs during a maternity leave). The interviews were recorded, and the researcher also took notes throughout the discussion. The voice recording and notes were saved to a password protected USB drive following each interview and the hand-written notes were then destroyed.

Each interview began with four questions that were designed to collect general demographic data:

1. How many maternity leaves have you taken and how long were you out for each leave?
2. How long has it been since you returned to work?
3. For how long had you been working prior to taking a leave?
4. What position did you hold at the time of your maternity leave? (answer for each leave if different)

Aside from four questions above, the interview questions were open-ended and designed to encourage the participant to speak to both her own experience, as well as her insights and perceptions related to how and to what extent maternity leave impacts the practitioner. Interview participants were asked the following questions:

5. Did you stay connected to your stakeholders during your maternity leave(s)? How did you manage these relationships? What processes or tools did you use (if any)?
 - a. Stakeholders could include: internal (management or executive team, direct reports, other departments) or external (clients, partners, sponsors, etc.)
6. Were you involved in the hiring and/or training of a replacement or additional resources to assume your position or responsibilities during your leave?
 - a. If yes – how do you think it impacted your ability to manage your existing workload or pursue new projects/opportunities?
7. Did you stay connected to your replacement (or other support) during your leave? How did you manage these relationships?
8. Did you feel there was an expectation from your stakeholders (management or executive team, direct reports, replacements, other departments, etc.) that you would remain connected (to people or to projects) while on leave?
9. Do you feel communications tools (social media, email, other) helped or hurt in terms of how strong you perceived your connection to your organization or clients to be during your absence?
10. If you could have done one thing differently during your maternity leave in terms of your relationship with stakeholders, what would it be?
11. What concerned you most about taking maternity leave before you left? Did these concerns prove true during your absence?
12. What concerned you most about returning to work before you went back? Did these concerns prove true upon your return?

13. What strategies did you put in place to mitigate these concerns prior to or during your leave? Did your organization have any processes or tools in place to mitigate concerns or ease the transition?
14. Did you design, or were you involved in, a reintegration plan in advance of your return?
15. What measures did you take, if any, to maintain or build career momentum while taking a maternity leave? (Volunteer work, professional development, freelance projects, etc.). Would you characterize it as intentional or organic?
16. How did you stay connected to the profession during your leave (information networking opportunities, professional development associations, etc.)?
17. If you could have done one thing differently in terms of maintaining your professional profile and ongoing professional development, what would it be?
18. What do you think is the biggest challenge for female practitioners when taking maternity leave? Where is the biggest impact felt?
19. Were you worried that taking maternity leave would have an impact on the role of public relations plays in your organization? Why or why not?
20. Do you feel it's more challenging for public relations practitioners to take maternity leave compared to other departments, professional services or industries? Why or why not?

Data Analysis

The researcher referred back to the recording and notes at the end of each interview to document key insights, and capture any pertinent or impactful quotes for the final report. At the end of the interview period, all of the data collected was organized by research question (as opposed to participant) in order to identify trends or similarities within the very personal experiences that were discussed.

Results

Participants

Seventeen women took part in an in-depth interview. Seven of the participants had taken one maternity leave, and ten had taken two; no one had three or more children. The researcher sought participants who had taken a maternity leave at any time over the last ten years, so there was a wide range from person to person in terms of how long they had spent in the workforce prior to their first maternity leave, and how much time had passed since they returned to work. There was one participant who was currently on maternity leave and two that had been back to work for less than one year.

Table 1.0

Years Passed Since Participants Completed Their Last Maternity Leave

Years	0-3	4-6	7-9	10-12	12+
Participants	8	3	4	2	0

Table 2.0

Years Spent in Workforce Prior to Taking First Maternity Leave

Years	0-3	4-6	7-9	10-12	12+
Participants	1	2	7	4	3

Most of the interviewees (14) had been in the workforce for seven or more years prior to their first leave, and the positions they held at the time reflect the fact that most were in managerial roles, including:

- Brand Manager
- Chief, Public Affairs & Community Relations
- Communications Assistant
- Communications Lead
- Creative Project Manager
- Communications & Community Relations
- Communications & Policy Advisor
- Director of Communications
- Executive Director, Corporate Communications
- Head of Marketing
- Manager, Public Affairs
- Managing Director
- Marketing Coordinator
- Regional Coordinator
- Research & Teaching Assistant
- Senior Communications Officer
- Senior Manager
- Senior Managing Director

Some participants changed jobs during or immediately following a maternity leave. Two participants accepted new jobs in new organizations while pregnant; one participant was let go from her position while on maternity leave; and seven began new roles in their existing organization when they returned from maternity leave.

