What it takes to be a good Public Affairs professional

A study into the competences of Public Affairs professionals

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Abstract of the study

Several definitions of Public Affairs (PA) are used by academics. In this study PA is defined as follows: PA focuses on facilitating and building relationships and interaction with actors in the political and social environment so as to align corporate and public policies. For the last decades the field of PA is considerably growing and with this growing field issues become more complex. This emerging field results in an increase in demand for more skilled and experienced PA professionals. In response to this need the aim of the present study is threefold: which are the most important competences to be a good PA professional, to which extent does the PA professional master these competences and what kind of personality traits a PA professional has. In order to examine the first two elements a Q-sort was used among 32 PA professionals. Additionally, a questionnaire was used for the demographic information and a big five personality test. Based on the results of this study there could be concluded that the most important competences for a PA professional were *strategical and tactical thinking*, *networking*, *knowledge of politics* and *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*. The best mastered competences were *strategical and tactical thinking*, *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*, *knowledge of politics*, *networking* and *analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)*. It turned out that the majority of the important competences were also the best mastered competences. Furthermore, the results of the big five personality test showed that PA professionals scored relatively low on neuroticism, high on extraversion and high on openness.

Keywords

Public Affairs, Competences, big five, NEO-FFI, Q-sort.

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1. Introduction and theoretical background

Whether it is justified or not, Public Affairs is often characterized by society as mysterious and is frequently associated with activities performed behind closed doors. Public Affairs seeks to influence public policy in an organization's favor. Therefore, it is interesting to find out who these Public Affairs professionals, that work in this mysterious environment, really are, since they try to influence the decision making process in public policy. In the first paragraph of this chapter literature regarding Public Affairs are discussed. Subsequently, the different tools of Public Affairs are discussed. In the third paragraph the competences that, are supported by literature and, might be important for a Public Affairs professional are shown. In the fourth paragraph the big five personality traits are discussed. Finally, the research questions are illustrated.

1.1 Public Affairs

The field of Public Affairs, which will be referred to as 'PA' in the present study, has grown considerably the last two decades. Already in 2001, Harris and Moss concluded that nowadays there are more PA practitioners than ever. As a consequence of this growing field of PA, the issues have become more complex as well (Moss, McGrath, Tonge & Harris, 2012). These issues can be determined as subjects which could have an impact on an organization. This development has led to a growing demand for more skilled and experienced PA professionals (Moss et al., 2012). Given this growing demand, there is a need to define the skills required for the role of a PA professional more clearly. In response to this need, the present study focuses on the competences required for a PA professional. In addition, the best mastered competences of the PA professional are studied.

Recently, after years of research and growing interest in attempts to define best practice, Moss et al. (2012) came to the conclusion that there still is a lot of confusion about what PA is and how it contributes to organizational success. Therefore, there is a need for academic research to catch up with the growth in PA practice (McGrath, Moss & Harris, 2010). Academics often use public affairs (PA), Public Affairs Management (PAM), lobbying and Public Relations (PR) as synonyms, showing that these terms are still being confused. What makes it even more difficult is that PA tends to have different meanings in different cultures (McGrath, et al. 2010). To provide insight into the different meanings of PA, the next section shows an overview of different definitions used by several academics.

Author	Year	Definition of PA
Post, Murray, Dickie & Mahon	1982	PA ensures management has understanding of political realities (window in) and equally that their views are known amongst key political figures (window out).
Meznar & Nigh	1995	PA helps cushion the organization from outside attack and reach out to key stakeholder groups.
Hillman en Hitt	1999	PA can either engage in short term political engagement, lobbying or longer term relationship building with the government.
Van Schendelen	2002	Public affairs refers to the external agenda of an interest group. This is the group of interests to be protected and promoted by influencing the environment.
Linders & De Lange	2003	Public Affairs is a strategic management discipline that focuses on the political and administrative environment in which the organization is situated or will be situated.
Hillman, Keim & Schuler	2004	Public Affairs is seen as the behavior and the actions of organizations to get issues on the agenda and influence politics.
Van Schendelen	2010	PA focuses on facilitating and building relationships and interaction with actors in the political and social environment so as to align corporate and public policies.

Table 1: Definitions of PA

Based on the definitions given in table 1, one general similarity can be identified; PA seeks to influence public policy in an organization's favor. This can be based on either the point of view from which PA is defined or the party that needs to be influenced.

At first, the point of view from which the PA definition is formulated will be discussed. The PA definitions from the different academics were developed from different points of view; coming from organizations, management and interest groups. Some academics did not formulate PA from a specific point of view. The majority of academics listed in table 1 chose the organizational point of view to determine the definition of PA. This point of view was used by Meznar and Nigh (1995), Linders and De Lange (2003) and Hillman, Keim and Schuler (2004). On the other hand, according to Post et al. (1982) PA helps management to understand political reality. Alternatively, Van Schendelen (2002) defined PA from the point of view of an interest group. An interest group can embody both an organization or a person. Finally, Hillman and Hitt (1999) and Van Schendelen (2010) have in common that they both did not define a clear point of view from which the PA definition was developed.

The other aspect of the similarity that is identified in table 1, is the party that needs to be influenced. Most academics mention politics, as the party that needs to be influenced. Only Van Schendelen (2002) and Meznar and Nigh (1995) choose a different perspective as Van Schendelen (2002) focused on influencing the environment, without any further specification, and Meznar and Nigh (1995) formulated their definition from a defensive point of view, where they conclude that PA helps to 'cushion the organization from outside attack and reach out to key stakeholder groups'. Thus, the academics do not unambiguously identify the same party which needs to be influenced.

Although the academics listed in table 1 all use different definitions of PA, their definitions have in common that PA tries to influence public policy in an organization's favor. Van Schendelen (2010) focuses on building and facilitating relationships with actors in the political and social environment. This definition is not formulated from a particular perspective. Therefore, this definition should be seen as the most comprehensive, since it focuses on building and facilitating relationships while it also takes the political and social environment into account. For this reason, this definition will further be used as the standard definition of PA in the present study.

1.2 The profession

As concluded in paragraph 1.1, a PA professional seeks to influence public policy in an organization's favor. In order to succeed, the PA professional needs to master certain competences in order to apply PA tools in an appropriate manner. These tools are the home front, arena analysis, issues management, network management, stakeholder analysis and lobbying, and will be discussed in this paragraph.

<u>The home front</u>
The state of the internal organization the PA professional represents, can set serious limits for lobby groups' management (Van Schendelen, 2002). For example, a lack of sufficient cohesion at the home front is one of the most serious causes of a poor performance in PA (Van Schendelen, 2002). If different members, that represent the same organization, send different and confusing messages, the message gets vague and unclear. As a result, the message of a PA professional will not be taken seriously. That is why it is important for the PA professional to stay in touch with the organization he or she represents. Or as Van Schendelen (2010) states it: 'The PA expert supports the management board by getting the outside world internalized by strategy and its interests externalized among stakeholders and officials'. In sum, regarding the home front, *knowledge of the home organization* is an important competence for a PA professional.

Arena analysis

An arena analysis can be divided into the following four components: arena boundaries, stakeholders, issues and time. According to Van Schendelen (2002) the results of the arena analysis can be used to identify the organizations' partners and enemies, the issues at stake, the time aspects and the differences between insiders and outsiders. Therefore, the arena analysis is the mapping of a dynamic situation. When one of the components of the arena changes, it influences the arena as a whole. In 2010, Van Schendelen states: 'An arena is not a physical place, but the virtual collection of all stakeholders, including EU officials, together with their interests-at-issue regarding a specific dossier at a specific time'. This means that each dossier has its own arena with specific characteristics. In sum, regarding the arena analysis, *knowledge of the arena's*, *time management* and *networking* are important competences for a PA professional.