Findings

RQ1: *How and to what extent does maternity leave impact a woman's ability to build and manage relationships with internal and external stakeholders?*

All of the participants recognized the importance of stakeholder and relationship management to their career success. And while all of the interviewees spoke to maintaining relationships while on maternity leave, there was no consensus on who they considered their

most important stakeholders to be, or how best to stay connected while away from work. All of the participants stayed in touch with colleagues and/or their professional network to maintain friendships, and many paid at least one social visit to their organization while on maternity leave. But those participants who changed jobs or organizations during their maternity leave were less focused on maintaining or building relationships of importance to the role they were leaving behind.

The majority of relationship management that occurred was with stakeholders within the participants' organizations. Five stayed connected to coworkers, managers and/or their replacement; two reported that they stayed active on certain files or projects; and two others continued to cultivate relationships with key media contacts in their market while on maternity leave. Participants shared their rationale for maintaining these relationships while away from work:

“I had superiors and subordinates, and I found it important to continue to have a presence and continue to be relevant. But that was incredibly important in order to maintain your effectiveness in the role when you return.”

“I did a lot of relationship management right before I left to make sure no one fell through the cracks, and that the relationships were handed off to (my replacement).”

“The company isn't going to take it upon itself to stay connected with you.”

“It's the nature of the industry and the corporate world. It's such a gray area - there's no fine line to say 'you're involved in this but not that - you're either involved or you're not.’”

Of the seventeen participants, nine had replacements hired or seconded by their organizations to fill their maternity leave, and all were involved in the training and transition planning for their replacement, but only seven had input on who was actually hired to assume their position. The rest of the participants were either not replaced at all, or they had their roles and responsibilities divided internally amongst their coworkers.

All of the participants played a very active role in creating transition plans in advance of their departure, and ensuring files and projects were well-positioned to be passed on. These experiences ranged from identifying those colleagues they wished to have assume their responsibilities, to having coworkers job shadow, to the creation of detailed work plans and status reports to be passed along to either existing colleagues or new replacements. The degree to which the interviewees maintained any contact with their replacements varied during their leave, depending on variables like how long of a leave they were taking, and whether or not they already had a relationship with the person or people who were backfilling their position. In the cases where the interviewees did stay in touch with their replacements, they described the dynamic as being more organic than formal, for example: occasionally hearing from their replacement with questions on certain issues. One interviewee described the challenge that exists in training a maternity leave replacement:

“Most people have no experience with how to train somebody. Suddenly you’re being thrust into training your replacement, but they don’t prepare you with the skills on how to implement that training. So even when there’s overlap, it’s not super if you don’t have the training or tools to explain to someone how to do your job.”

While participants spoke of maintaining their connection to coworkers from a social or informal perspective, their experiences varied in terms of whether or not participants felt there was an expectation from their management that they would continue to remain involved in any official capacity while on maternity leave. Nine of the interviewees reported that there was no expectation from their organization; four reported there was an expectation, including one who had made arrangements with her organization to be compensated for a certain number of hours worked each week; and four described a situation where the expectation was not explicitly stated but they felt it was implied. One participant explained her experience:

“It's funny, I feel like they expect one thing but then say another, if that makes sense. I felt very much like my manager really wanted me to be available to help, though they never put it in words. But then you talk to HR and they took my work phone - so they want me to be available but at the same time, they're not willing to give me the tools to stay in contact like that. So it's almost like they say one thing and mean another - they don't have a clear policy around that.”

For the interviewees who did continue to be connected to their colleagues and organizations during their maternity leave, email was the preferred means of communication, followed by phone calls and text messaging. Three interviewees noted that they used social media as a tool for keeping connected with colleagues and with contacts external to their organization. Two referenced following their organizations social media channels, but doing so in a passive way, in that they consumed the content their organization's shared without engaging with it in any way. The role of communications tools was described as follows:

“I’m a prevalent communicator by nature. When people feel like they’re experiencing it with you, they’re more sympathetic/empathetic to the challenges you’re facing, especially other women.”

“I sometimes envy people who can totally check out, but it was really helpful to me mentally to still feel like I was in the game. It also made the transition back in very easy, I didn’t need someone to sit down and debrief me on what had gone on in the last six months.”

When asked if there was anything they would have done differently in terms of maintaining their relationships, the participants were generally satisfied with how they fared. Five interviewees said they would have changed their approach to how they remained connected to their organizations and/or replacements in order to ease their eventual transition back, citing examples such as keeping their work phone or access to work email, to managing certain key external stakeholder relationships.

Overall, for those participants who expressed that there were things they would have done differently in hindsight, for those who had regrets at all, they were related more to their personal lives and decisions related to the length of time they took from work. Three participants, all of whom took less than one year off, said they wished they had taken longer leaves, while another reflected that she wished she had returned to work earlier; one expressed regret that she did not try to have more children, having been focused on work projects.

RQ2: *How and to what extent does maternity leave impact a woman’s professional development and role in terms of strategic public relations management?*

Interview participants were asked about what concerned them the most prior to their leave, as well as in advance of their return. To these questions, the interviewees recalled concerns that generally fell into three categories: that projects would “fall through the cracks” during their absence, that replacements would do a better job than them, and about how they would balance career with childcare and family obligations upon their return to work. Participants also described a desire to return to work performing at the same level as before they had left and be perceived by coworkers as such, but worried about how they would manage the volume of work alongside their additional responsibilities as new parents:

“There’s inflexibility and a microscope around new parents coming back, and what’s appropriate in terms of how they’re managing their time and keeping the balls in the air. The person who left is not the same person who is coming back, but I wanted to be that same person.”

“You know that if you say you’re going to take a year, you’re probably going to be looked at as someone who doesn’t take their career as seriously as those who do rush back. Among women there’s almost a badge of ‘who takes the shortest mat leave’ as a proxy for who has the most dedication to the company. It’s so stupid and I’m sorry I fell into that.”

“I was afraid of proving to everyone around me that I could do it all, but I was also afraid that I couldn’t do it all, so I was trying to prove something that I wasn’t sure was actually true.”

“Being able to handle it all was a real personal concern. I questioned my own capacity to deal with the massive unknown of having a baby and going back to work, without knowing what either would be like.”

“I was afraid that I’d be overlooked, that people will have forgotten my accomplishments. There’s no way around it, you’re taking a year off from your career.”

It is worth noting that the interviewees who had taken two maternity leaves mentioned that the two leaves were different experiences in terms of how they managed and mitigated concerns related to their place in the workforce. Two interviewees took a different outlook on going on leave, describing it as an opportunity to evaluate their career trajectory, consider job changes, or exploring new opportunities:

“The job, or your expectations, has to shift, especially in PR. In PR things change month to month, so it’s unrealistic to expect that it won’t change in a year. The biggest piece of advice I give is: don’t expect to have the same job when you come back.”

“It’s the time to change course and up the ante. If you’re a good worker, the company will find a role for you. Plant the seed now, because you have nothing to lose. Women stand in their own way – we look at maternity leave as a hindrance when it’s really an opportunity.”

All participants were asked if their organizations had any processes or tools in place to help women ease their transition out of, or back into, the workforce on either end of their maternity leave. None of the participants reported that their organization provided any kind of structure or support, but four did explain how they took it upon themselves to approach their management or organization to make alternative arrangements. These scenarios included keeping

a work phone while out to monitor files, one who now works from home one day a week, another who returned to a four day work week at 80% of her salary, and another who took the tools she deemed necessary (phone, laptop) with her on maternity leave. In cases where interviewees spoke of developing work plans prior to their departure, or reaching out to the organization to set the terms of their return, they all indicated that it was a self-directed initiative meant to mitigate some of the concerns they held as discussed above:

“No one really provided me with tools, though I didn’t ask permission, I just walked out of there with all the tools that I already had.”