Issues management

According to McGrath et al. (2010), 'Issues management has to be concerned with identifying potential issues which could have an impact on the organization – this is the essential precondition to all else, as if an issue evades detection then nothing can or will be done about it'. It is therefore necessary to prioritize issues in terms of the extent to which they could matter to the organization. The more important the issue, the more likely it is that the organization engages in political activity to influence the outcome (McGrath et al., 2010). Furthermore, issues can be seen as a threat or as an opportunity for the group of interests (Van Schendelen, 2002). Issues have a life cycle (Van Schendelen, 2002) which means that issues tend to develop in a similar way. They start life silently, but at some point the issue enters the public arena. In the public arena the issue gets attention in a bell curve; it rises, achieving some settlement and it disappears slowly or suddenly (Van Schendelen, 2002). In sum, regarding issues management, *knowledge of the home organization* and *knowledge of the world, social issues* are important competences for a PA professional.

Network management

Soeters (1993) states that: 'Networks are structures of interrelations between individuals and/or organizations, who engage in reciprocal, preferential, mutually supportive actions'. Information and new ideas are exchanged since networks rely on future expectations and trust (Soeters, 1993). Networks develop since they evolve from a process of social integration. This implies that networks should be regarded as dynamic, and not as static, entities (Soeters, 1993).

For officials of EU institutions, MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) and lobbyists, work never stops because they meet each other on informal occasions like, during lunchtime, after work or during the weekends. This informal networking circuit renders the boundaries between the professional and private lives fluid and is assumed to influence policy-making indirectly (Suvarierol, 2009). In sum, regarding networking, *networking* and *willing to work irregular hours* are important competences for a PA professional.

Stakeholder analysis

According to Brugha and Varvasovszky (2000) stakeholder analysis can be used to generate knowledge about the relevant actors and to understand their agenda, actions and intentions. The growing popularity of the stakeholder analysis shows the importance of the influence that stakeholders have in the decision making process (Brugha & Varvasovszky, 2000). Van Schendelen (2002) also describes the process of the stakeholder analysis and describes that the process starts with drawing an inventory of all the stakeholders including the PA professional themselves and the officials. When doing so, all stakeholders should be respected and taken seriously, to ensure that the list is free from bias. An unbiased and specific inventory usually results in a long list of stakeholders. The stakeholders will be evaluated on political participation (passive or active) and effectiveness. With sufficient political resources (such as financial means, expertise, skills, affiliations, personnel, reputation and network) a stakeholder can be effective. The most relevant stakeholders are the ones that are active and potentially highly influential (Van Schendelen, 2002). Or as Van Schendelen (2010) describes a stakeholder as an interest group, one that holds a stake or a position within an issue arena. Consequently, each issue requires its own stakeholder analysis. In sum, regarding the stakeholder analysis, *networking* is an important competence for a PA professional.

Lobbying

Academics continue to use lobbying as a substitute term for PA. However, lobbying is the action-oriented part of PA that aims to actually influence formal institutions and authority figures in an informal way (Van Schendelen, 1992). Mack (2005) agrees with Van Schendelen, as he concludes that influencing the government is the practical definition of PA. According to Van Schendelen (2010) lobbying has four general characteristics. At first, information about stakeholders and their issues is preferably gathered in direct ways. Secondly, PA should be highly informally and preferably without showing direct interest in a specific topic, because otherwise some point of no return may be passed. After this lobbying is done silently, because information is gathered through ears and eyes and never through the mouth, and also because sound tends to mobilize potential opponents. The fourth and last characteristic can be summarized by the fact that others are usually less interested in somebody's demand and more in 'what is in it for them'. So, the counter party is interested in what

the lobbyist has to offer. In sum, regarding lobbying, *knowledge of politics*, *communication skills* and *networking* are important competences for a PA professional.

1.3 Be good

There is no specific education to become a PA professional, but in order to perform this job in an appropriate manner several competences are required. A PA professional is someone who often functions in a personal encounter with other people in situations where much is at stake. Therefore, it seems not too farfetched to state that habitus plays an important role, and sometimes a decisive one (Linders & De Lange, 2006). This confirms the conclusion of McGrath (2006) who shows that 'the personal skills will contribute to his or her effectiveness'. So, in sum, a PA professional's appearance can be a decisive factor.

In this paragraph a list of relevant competences is created. To create a scientific basis for this list of competences, these competences are collected from several academics. First, studies on competences, in general as well as specific to PA professionals, are collected. Based on these studies a list of more than 100 competences is created. Some of the competences are identified as an element of another competence. For instance *communication skills*, this competence is mentioned by one of the academics, but some of the other academics mentioned elements of communication skills like listening or writing. Therefore, these elements are merged into the competence *communication skills*. As a result, it is possible that some of the competences in table 2 are mentioned more than once by the same author(s). Only the competences that are represented more than once are included in table 2 so that only the most supported competences are included in the present study. In contrast to the supported competences the *networking* competence is not mentioned by one of these academics. Nevertheless this competence was included in the table since this competence is often associated with lobbying and the work of PA professionals.

All of the competences are divided into three different groups: knowledge (n=5), skills (n=16) and behavior (n=7). In addition, the used references are mentioned in table 2. Furthermore, in table 3 the competences are assigned to the tools of PA which are described in more detail in paragraph 1.2. The information in these both tables may help to interpret the results of this study.

<u>Knowledge</u>
Table 2 shows five knowledge competences. The most mentioned competence is *knowledge of the world and social issues*. Then, *specific knowledge for the job* is mentioned four times. Next, *knowledge of politics*, *knowledge of the arena's* and *knowledge of the home organization* are all mentioned two times in literature. In table 3 there are two knowledge competences who apply to

five of the PA tools, these competences are: *knowledge of the arena's* and *knowledge of politics*. *Knowledge of the home organization* is important for two of the PA tools and *knowledge of the world, social issues* is important to one of the PA tools. *Specific knowledge for the job* could not be linked to one of the PA tools.

<u>Skills</u>

The majority of the competences in table 2 are skills. *Communication skills* is the only competence that is mentioned by all of the previous studies that were taken into account for the present study. The second most mentioned skill is *teamwork*. *Being able to speak and write in the leading languages, independent (taking responsibility and autonomy)* and *coping with pressure* are mentioned four times in total. *Manners (politeness, charming, respectful and being pleasant)*, *analytic and research minded* and *media skills* are mentioned three times. Seven of the skills are mentioned twice by one or more academics: *persuasiveness, pragmatic, negotiating, strategical and tactical thinking, time management, conceptual thinking and problem solving* and *learning and development of self and others*. In table 3 *strategical and tactical thinking* is applicable to all of the six PA tools. Followed by *analytic and research minded* and *networking* which both apply to four of the PA tools. Then *persuasiveness* and *negotiating* are important to three of the six PA tools. Furthermore, *conceptual thinking and problem solving* is applicable for two of the PA tools. The remaining skills are applicable to one or none of the PA tools.

<u>Behavior</u>

in contrast to the skills mentioned above there are seven behavioral competences which were represented more than once. The first one, *ethics (honest, integrity and reliability)*, is the most mentioned behavioral competence. The second most mentioned behavioral competences are *empathy and sensitivity*, *flexibility* and *positive attitude*. The last two behaviors, that are mentioned twice, are *being critical* and *willing to work irregular hours*. In table 3 the behavior competence which is applicable to four of the PA tools is *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*. Followed by *empathy and sensitivity* which is an important competence for two of the PA tools. The remaining behavioral competences are applicable to one or none of the PA tools.

	Competences	Figee, E.L., Gosselt, J.F., Jong, M.D.T. de & Linders, P.C.J., (2016)	Van Schendelen, M.P. (2010)	McGrath, C. (2006)	Damaschke, C.K. (2012)	Phillips, B. N., Kaseroff, A. A., Fleming, A. R., & Huck, G. E. (2014)	Robertson, I. T., & Kinder, A. (1993)	Patterson, F., Ferguson, E., Lane, P., Farrell, K., Martlew, J., & Wells, A. (2000)	Patterson, F., Tavabie, A., Denney, M., Kerrin, M., Ashworth, V., Koczwara, A., & MacLeod, S. (2013)	Total
skills	communication skills	2	1	4	1	5	2	1	1	17
skills	being able to speak and write in the leading languages	2	1	1	3					7
behavior	ethics: honesty, integrity and reliability	2	1	1			1	1	1	7
knowledge	knowledge of the world, social issues	5								5
skills	manners: politeness, charming, respectful to others, being pleasant		2	1		2				5
skills	teamwork				1	1	1	1	1	5
knowledge	specific knowledge for the job: vocational training & expertise	1			1			1	1	4
behavior	empathy and sensitivity	1					1	1	1	4
skills	independent, taking responsibility and autonomy	1			1	1	1			4
skills	coping with pressure	1					1	1	1	4
behavior	flexibility	1	1		1		1			4
skills	analytic, research minded	1	1		1					3
skills	media skills; influencing media, knowledge of media	3								3
behavior	positive attitude		1			1	1			3
knowledge	knowledge of politics	1	1							2
knowledge	knowledge of the arena's	1		1						2
skills	persuasiveness	1					1			2
skills	pragmatic	1	1							2
skills	negotiating; win-win & maximilization	2								2
skills	strategical and tactical thinking	1					1			2
skills	time management						2			2
skills	conceptual thinking & problem solving							1	1	2
behavior	being critical	1	1							2
behavior	willing to work irregular hours	1					1			2
behavior	tenacity		1				1			2
knowledge	knowledge of the home organisation	1	1							2
skills	learning and development of self and others							1	1	2
skills	networking									

Table 2: Competences supported by literature

	Competences	The home front	Arena analysis	Issues Management	Network management	Stakeholder analysis	Lobbying	Other	Total
skills	strategical and tactical thinking	1	1	1	1	1	1		6
knowledge	knowledge of politics		1	1	1	1	1		5
knowledge	knowledge of the arena's	1	1		1	1	1		5
skills	analytic, research minded		1	1	1	1			4
skills	networking		1		1	1	1		4
behavior	ethics: honesty, integrity and reliability	1	1	1			1		4
skills	persuasiveness	1	1				1		3
skills	negotiating; win-win & maximilization	1	1				1		3
behavior	empathy and sensitivity		1				1		2
skills	conceptual thinking & problem solving		1				1		2
skills	time management		1					1	2
knowledge	knowledge of the home organisation	1		1					2
knowledge	specific knowledge for the job: vocational training & expertise							1	1
knowledge	knowledge of the world, social issues			1					1
skills	communication skills							1	1
skills	being able to speak and write in the leading languages							1	1
skills	manners: politeness, charming, respectful to others, being pleasant							1	1
skills	teamwork	1							1
skills	independent, taking responsibility and autonomy							1	1
skills	coping with pressure							1	1
behavior	flexibility							1	1
skills	media skills; influencing media, knowledge of media							1	1
behavior	positive attitude							1	1
skills	pragmatic							1	1
behavior	being critical							1	1
behavior	willing to work irregular hours							1	1
behavior	tenacity		1						1
skills	learning and development of self and others							1	1

Table 3: Competences assigned to PA tools

1.4 **What it takes**

Table 2 shows the competences supported by literature. While certain competences can be developed over time, there are also competences that are related to the personality of the PA professional. For this reason it is interesting to gain more insight in the personality of PA professionals. The big five personality traits are used to describe the human personality and psyche in psychology (McCrae & Costa, 2004). Therefore, this theory will also be used in the present study. The five factors that have been defined in this theory are: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. These five factors will be further described below.

Openness

The openness factor is mostly designated as an spiritual attitude. Elements like imagination, sensitivity to the aesthetic, attention to personal feelings, preference for variation, intellectual curiosity and the ability to give independent judgements play an important role in many theories and research methods on this factor (Hoekstra, De Fruyt & Ormel, 2003). The insight that these elements constitute as one coherent domain is rarely so explicitly put forward as within a personality test, the NEO-FFI questionnaire (McCrae & Costa, 1997). Within the more extensive five factor personality test, the so-called NEO-PI-R test, the following elements are included to measure the openness factor: fantasy, aesthetics, feelings, actions, ideas and values (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001).

Conscientiousness

The term conscientiousness directly refers to the human conscience as a controlling and supervisory body for its own behavior. The fact that people do what they should do and neglect what they should not do is attributed to our inner body conscience. Thus, conscientious people are characterized as reliable, disciplined, self-controlled and thoughtful (Hoekstra et al., 2003). This is consistent with research of Paunonen (1998) and Paunonen and Ashton (2001) who found significant relations between conscientious people and elements like organization, cognitive structure, a reversed score on impulsivity and endurance.

Extraversion

The concepts of extraversion and introversion are derived from Jung (1923) who designated these concepts as outwardly and inwardly directed energy, attention and orientation. Later research of Paunonen (1998) confirmed that extraversion is highly related to elements like interpersonal effect, self-esteem and social participation. Extravert people prefer companionship, group activities and public events, and are more self-assertive, active and conversational than introvert people. Extravert people are typically humored, energetic and optimistic (Hoekstra et al., 2003). Within our culture a

salesman is classified as a prototype of extraversion and the scale of extraversion is highly correlated with more venturous professions (Costa, McCrae & Holland, 1984).

Agreeableness

This factor represents elements like conformity, responsibility and a low level of risk taking (Paunonen, 1998). Agreeable people are helpful, modest, friendly and inclined to cooperate. In addition, they are inclined to help others when the need arises (Hoekstra et al., 2003). Within the NEO-PI-R test, the following elements are included to measure the agreeableness factor: trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance and modesty (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001).

Neuroticism

This broad and important domain contrasts emotional stability with emotional lability. This domain is also referred to as 'generalized anxiety', because people who score high in this area are strongly inclined to experience fear (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001). Furthermore, it is likely that these people frequently experience other negative feelings like furiosity, frustration, dreariness, shame and indebtedness. This area also includes the limited ability to cope with frustration and stress (Hoekstra et al., 2003). Within the NEO-PI-R test, the following elements are included to measure the neuroticism factor: anxiety, angry, hostility, depression, self-consciousness, impulsiveness and vulnerability (Paunonen & Ashton, 2001).

1.5 Research question

As mentioned previously, little is known about the personality traits and competences of PA professionals. However, since PA professionals try to influence decision makers on important topics, and there is no specific education to become a PA professional, it is relevant and interesting to gather information about the personality traits and competences of PA professionals. McGrath (2012) also mentioned the importance of this subject, when he identified an increase in complexity of the issues at stake. At last, there is a growing demand for more skilled and experienced PA professionals. As a result, the present study can be helpful for both academics and professionals.