“I had a plan to acclimatize my daughter to daycare, but there was no plan for me.”

“I went back to new jobs, but that came with it’s own challenges: the team didn’t know me or my work ethic. You know how they say you have three months to establish your credibility? It’s hard to do when you also have a one year old, and (are working with) new people who don’t know what you were like before.”

Approaches varied in terms of how women continued to maintain or build their career momentum, outside of their day-to-day employment, while on maternity leave. Four interviewees stepped away from engaging in any kind of networking or volunteer activities entirely, while another four were involved in their local community (for example: with mom groups, volunteering at daycares and schools). One interviewee took on freelance graphic design work, while eight were actively engaged in professional development, either through continuing education or involvement with industry associations such as the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) and International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), including

two women who made decisions to pursue accreditation through those organizations during their maternity leaves.

“It was an active decision to stay involved (as a volunteer) before I went out. You can be, without it overtaking your maternity leave, as you can make your own schedule, which you can’t do with work.”

“I thought of it as an opportunity for personal growth and exploration. It (being on maternity leave) confirmed that I was in the right field because I missed the work.”

“During my second leave, I set out to increase my network and build my social profile so I maintained and grew relationships via online interactions, coffee chats, etc., while staying connected to my coworkers over email.”

RQ3: *How and to what extent does having public relations practitioners take maternity leaves affect the overall standard of practice (levels of excellence) of PR within an organization?*

The third research question was intended to explore perceptions around how having women on maternity leave effects the overall placement and importance of public relations in an organization. Interview participants had a wide range of experiences, and had worked with organizations of varying sizes and scopes during their maternity leaves, thus each offered a unique perspective. For example, in smaller organizations, the impact of having roles and responsibilities of public relations change hands over the course of a woman’s pregnancy and maternity leave was much more significant than for those who worked in departments within larger organizations.

However, there was some consensus in two areas around challenges women faced when leaving their organizations for a short-term leave that ultimately impacted the role of public relations in their organizations. Three women felt that it was challenging to find suitable replacements to fulfill maternity leave contracts, and as a result of having to hire more junior practitioners, the role was at risk of becoming more technical rather than managerial in nature. Other interviewees noted that taking a maternity leave had an impact on their ability to advance in the short-term, and thus advance the practice of public relations within the organization. Interviewees were also asked if they felt it was more challenging for public relations practitioners to take maternity leave compared to women in other sectors or professional services. There was not consensus on this, as interview participants only had experience working in the communications industry, thus not able to speak to the challenges or requirements put to women in other sectors. However, those who did perceive it to be more challenging attributed it to the fast pace of change in the industry and importance of building and maintaining relationships with stakeholders to achieving success.

“I’ve been in more meetings where, when discussing what candidate to hire, the term ‘pregnancy risk’ is used. Pregnant women, and all women of child-bearing age, are put into the same box, and it impacts your career development; you’re not given any cool projects while you’re pregnant, you get put into a holding pattern.”

“It’s hard to find somebody with a lot of experience who is willing to come in and do your job for a year, so you tend to get a lot of junior applicants. Because of the nature of the candidates you get, the work takes a step backwards and become more coordination instead of participating in those senior meetings with executives.”

Discussion

Public relations in Canada is a feminized profession; with females making up the majority of practitioners in the industry. The ways in which those who have children navigate that period of their careers when they are taking temporary leaves from the workforce may impact the perception of the profession itself, rather than just the individuals.

The purpose of this study was to explore how and to what extent taking one or more maternity leaves impacts the short-term career development of new or young mothers working in public relations in terms of their abilities to build relationships and position themselves as strategic managers. Specifically, it looked into the issue from a Canadian context, as eligible new parents are now able to receive parental leave benefits (and be out of the workforce) for up to 18 months.

The qualitative data collected during the interviews revealed that despite maternity leave being a vastly different and unique experience for each woman who takes one, there are some common themes that can be extrapolated. This is so even though the women who participated in the interviews varied greatly in terms of age, geography, and work experience.