The present study focuses on the importance of several competences for PA professionals. First, it is relevant to know which competences are important to PA professionals. In this way an image of the ideal PA professional is created, which shows the competences typical to a PA professional. Second, it is relevant to determine the best mastered competences by PA professionals in the field. Comparing these best mastered competences with the most important competences, will give an insight in the actual state of the art PA professional. When the most important and best mastered competences are both taken into account it can be determined to which extent PA professionals in

the field comply with the image of the ideal PA professional. Lastly, to form a complete image of the ideal PA professional, the personality traits should also be taken into account.

Based on all aforementioned information, the following three research questions are formulated:

1. Which competences are the most important to be a good Public Affairs professional?

2. To which extent does the Public Affairs professional master these competences?

3. What kind of personality traits does a Public Affairs professional have?

2. Research design and method

In this chapter the research design and method will be discussed. Four paragraphs will discuss the following subjects subsequently: method, participants, procedure and data analysis.

2.1 Method

The present study makes use of both a Q-sort and a questionnaire. The first research question of this study focused on identifying the most important competences to be a good PA professional. The second research question added the aspect of the extent to which PA professionals master these competences themselves. The Q-sort method was used to study the first two research questions. The third research question focused on what kind of personality traits a PA professional has. A questionnaire, which consisted of two parts, was used to study the third research question. The first part of the questionnaire focused on gathering participants' demographic information, and the second part focused on the participants' personality traits by using a NEO-FFI questionnaire.

Q-sort

The Q-sort was created by Stephenson (1953) and can be characterized as a forced choice method. Participants received cards that must be ranked within the Q-sort table and can only be used once (Ten Klooster, Visser & De Jong, 2008).
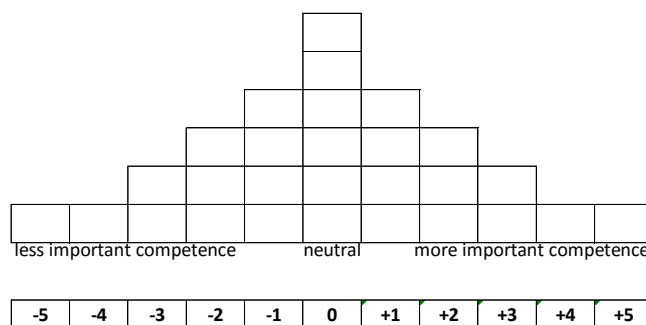

less important competence					neutral			more important competence		
-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5

Figure 1: Q-sort table

The Q-sort table used in the present study is presented in figure 1. It consisted out of 28 empty fields in which the competences, should be placed. This table was designed in a way that all of the identified relevant competences, as presented in paragraph 1.3, could be included. All participants received a set of small cards which each represented one of the competences. First, the cards were sorted by the participant into three piles; not important, neutral and very important. When the three piles were sorted, participants placed the cards in the Q-sort table. During this process, the participants expressed their thoughts out loud. In this way, more insight was gained into their

motivation for the importance of a competence. All participants were allowed to keep moving the cards around the table until they were satisfied. Each participant did two Q-sorts. During the first Q-sort participants were asked to think out loud while determining the most important competences for a PA professional. In the second Q-sort participants were asked to which extent they mastered these competences themselves, without thinking out loud. Thinking out loud was only requested in the first Q-sort, because it is interesting to gain more insight into participants' motivation why a certain competence is important or not, and not so much into their personal development of these competences.

Questionnaire: Demographic information

The first part of the questionnaire focused on gathering participants' demographic information. The answering options differed per question, since participants either filled in a blank entry field, or had to choose between several answering options. Demographic information that participants were asked about were gender, age, type of organization they worked for (for instance the government, PA office or NGO), in which province they were born, in which province they currently lived, their educational level (for instance elementary school, Bachelor degree or Master degree) and the field of study of their education (for instance economic sciences, social sciences or political sciences). Participants could enter their age in a blank field, and indicate the other demographic information by selecting one of the answering options. Furthermore, they were asked about the amount of years they had been working as a PA professional, the amount of hours a week they spend on PA, the location from which they mostly worked (at the headquarter of the organization they represent, at another location of the organization they represent, at home or elsewhere) and their official job title. Participants could enter the amount of years worked, hours a week spend on PA and their job title in a blank field, and indicate the location from which they worked by selecting one of the answering options. At last, participants could indicate their preferences for political parties (for instance D66, PvdA or they could withhold from answering) and specify whether they were a member of a political party (they were currently a member, they were a former member or they are no member at the moment, and never have been a member at all). If the participants' were a member of a political party, or if they were a former member of a political party, they could enter in a blank field the political party of their preference and the amount of years they were a member.

Questionnaire: Personality traits

The second part of the questionnaire focused on participants' personality traits. For this purpose, the so-called NEO-FFI questionnaire was used. The 60 item NEO-FFI questionnaire measured five basic personality factors based on self-assessment. The five basic personality factors are: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness, as discussed in paragraph 1.5. Each of the personality factors was measured by 12 items in the questionnaire. All items could be answered on a five-point Likert scale. The NEO-FFI has been translated in many languages over the years (McCrae and Costa, 2004). The Dutch questionnaire and instruction manual were used (Hoekstra et al., 2003).

2.2 Participants

A total of 32 PA professionals volunteered to participate in the present study. Of these 32 participants, there were 21 males and 11 females. The average age of the participants was 42,75 years old and the average working experience as a PA professional was 8,75 years. When looking at the type of organization they worked for, 12 participants worked for the government, 10 participants worked for a PA office, 3 participants worked for an NGO, 3 participants worked for the business industry and 3 participants worked for other types of organizations.

What stands out is the level of education. The majority of the participants, 25 of them, holds a Master's Degree. Furthermore, 4 participants hold a Bachelor's Degree, 1 participant holds a PhD, 1 participant finished intermediate vocational education and 1 participant only finished elementary school. In the present study, 75% of the participants is a member of a political party, which is a lot higher than the average of 5% among the entire Dutch population (CBS, 2014).

2.3 Procedure

Most participants were recruited at a meeting for PA professionals. The remaining participants were approached based on the network of other participants, which can be referred to as snowball sampling. The only requirement to participate in the present study was that the participant had to work as PA professional. All participants were recruited in the Netherlands and Belgium.

The participants were contacted by e-mail or by phone to arrange a time and location to participate in this study. Of all participants, 27 met the researcher in their own office and 5 participants met the researcher in public areas. Each of the participants was informed that the purpose of the present study was to gather information about competences a PA professional needs, the extent to which PA professionals master these competences, and what kind of personality traits PA professionals

possess themselves. Each of the participants was informed that their anonymity was guaranteed. The sessions with the participants lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

2.4 Data analysis

The data analysis consists of the Q-sort and the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: demographic information and the NEO-FFI.

<u>Q-sort</u>
The analysis of the Q-sort data was divided into three different parts. The first part focused on ranking the 28 cards with competences which were placed in the Q-sort table by each of the participants. Each competence of each participant was ranked from 1 (least important, had a -5 score in the Q-sort table) to 11 (most important, had a +5 score in the Q-sort table) to enable data analysis with the use of the program IBM SPSS statistics V22. All data was merged and all competences were sorted from more to less important. As a result, the gathered data could be analyzed for the entire group of participants, instead of groups of correlated participants.

The second part of the Q-sort analysis relates to the data from the 28 cards with competences which were placed in the Q-sort table by each of the participants. The Q-sorts were combined with participants' demographic information from the questionnaire and subsequently analyzed using the program PCQwin. Based on the Q-sorts, groups of correlated participants were created within the program. The results of these groups were subsequently analyzed in more detail. What characterizes this method is that respondents are correlated instead of items (Ten Klooster, Visser & De Jong, 2008).

The third part of the analysis was based on the transcript of the recording of participants' thinking out loud. These transcripts were coded in fragments (Baarda, De Goede & Teunissen, 2005), and the 28 relevant competences, as identified in paragraph 1.3, were used as a basis for the codebook. Since the analyzed data was very extensive, the coding procedures led to substantial more codes to improve the quality of the data analysis. The coding procedures were performed by two different researchers. The second researcher was a student who volunteered to help. Subsequently, also the reliability of the coding procedures was validated by two researchers. A part of the transcripts (12%) was coded by two researchers and was therefore compared. Any discrepancies were discussed and solved. This procedure led to a Cohens Kappa of .658. Afterwards, the remaining transcripts were coded, based on this codebook, the codes were analyzed with Atlas.ti 7.0.

Questionnaire: Demographic information and personality traits

The two parts of the questionnaire were analyzed using IBM SPSS statistics V22. The first part of the questionnaire measured the demographics of the participants. The second part of the questionnaire measured 5 personality traits, and each personality construct was measured by 12 items. To determine the reliability within each construct, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. Cronbach's alpha for the neuroticism construct was .748. Cronbach's alpha for the extraversion construct was .690. Cronbach's alpha for the openness construct was .201, which was found to be too low. To increase Cronbach's alpha, items 2 and 8 were deleted, which increased Cronbach's alpha to .429. Because this was still found to be too low, items 4 and 7 were deleted as well, which increased Cronbach's alpha to .514. Cronbach's alpha for the agreeableness construct was .784. Cronbach's alpha for the conscientiousness construct was .812.

The NEO-FFI personality test was completed by 29 participants. One of the participants missed a page of the test, and another participant only filled in 56 of 60 statements, therefore these results were excluded from the analysis. One participant felt that the questionnaire was too vague and refused to fill it in.

Hoekstra et al. (2003) used norm groups in their NEO-FFI instruction manual. Norm groups can be used to compare the results of the NEO-FFI. For the NEO-FFI there are two norm groups available. The first norm group required a research context, within this norm group the results of the test had no consequences for the participants. The second norm group required a selection context, in this norm group the results had consequences for a job application. In the present study a research context was applicable. Therefore the first norm group was used to examine the results of the participants. According to the guidelines (Hoekstra et al., 2003) each personality factor should have a normal distribution, a mean of 5 and a standard deviation of 2.

3. Results

This chapter presents the results of the present study. The first paragraph discusses the NEO-FFI results. Subsequently, the second paragraph discusses the Q-sort results for the group of participants as a whole. The third paragraph shows the results of the Q-sort in which the most important competences for PA professionals in general are presented. The last paragraph shows the results of the Q-sort in which the best mastered competences of the PA professionals are presented.

3.1 The personality of a Public Affairs professional

Personality factor	Mean PA professionals	Standard deviation PA professionals	Mean norm group	Standard deviation norm group	Normal distributed
Openness	**7.21***	0.86	5	2	Yes
Extraversion	6.76	1.46	5	2	Yes
Agreeableness	5.62	2.21	5	2	No
Conscientiousness	5.59	2.21	5	2	No
Neuroticism	3.14	1.64	5	2	No

Table 4: Results of the personality tests of PA professionals

* outside the range of the mean plus/minus the standard deviation

Table 4 shows how the PA professionals scored on the five personality factors. The score of PA professionals on openness stands out, since the mean of the PA professionals is beyond the range of the mean plus the standard deviation of the norm group. Openness is the only construct which all the participants rated with a mean of 6 or higher, so 100% of them scored above the average. According to the norm group, only 40% should score this high on openness. So openness seems to be an important personality characteristic to a PA professional. Although PA professionals did not score beyond the range of the mean and the standard deviation, their score on extraversion is relatively high. Only six of the participants (20,7%) had an average score or lower. This means that 23 participants (79,3%) scored a mean of 6 or higher. According to the norm group, only 40% should score this high. So it seems like PA professionals score relatively high on extraversion when they are compared with the norm group. The participants' scores on agreeableness are very widespread, and the score is not normal distributed. This explains the score of PA professionals on agreeableness, which is slightly above the average of the norm group. Since reliability, which is a part of consciousness, is important in the field of PA, it was expected that the PA professionals scored relatively high on this factor. As shown in table 4 the PA professionals scored 5.59, which was slightly

above the average of the norm group. Therefore, the expectation that PA professionals score relatively high on consciousness is not confirmed by the results. The PA professionals scored 3.14, which was relatively low, on neuroticism. 24 participants (82,8%) scored below five. According to the norm group this should be only 40%. This indicates that a PA professional is relatively less neurotic than the norm group.

3.2 Q-sort results of all participants

In this paragraph the 28 competences were valued by the group of participants as a whole. Table 5 shows how the PA professionals valued the competences from most to least important. Then, table 6 shows what the best and least mastered competences were according to the PA professionals.

Table 5 shows the importance of each competence for a PA professional in general. It shows that *strategical and tactical thinking* is valued as the most important competence, followed by *networking*, *knowledge of politics* and *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*. Furthermore, this table shows that *being able to speak and write in the leading languages* is valued as the least important competence. In addition, the competences *learning and development of self and others*, *time management*, *willing to work irregular hours* and *knowledge of the world (social issues)* are valued as not that important as well.

Table 6 shows for each of the 28 competences to which extent the competence is mastered by the participants. These results show that *strategical and tactical thinking* is the best mastered competence. Furthermore, *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*, *knowledge of politics*, *analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)* and *networking* are indicated as competences which are well mastered by the participants. In contrast to the before mentioned competences, *time management* is indicated as the competence which is the least mastered by the participants. In addition, the results show that *being able to speak and write in the leading languages*, *learning and development of self and others* and *media skills (influencing media and knowledge of media)* are the competences which are mastered the least according to the PA professionals themselves.

When these results of table 5 and 6 are compared it stands out that *strategical and tactical thinking* is the most important competence. *Strategical and tactical thinking* is also the best mastered competence. Other best mastered competences that are important as well are the competences *networking*, *knowledge of politics* and *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*. Furthermore, the results in table 5 and 6 showed that *being able to speak and write in the leading languages* and *time management* were seen as not that important and as less mastered competences.

Competences most important towards a PA professional	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Strategical and tactical thinking	5	11	9.06	1.632
Networking	3	11	8.06	1.843
Knowledge of politics	3	11	7.94	2.175
Ethics: honesty, integrity and reliability	3	11	7.74	2.490
Persuasiveness	3	11	7.19	2.654
Communication skills	4	10	7.13	1.565
Analytic, research minded, conceptual thinking	3	11	7.10	1.904
Knowledge of the arena's	2	10	6.87	1.857
Problem solving	4	9	6.74	1.413
Negotiating; win-win and maximalization	1	11	6.26	2.221
Independent, taking responsibility and autonomy	1	10	6.16	2.282
Pragmatic	4	8	6.13	1.147
Empathy and sensitivity	2	11	6.00	2.236
Media skills; influencing media, knowledge of media	1	9	5.87	1.962
Flexibility	2	9	5.84	1.635
Manners: politeness, charming, respectful to others, being pleasant	3	11	5.68	1.815
Being critical	2	9	5.45	1.710
Tenacity	1	8	5.39	1.961
Coping with pressure	3	9	5.39	1.606
Knowledge of the home organisation	1	11	5.32	2.821
Positive attitude	1	10	5.13	1.996
Specific knowledge for the job: vocational training and expertise	1	11	5.13	2.526
Teamwork	2	10	5.10	1.599
Knowledge of the world, social issues	1	7	4.94	1.482
Willing to work irregular hours	1	8	4.77	1.765
Time management	1	8	4.58	1.893
Learning and development of self and others	1	8	3.94	1.806
Being able to speak and write in the leading languages	1	8	3.10	2.196
N	31			