Feedback collected during the interviews suggests that maintaining strong relationships, and in particular relationships within their organizations, continues to be a priority for women while they are planning to transition out of work for maternity leave. Many participants spoke to spending a significant amount of time and energy on creating detailed work plans and ensuring that their replacements and/or coworkers were sufficiently briefed, and that the necessary introductions to external stakeholders had been made prior to their departure. This level of planning could be interpreted simply as a practitioner's way of ensuring a smooth transition

and/or the successful management or completion of projects. However it could also be inferred that, because these practitioners consider relationships management to be an important component of successful public relations, they took extra measures to support their internal team. In short, it may be that they took steps to setting their team and/or replacement up to successfully meet objectives and fulfill communications plans in an effort to positively impact how the public relations function operates in their absence and allow them to maintain positive and productive relationships within their team and across the organization upon their return.

Those interviewees who took shorter leaves were also less likely to keep in contact, because they felt their absences were not long enough for them to worry about having to remain relevant and on people's radars. From a social perspective, a few of the interviewees spoke of how "being kept in the loop" on office gossip or politics was actually helpful in feeling connected to their organizations and to transitioning back to work; this was also useful for those who were not able to stay in touch with their organizations in any official capacity due to internal policies or union regulations.

Similarly, the idea of trust underpinned much of the data collected with regards to the level of comfort practitioners had about leaving the workforce following their pregnancy. Some participants shared that they had little concerns about going on maternity leave or being disconnected from their organizations for up to a year. This could be attributed to the woman's age or how long she had spent in the workforce prior to their first leave, as generally, older women who were in more managerial positions had the highest level of comfort with going on a leave. But in several instances, this peace of mind was related to existing levels of trust that they had already established (and were confident would not be effected without them there) with their replacements and/or colleagues. Further, those who had input and involvement on the selection

and training of a replacement, or who were delegating the responsibilities to colleagues where trust was already well-established, seemed less likely to be worried about the status of their projects or their overall job security while they were out. The strength of the relationships with senior management and/or executive teams was also a factor but to a much lesser degree, as most of the experiences interview participants spoke of were about others in a similar management bracket or subordinates.

Interestingly, the courtesy of providing thorough training and status reporting is not one that seems to be reciprocated when women are returning to work after a maternity leave. Some interviewees took it upon themselves to initiate discussions with their management or teams and put plans in place in advance of their return to work. However, none of the women interviewed presented a case where their organization had tools or policies in place to help them reintegrate back into the workforce or formally familiarize themselves with any new people, projects or procedures that could be helpful in easing the transition back to the office and into projects. So, as it stands, many women are bookending their actual maternity leave with having to develop their own strategies to ensure smooth transition, on top of having to strike a balance within a new family dynamic. In this study, the women interviewed reported that their organizations either hired a replacement or redistributed their responsibilities around their team, which put these women in positions where they spent time before and after their leave managing laterally and spending time and energy on developing work plans and status reports rather than public relations strategies and interacting with senior leaders and decision makers to demonstrate and/or reinforce the value they bring to the overall organizational strategy. This raises the question of how time spent preparing for their departure impacts their abilities to take on new projects or

have the capacity to identify new opportunities that could either help them advance professionally, or help advance the role of public relations within their organizations.

In the absence of any organizational plans or policies to help ease the transition, women who take a maternity leave are also left to figure out their place in the organizations upon their return, and fit that within the broader ambiguity that surrounds new parents in terms of determining how best to balance work responsibilities with family obligations, which people often cannot plan for until they are actually back in the workforce. That uncertainty, and the stress and anxiety it can cause, came up in several of the interviews. Nearly all of the participants noted that, to a certain extent, leaving the workforce for maternity leave had an impact on their short-term professional development. For women who were concerned about how they would navigate this new reality, dedicating time and intellect to thinking about their overall career advancement was not a priority during their leaves. However, participants who were involved in professional development or professional associations prior to taking maternity leave remained involved while they were out of the work force, and in most cases cited the affiliation as being a positive experience in terms of remaining connected to the profession.

The return to work experience is as different for every woman as is the experience of being a parent, and can even differ from the first to the second child and maternity leave, and depends on many external variables like access to childcare, family support and commute. Issues related to work-life balance and organizational culture is becoming a more popular subject in public discourse. However, many of the women who participated in this study spoke of how, upon their return to work, they felt it important to establish their relevance and credibility by resuming the same pace and level of productivity, and of taking active measures to not draw

attention to the fact that they were new parents and that their priorities and availability had evolved accordingly.