Table 5: Overview of the most important competences for a PA professional when all participants were taken into account

Competences best mastered by PA professionals	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Strategical and tactical thinking	3	11	8.28	2.247
Ethics: honesty, integrity and reliability	3	11	7.75	4.351
Knowledge of politics	1	11	7.59	2.258
Analytic, research minded, conceptual thinking	2	11	7.44	2.589
Networking	2	11	7.28	2.154
Problem solving	2	10	6.72	1.651
Knowledge of the arena's	2	11	6.50	1.901
Manners: politeness, charming, respectful to others, being pleasant	2	10	6.44	2.154
Pragmatic	4	10	6.41	1.583
Independent, taking responsibility and autonomy	1	10	6.37	2.091
Communication skills	3	9	6.31	1.512
Empathy and sensitivity	1	11	6.22	2.549
Persuasiveness	2	10	6.16	1.834
Knowledge of the world, social issues	1	11	6.13	2.152
Being critical	3	10	5.81	1.839
Positive attitude	3	9	5.81	1.768
Coping with pressure	2	11	5.78	1.862
Flexibility	1	11	5.56	2.285
Negotiating; win-win and maximalization	1	11	5.53	2.396
Tenacity	1	10	5.34	2.119
Teamwork	2	11	5.31	1.857
Knowledge of the home organisation	1	9	5.22	2.196
Willing to work irregular hours	1	9	5.16	2.034
Specific knowledge for the job: vocational training and expertise	1	10	5.00	1.951
Media skills; influencing media, knowledge of media	1	9	4.81	2.429
Learning and development of self and others	1	8	4.56	1.813
Being able to speak and write in the leading languages	1	11	4.16	2.629
Time management	1	8	4.13	1.897
N	32			

Table 6: Best mastered competences by PA professionals when all participants were taken into account

3.3 The most and least important competences for PA professionals

In this paragraph the most and least important competences for a PA professional are discussed. The Q-sort method has been used to identify groups of correlated participants. Then, the results of these identified groups are described.

The Q-sort data was analyzed using a centroid factor analysis with varimax rotation. An overview of the different groups is shown in table 7. This table shows how the number of groups influences the eigenvalue, variance and the total of deleted participants. The used criteria mainly consist of an eigenvalue of at least 1 and a minimum of 2 respondents per group. In addition, the solution should meet the requirements of a high variance and a low number of deleted participants.

A seven-factor solution was chosen. The choice for the seven-factor solution is based on several selection criteria shown in table 7. For this factor the eigenvalue was at least 2.03, accounting for 0.63 of the variance. The variance is also known as the reliability of the results. Of the 31 participants, 8 were deleted because the participants could not be placed in one of the factors or they were confounded. In the next sections the identified groups will be described in more detail by using quotes of the participants. During this part of the Q-sort the participants were thinking out loud to gain insight in their motivation. Because the participants were thinking out loud this resulted in some quotes which were used to describe the identified groups.

Number of groups/ factors	Lowest eigenvalue	Variance	Minimal number of participants within the groups	Number of excluded participants	Confounded participants	Total number of deleted participants
1	9.42	0.30	18	13	0	13
2	5.50	0.38	8	12	1	13
3	3.58	0.45	3	11	4	15
4	2.46	0.42	3	13	0	13
5	2.87	0.57	2	6	2	8
6	1.93	0.60	1	8	1	9
7	2.03	0.63	2	6	2	8
8	1.31	0.68	1	5	3	8

Table 7: Factor analysis of the most important competences for a PA professional

Factor A: the independent persuaders

This first group consisted of two women who both work for the government. Both women in this group are in their mid thirty's. The participants in this group believed that *persuasiveness* was the most important competence for PA professionals, followed by *independent (taking responsibility and autonomy)*. Furthermore, *strategical and tactical thinking* and *networking* were important to this

group of participants. The least important competence was *willing to work irregular hours*, followed by *being able to speak and write in the leading languages*. *Empathy and sensitivity* and *media skills (influencing media, knowledge of media)* were mentioned as other less important competences. Some typical quotes of participants in this group are shown below:

'A positive attitude. Yes I think that is very important. Yes, if you are able to send a message in a very positive manner it forms an important part of your persuasiveness.'
'Encounters sometimes arise spontaneously, then you need to know very well how to respond to that situation. That you are able to convince that person of your message. That is quite an important practice in PA.'
'Look, your story can be as good as possible but that does not necessarily lead to success. Persuasion does not only consist of the quality of the content, but also on your communication manners, credibility, image and appearance. These elements all together determine your persuasiveness.'
'Strategical and tactical thinking, yes that is very important in my opinion. You must know exactly when you need to be at the right place, when you need to respond, who you need to approach and which people are necessary to reach my goal.'
'You get a lot of freedom to operate as a Public Affairs professional and are highly trusted. That means that you must be well able to operate independently. That you take your responsibility and handle it with care. Personally this competence is very important. One of the most important.'
'Maybe this is the least important, because when you have this job you are a lobbyist 24 hours a day. So when you read the newspaper in the weekends and identify lobby features, you are also busy doing your job, that is standard for me.'
'You do not always need the media for your lobby, look sometimes it is a better alternative to achieve your goal in silence using your connections with the Ministry or you explicitly do not want a subject in the media.'
'Media, that's what your spokesmen are for.'

Factor B: the strategical moralists

This second group consisted of two men and one woman, one of them worked for a PA office and two of them worked for the government. For the participants in this group *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)* was the most important competence for PA professionals, followed by *strategical and tactical thinking*. Furthermore, *communication skills* and *persuasiveness* were important competences for this group of participants. The least important competence according to this group was *specific knowledge for the job*, followed by *being able to speak and write in the leading languages*. Then, *learning and development of self and others* and *knowledge of the home organization* were mentioned as other less important competences. To illustrate these results, some typical quotes of participants in this group are shown below:

'In my opinion your honesty, integrity and reliability directly relates to the credibility of your story. The success of your lobby depends on the credibility of your story. Therefore you should never lie as a lobbyist.'
'A large part of Public Affairs is strategy. And that strategy is about the way you position the organization, about the interest you represent, the way you inform, who your stakeholders are. Actually everything relates to strategy and tactical thinking.'
'In my opinion your writing skills are important, and your ordinary skills. It is also about your ability to advise your clients how to hold that typical conversation. It is important that you are able to formulate summarily, framing the important topics.'

'In my opinion can learning and development of self and others be classified as a general competence. It also applies to the greengrocer, that is why I think that this competence is less specific for a PA professional. This competence applies to everybody. So I think it is less relevant for PA.'

'Knowledge of the home organization: it is nice to know each other within your organization, but I think that it is less relevant for your competences. This will probably be caused by the fact that we work in a small team.'

Factor C: the analytical strategists

This third group consisted of one man and three women, who all hold a master degree. They have relatively limited working experience in PA. For these participants *strategical and tactical thinking* was the most important competence for a Public Affairs professional, followed by *analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)*. Then, *knowledge of politics* and *knowledge of the arena's* were the most important competences. The least important competence was *positive attitude*, followed by *knowledge of the home organization*. Then *teamwork* and *learning and development of self and others* were the least important. To illustrate these results, some typical quotes of participants in this group are shown below:

'You must be very good in strategical and tactical thinking, because that is what you constantly do. You provide strategical advice and the consequences on a tactical level, that is actually your core activity. This can be further divided into other competences which are also mentioned on the cards.'

'You must be able to analyze a situation properly to understand what your options could be. That depends on your knowledge of politics and knowledge of the different arena's. You must have sufficient knowledge of the subject. You must know the different players. You must know the different processes. Only then you are able to analyze the situation in a proper way. And only then you are able to determine the appropriate strategy.'

'It is well possible that your attitude is very negative while you are still able to provide adequate information. Therefore it can be an advantage if you have a positive attitude, but it is not necessary at all.'

'Knowledge of the home organization is not very important in this respect. I think that it is primarily important to do understand the most important activities of the organization we work for. And furthermore their core values, so it is less important to understand how everything works, but it is important to understand the objectives and goals of the organization.'

Factor D: the critical moralists

This group consisted of three participants who are all male and middle-aged. One of the participants had a reversed sort, which means that he was opinionated the exact opposite of the other participants within this group. Despite this, it stands out that for the participants in this group *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)* was the most important competence, followed by *being critical*. Furthermore, *analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)* and *learning and development of self and others* were important competences to this group of participants. The least important competence was *knowledge of the arena's*, followed by *persuasiveness*. *Flexibility* and *tenacity* were also named as less important. What stands out, is that *knowledge of the arena's* qualifies as less

important, but according to a participant it was a precondition at the same time. To illustrate these results, some typical quotes of the participants in this group are shown below:

'I think that the first one, honesty, integrity and reliability, is one of the most important competences of a lobbyist. Simply because when you disrespect appointments you made, which can also include secrecy, but it is all about reliability and integrity. That you are not seen as a reliable source of aggregated information.'
'I represent an association so the substantive information that I receive from my colleagues is obtained from our members. Therefore I need to be very critical towards my colleagues on the quality of the provided information. Although the final result meet high quality standards, it is preceded by a long and critical process, at least that is how it works in our organization.'
'I think that learning and development of self and others, of yourself and others is an important competence. In my opinion it is not typical PA.'
'Yes, knowledge of politics and knowledge of arena's that are, that is really knowledge that you should have. You can challenge this by saying that you are able to gain this knowledge, that is correct but it is an, it is an important condition to properly function as a PA professional.'

Factor E: the tenacious strategists

This group consisted out of three men and one woman. Three participants in this group are member of the political party VVD. For the participants in this sort *strategical and tactical thinking* was the most important competence for a Public Affairs professional, followed by *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*. Furthermore, *tenacity* and *networking* were important competences for this group of participants. The least important competence according to this group was *time management*, followed by *willing to work irregular hours*. Furthermore, *teamwork* and *independent (taking responsibility and autonomy)* were identified as less important competences. To illustrate these results, some typical quotes of the participants in this group are shown below:

'You must be a good observer before you are just ramming into it, you must be able to determine the strategical lines that you observe. What are the tactical lines and how are you able with a strategy, so through goals, to realize a certain outcome, which tactical moves and which operational moves, because they are not mentioned yet, should you make.'
'Tenacity is very important. As a consultant you always deal with the problem that, you work for your client so you are also dependent of your client. You are not his boss, but you do are his advisor. Therefore your criticism towards your client is limited. Your level of tenacity depends on your own perspective of how the problem should be solved. Thus your level of tenacity and criticism is limited off course.'
'Time management is important for everyone. So it is not a specific requirement for a PA professional to perform better on this subject. That is actually the right approximation.'
'You must be willing to work irregular hours, but the question is when you rarely work irregular hours, that willingness becomes less relevant. Therefore, because lobbying is less visiting receptions and more working in your office with your clients, I notice that it becomes less relevant.'

Factor F: specialist in politics

This group consisted of three men and two women. No demographical similarities were noted within this group. For the participants in this group *knowledge of politics* was the most important competence for PA professionals, followed by *networking*. Furthermore, *negotiating (win-win and maximalization)* and *strategical and tactical thinking* were important competences for this group of participants. The least important competence according to this group was *being able to speak and write in the leading languages*, followed by *learning and development of self and others*. Furthermore, *empathy and sensitivity* and *time management* were identified as less important competences. To illustrate these results, some typical quotes of the participants in this group are shown below:

'My job focuses on politics and therefore you should understand how politics works. If you do not understand how debates, motions, etcetera function within the Dutch government, thus if you have a lack of knowledge regarding politics, you should not even start working as a PA professional.'
'You cannot proper function without your network. If you do not have the right connections it is difficult to perform your job. You can build up your own network when you are new in this profession, you can do that with the use of other lobbyists. If you want to be a good lobbyist, than it is very important to have a good network.'
'Empathy and sensitivity, I would say that that is a less important competence. You should have empathy, or at least you should be able to empathize with your subject. The message that you try to convince other people with. But you do not have to be very sensitive with or concerned to your subject, because your subject will rapidly change.'
'Being able to speak and write in the leading languages, well everything is in the Dutch language around here. It is helpful when you master the English language. Other languages are rare.'

Factor G: specialists of the home organization

This last group consisted of two males which both have more than 10 years of working experience in PA. For the participants in this group *knowledge of the home organization* was the most important competence for PA professionals, followed by *empathy and sensitivity*. Furthermore, *strategical and tactical thinking* and *networking* were important competences for this group of participants. The least important competence according to this group was *being able to speak and write in the leading languages*, followed by *media skills (influencing media and knowledge of media)*. Furthermore, *specific knowledge for the job* and *independent (taking responsibility and autonomy)* were identified as less important competences. To illustrate these results, some typical quotes of the participants in this group are shown below:

'Knowledge of the home organization. 80% of your lobby relates to properly performing your homework. When you are counteracted by your own organization, or when your message and the message of your home organization is inconclusive, you will be played against each other. To give you an example, I was performing the Public Affairs activities for a motorway, this lobby was in an advanced stadium while the Ministry was already convinced. At the final stage in this process the Ministry showed me a report which identified several areas where the environmental requirements were exceeded. As a

result the route that I proposed for this motorway was not allowed, therefore my plan was rejected. Afterwards it appeared that the Ministry received this report from another department from my own organization. Therefore there was a lack of internal communication. That is what I call internal lobbying and this example shows why that is very important in my opinion.'

'What is really important in Public Affairs? Well in my opinion that would be empathy and sensitivity. I think that, as a PA professional and as a lobbyist, you should permanently be able to replace yourself into the situation of the other to determine how that person can help you.'

'When someone approaches me on a subject I am able to do the elevator pitch, but when they keep asking me more and more question I often need to say: 'Ok, thank you. I will look into it and come back to you.' At that moment your internal network, thus within your own organization, is very important as well as the person who you would like to talk to first.'

'No, I will also classify independent, taking responsibility and autonomy as a low priority competence. In my opinion Public Affairs is a department which is not responsible for the what-question, that is a management decision, but for the how-question. Where we should start, which procedures apply, which directors needs to be contacted and which politician needs to be convinced. That belongs to my job. Therefore I do not think that independence should deserve a high priority. We are a service provider.'

3.4 To what extent are these competences mastered by PA professionals

The Q-sort data was analyzed using a centroid factor analysis with varimax rotation. An overview of the different groups is shown in table 8. This table shows how the number of groups influences the eigenvalue, variance and the total of deleted participants. The used criteria mainly consist of an eigenvalue of at least 1 and a minimum of respondents per group of 2. In addition, the solution should meet the requirements of a high variance and a low number of deleted participants.