With this in mind, perhaps there is a role that public relations practitioners can play in advancing the conversation around creating conditions for women to transition in and out of the workforce for maternity leaves, and positively impact the overall culture within their organization. In situations where public relations is also responsible for internal communications and working with the human resources function to make employees aware of new policies or practices especially, there may be opportunity to implement changes that would be beneficial to women, and men, across the organization.

It is also worth making note of the level of interest that the interview participants had in the topic and the opportunity to share their own experiences. Most of the interviewees proactively responded to a call for participants from the researcher, and expressed enthusiasm for the need for research of this nature. Though the sample size for this study was small, it suggests that there could be an opportunity for public relations professional associations such as the Canadian Public Relations Society to bring additional value to its female members by creating a platform for women practitioners to share their best practices on how to manage maternity leave with career development.

Limitations

Information collected through the interviews revealed that there were common themes as discussed above, despite the unique and personal nature of family planning. However, there were a number of limitations to this study, including a limited research and data collection period,

which resulted in a limited number of interviews being conducted, especially relative to the number of women who would have been eligible to participate across Canada.

Additional limitations included the following:

- Small sample size, relevant to the number of women in communications in Canada who have also taken maternity leave over the course of the last decade.
- Participants were primarily drawn from the current student and alumni network of McMaster University's Masters of Communications Management program, thus there was a high percentage holding a graduate degree.
- Participants were based largely in the greater Toronto area; a broader geographic sample that included women from other parts of Canada and rural or remote areas in particular may have yielded different results, especially where access to professional development or industry connections may be limited.
- The sample population did not include anyone who owned their own business or who did freelance or contract work leading up to or during maternity leave. Business owners must meet different requirements in order to qualify for parental benefits through Employment Insurance, thus may have approached maternity leave differently than those with insurable employment through their organization.
- Some participants discussed the lack of programs or policies to support women as they leave and/or return to work, but the study did not examine organizational maternity leave policies or include research on, or interviews with, human resource professionals to explore the issue further.

- The study did not directly ask or explore whether or not those who did work during maternity leave used their contribution as leverage when negotiating a new or revised contract, for those who went back to the same organization.
- No participants in the study took parental leave for an adoption. Women who take maternity leave without spending a number of months at work while pregnant may perceive there to be other issues or challenges not examined herein.
- No participants were single parents during the time they were on maternity leave.

Conclusions & Future Research

This case study sought to explore how one or more maternity leave impacts female public relations practitioners in Canada in three areas: their ability to build and manage stakeholder relationships, the impact on their professional development and ability to position themselves as strategic managers, and the effect on the overall standard of practice of public relations within an organization, relative to the fact that women make up the majority of practitioners in Canada.

Indeed, this research could be considered an introductory look at this issue, given the public discourse currently taking place on the importance of work-life balance, and the changing nature of how families plan for and manage raising children, and how organizations, industries or professional associations can be more supportive. This is an area that is continually evolving, so new research opportunities will likely present themselves as governments and organizations recognize the evolving needs of working parents.

There are many other future research opportunities to look at this issue more in-depth or from alternative angles, including:

- How do male practitioners who take parental leave view the same areas?
- How do other kinds of prolonged absences (for example: for child or elder care, or due to illness or injury) from the workforce effect a practitioner's ability to manage relationships and manage strategically?
- What is the impact on practitioners who take a prolonged leave from the workforce for childcare? The longest leave included in this study was 18 months, but many were shorter than a year, so the perceived consequences for women who take several years consecutively before re-entering the workforce may differ.
- What issues arise in the field of human resources management with regards to how organizations of different sizes or in different sectors approach maternity leave and navigate managing employees who wish to stay engaged with those who do not?

In addition to more in-depth academic research, there is also an opportunity for women in the profession to start a dialogue around their experiences and best practice sharing. Having a platform to discuss the issue may help women navigate the maternity leave experience more easily, and ultimately advance more quickly in the profession. We cannot change the fact that women will leave the workforce to start, grow or care for their families. But if anything, parental leaves will become more common as both men and women leave the workforce for family leaves of all kinds; as of December 2017, there is even a new category of leave for which employment insurance benefits can be paid for caring for family members (Government of Canada, 2017). And, what constitutes “work-life” balance means different things to different people. However by starting a conversation about how practitioners can balance the connected, interactive nature of the industry, along with the tools available to them to stay connected to their positions and

their professions even during career absences, practitioners could eventually be in positions to guide their organizations to create and implement policies that are more personalized or conducive to the requirements of the job.

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Appendix A – Interview Guide

Intro: This interview will consist of 25 questions, but I may ask follow-up questions or for you to further clarify or elaborate on your answer. We can skip over any answers you do not feel comfortable answering, and you can stop the interview at any time. All the information you do provide will be kept confidential, and if you wish, you can review the interview transcription and omit any details.

I'll be recording our conversation to ensure that accuracy in how your responses are captured and transcribed. The only other person who may access the recording is my supervisor, and the recordings will be destroyed once the report is written.

Closing: Thank you again for your participation in this research. If you wish to review your individual transcripts or a summary of the overall research findings, I'll be happy to provide a copy once the research is complete.

Interview Questions

Demographic Information

1. How many maternity leaves have you taken and how long were you out for each?
2. How long has it been since you returned to work?
3. For how long had you been working prior to taking a leave?
4. What position did you hold at the time of your maternity leave? (answer for each leave)

RQ 1: How and to what extent does maternity leave impact women's role in relationship building and management and more broadly with internal and external stakeholders?

5. Did you stay connected to your stakeholders during your leave? How did you manage these relationships? What processes or tools did you use (if any):
 - a. Internal – e.g., management or executive team, direct reports, replacement, other departments, etc.
 - b. External – clients, partners, sponsors, etc.
 - c. Professional network
6. Were you involved in the hiring and/or training of a replacement or additional resources to assume your position or responsibilities during your leave?
 - a. If yes how do you think it impacted your ability to manage your existing workload or pursue new projects?
7. Did you stay connected to your replacement (or coworkers if not replaced) during your leave? How did you manage these relationships?
8. Did you feel there was an expectation from your stakeholders (management/executive team, direct reports, replacement, other departments, etc.) that you would remain connected while on leave?
 - a. If yes, to people or to specific files or projects?
9. Do you feel communications tools (social media, email, etc.) helped or hurt in terms of how strong you perceived your connection to your organization or clients to be during your absence?
10. If you could have done one thing differently during your maternity leave in terms of your relationship with stakeholders, what would it be?

RQ 2: How and to what extent does maternity leave impact women's professional role and development in terms of strategic public relations management in Canadian workplaces?

11. What concerned you most about taking maternity leave before you left? Did these concerns prove true during your absence?
12. What concerned you most about returning to work before you went back? Did these concerns prove true upon your return?
13. What strategies did you put in place to mitigate these concerns prior to or during your leave? What processes or tools does your organization (formal or informal) have in place to mitigate concerns?
14. Did you design, or were you involved in the development of a reintegration plan in advance of your return?
15. What measures did you take, if any, to maintain or build career momentum while taking a maternity leave? (e.g., volunteer work, professional development opportunities, etc.).
Would you consider them to be intentional or organic in nature?
16. How did you stay connected to the profession during your leave?
17. If you could have done one thing differently during your maternity leave in terms of maintaining your professional profile and professional development, what would it be?

RQ 3: How and to what extent do different levels and amount of maternity leave effect the overall standard of practice (level of excellence) of public relations within an organization?

18. What do you think is the biggest challenge for female practitioners when taking maternity leave? Where is the biggest impact felt? (e.g., relationship with management, relationship with stakeholders, missed advancement opportunities, etc.)
19. Were you worried that taking maternity would have an impact on the role public relations plays in your organization? Why or why not? What did you do (if anything) to mitigate those concerns before you left or upon your return?

20. Do you feel it's more challenging for PR practitioners to take maternity leave compared to other departments or industries? Why or why not?

Appendix B: Email Recruitment

Dear (Insert Name),

My name is Claire Ryan and I am a graduate student in the Master of Communications Management program at McMaster University. I'm conducting research on the impact of maternity leave on relationship management and strategic management in public relations on female practitioners. As part of this research I am interviewing senior executives who have taken one or more maternity leaves in the last ten years. I received your contact information from (insert source).

If you are interested in participating, it would be great to include your insights, and I would be happy to arrange an interview at a day/time most convenient for you. This research is being conducted for academic purposes, and your participation is completely voluntary. With my recruitment plan, I am likely to have more than sufficient numbers to complete my research, so please do not feel obligated to participate.

Interviews will be a series of open-ended questions and will take approximately one hour. It is not required that participants answer all questions, and all of the information provided will be summarized in the final report without identifying participants by name or organization. The list of interview questions that will be asked during each interview is attached.

This research has been approved by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board, and the attached Letter of Information contains a detailed explanation of the study and research objectives.

I look forward to hearing from you in this regard.

Thanks,

Claire Ryan
Master of Communications Management Candidate
McMaster University
Ryanl7@mcmaster.ca
506-343-5425

Appendix C: Letter of Information

December 14, 2017



LETTER OF INFORMATION

A Study of the Impact of Maternity Leave on Mid-Career Public Relations Practitioners

Student Researcher:

Claire Ryan
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And Multimedia
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140, ext. 26977
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Advisor:

Dr. Terry Flynn
Department of Communication studies
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McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140, ext. 26977
Email: tflynn@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this study is to explore how and to what extent maternity leave impacts female public relations practitioners in terms of ability to build and manage relationships with stakeholders, and remain connected to their organization's overall management strategy. This research is being conducted as a part of the Master's of Communications Management degree program at McMaster University.

Procedures involved in the Research:

This research is being conducted through in-depth interviews of 10-15 female public relations practitioners who currently hold senior management or executive positions, and who have taken one or more maternity leaves in the last ten years. The interview will be conducted in person or via Skype, depending on the participant's location. The interview will consist of 25 questions and will take approximately one hour each. The list of interview questions that will be asked during each interview is enclosed below. Interviews will be recorded, and the researcher will also take handwritten notes.

Are there any risks to doing this study?

It is not likely that there will be any harm or discomfort associated with participation in this research. This research is being conducted for academic purposes, and participation is completely voluntary. Certain interview questions will be about organizational culture as it relates to reintegration after maternity leave. Some participants may perceive a risk in sharing their opinion if it is not favourable to their organization based on their experience. This may cause hesitation or discomfort in answering certain questions, however, participants do not need to answer any questions that cause any hesitation or discomfort.

The potential for risks will be managed by ensuring that identities will not be used. The job titles and sector area (public relations agency, non-profit organization, or business) will be used in the analysis of data collected during the interviews, but participants' names and organizations will not be used. Interview participants will also be informed that they can opt out of questions they do not feel comfortable answering. Participants will also be advised that while measures to ensure that the data remains anonymous, participants may be identifiable depending on the total number of interviews conducted and the level of detail shared.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

This research will not benefit you directly. I hope that what is learned as a result of this study will help us to better understand how and to what extent maternity leave impacts a practitioner's ability to manage relationships and remain involved in strategic management within their organizations.

Payment or Reimbursement

There is no compensation associated with the completion of this survey.

Confidentiality

Participation in the survey is anonymous, and interview participants will not be identified by name or organizations in the final analysis and discussion. The data will be kept on a private, password-protected external hard drive where only my advisor and myself will have access to it. Notes and recordings from the interviews will be destroyed immediately following interview transcription, and all data will be destroyed five years following the completion of the study.

Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in the interviews is voluntary, and it is the individual's choice to be part of the study or not. Interviewees can withdraw their information from the research at any point during the data collection period, and will be given the opportunity to review their interview transcription and omit certain details prior to data analysis.

Information about the Study Results

If you would like to receive the summary of the study results, please email me at ryanl7@mcmaster.ca. Results will be shared by blind carbon copy (BCC) email when ready.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

Claire Ryan
ryanl7@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140, ext. 23142
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
Email: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Claire Ryan, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until my survey results are submitted.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.
- I agree to have my interview recorded, both by a voice recording app and researcher's notes
- **I understand that by agreeing to and participating in an interview, I have provided my consent to this research study and the terms outlined in this document.**

Name

Date