A seven-factor solution was chosen. The choice for the seven-factor solution was based on several selection criteria shown in table 8. For each factor the eigenvalue was at least 1.69, accounting for 0.57 of the variance. The variance is also known as the reliability of the results. Of the 32 participants, 7 participants were deleted because they could not be placed within one of the factors.

In this part of the study the participants were not thinking out loud any more. The results of this Q-sort, which competences are best mastered by the PA professionals themselves, are linked to the personality tests the participants took. It is imaginable that the best mastered competences are related to the personality of the PA professional. Therefore these both results are studied within this paragraph.

Number of groups/ factors	Lowest eigenvalue	Variance	Minimal number of participants within the groups	Number of excluded participants	Confounded participants	Total number of deleted participants
1	6.20	0.19	14	18	0	18
2	3.47	0.27	4	20	0	20
3	2.87	0.34	5	15	0	15
4	2.46	0.42	3	13	0	13
5	2.20	0.47	2	11	0	11
6	2.07	0.51	2	11	0	11
7	1.69	0.57	3	7	0	7
8	1.51	0.61	1	9	1	10

Table 8: Factor analysis for the best mastered competences

In the next sections the identified factors (in extent groups) will be described in more detail. The results of the best and least mastered competences of each group are combined with the results of the personality test, which measured the personality traits of the participants, per group. Table 4 showed the average results and the standard deviation of all participants in this study on the five basic personality factors as described in paragraph 3.1. These results are combined with the average results of the participants within the identified factors in table 9.

	N	E	O	A	C
Average of all PA professionals	3.14	6.76	7.21	5.62	5.59
Std. Deviation of all PA professionals	1.64	1.46	0.86	2.21	2.21
Average of Factor A	3.75	7.00	7.25	**8.25***	**8.25***
Average of Factor B	3.50	7.25	7.25	5.50	4.50
Average of Factor C	4.67	5.67	7.00	3.67	4.33
Average of Factor D	**5.00***	**4.67***	7.00	**3.33***	7.67
Average of Factor E	2.25	7.50	6.75	6.25	5.75
Average of Factor F	2.68	7.67	7.33	7.33	7.33
Average of Factor G	**1.00***	7.00	6.67	5.57	5.33

Table 9: Overview of the big five personality factors compared to all groups

* outside the range of the mean plus/minus the standard deviation

For groups A, D and G the results of the competences combined with the results of the personality traits seem to be significant. Please note that, for proper interpretation of the results, the number of participants per group are relatively limited.

Factor A: the friendly moralists

This first group consisted of three men and a woman. All participants hold a master degree and have less than 10 years of working experience in PA. The participants in this group mastered *ethics (honesty, reliability and integrity)* the best, followed by *networking*, *knowledge of politics* and *manners (politeness, charming, respectful to others and being pleasant)*. The least mastered competences were *willing to work irregular hours*, *negotiation (win-win and maximization)*, *time management* and *media skills (influencing media and knowledge of media)*.

As shown in table 9 the participants in this group score significantly higher on A (Agreeableness) and C (Conscientiousness), since their results were higher than the sum of the average plus the standard deviation. Considering some relevant aspects of agreeableness, like helpful, modest, friendly and inclined to cooperate, a logical connection was made with the best mastered competences *networking*, *manners* and *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*. Furthermore, a logical connection was made with the least mastered competences of this group of participants. One of those competences was *negotiation*, when you are helpful, modest, friendly and inclined to cooperate, it sometimes can be hard to negotiate. When some relevant aspects of conscientiousness are considered, like reliable, disciplined, self-controlled and thoughtful, the connection with *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)* could be made.

Factor B: the moral strategists

This second group consisted of three men and a woman and their age is above average. Furthermore, all members of this group have more than 10 years of working experience in PA. The participants in this group mastered *strategical and tactical thinking* the best, followed by *ethics (honesty, reliability and integrity)*, *tenacity* and *persuasiveness*. The least mastered competences were *time management*, *teamwork*, *knowledge of politics* and *being able to speak and write in the leading languages*.
The results in table 9 show that there was no significant difference between the average results of all participants and the results of this particular group. As a result no connection between the personality traits and the best and least mastered competences could be made.

Factor C: specialists of the world

This group consisted of three men and their age is above average. Although one of the participants had a reversed sort, which means that he was opinionated the exact opposite of the other participants within this group, it stands out that the participants in this group mastered *knowledge of the world (social issues)* the best, followed by *problem solving*, *strategical and tactical thinking* and *empathy and sensitivity*. The least mastered competences were *independent (autonomy and taking responsibility)* and *learning and developing of self and others*. Followed by *manners* and *persuasiveness*.

The results in table 9 show that there was no significant difference between the average results of all participants and the results of this particular group. As a result no connection between the personality traits and the best and least mastered competences could be made.

Factor D: the strategical specialist of politics

This fourth group consisted of three women and one man. Their age is below average and their working experience in PA varies between 5 and 10 years. The participants in this group mastered *knowledge of politics* the best, followed by *strategical and tactical thinking*, *ethics* and *analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)*. The least mastered competences were *empathy and sensitivity*, *flexibility*, *networking* and *positive attitude*.

As shown in table 9 the participants in group D score significantly higher on N (Neuroticism) and significantly lower on E (Extraversion) and A (Agreeableness), since their results were higher respectively lower than the sum of the average results and the standard deviation. Considering some relevant aspects of neuroticism, like furiosity, frustration, dreariness, shame and indebtedness, a logical connection could be made with less mastered competences *positive attitude* and *flexibility*. When some relevant aspects of extraversion were considered, like humored, energetic and optimistic, the connection with the less mastered competence *networking* seems also logical. When finally some relevant aspects of agreeableness are considered, like helpful, modest, friendly and inclined to cooperate, a logical connection could be made with the least mastered competence *empathy and sensitivity*.

Considering the results of this group of participants as a whole it seems consistent that they mainly perform their jobs in an appropriate manner by using competences like *knowledge of politics*, *strategical and tactical thinking*, *ethics* and *analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)* in a way to compensate their limitations. Therefore the connection between the best and least mastered competences and the personality traits of this group of participants seems consistent.

Factor E: specialist of politics, no media allowed

This fifth group consisted of four men and their age is above average. The participants in this group mastered *knowledge of politics* the best, followed by *manners*, *ethics* and *knowledge of the arena's*. The least mastered competences were *being able to speak and write in the leading languages* and *learning and development of self and others*. Furthermore, *specific job knowledge* and *media skills (influencing media and knowledge of media)* were referred to in this respect. The results in table 9 show that there was no significant difference between the average results of all participants and the results of this particular group. As a result no connection between the personality traits and the best and least mastered competences could be made.

Factor F: The flexible PA professional

This group consisted of three woman who all hold a master degree. Furthermore, they all have less than 10 years of working experience in PA. Although one of the participants had a reversed sort, which means that she was opinionated the exact opposite of the other participants within this group, it stands out that the participants within this group mastered *flexibility* the best, followed by *knowledge of the arena's*, *communication skills* and *strategical and tactical thinking*. The least mastered competences were *ethics*, *networking*, *knowledge of the world (social issues)* and *being able to speak and write in leading languages*. The results in table 9 show that there was no significant difference between the average results of all participants and the results of this particular group. As a result no connection between the personality traits and the best and least mastered competences could be made.

Factor G: The non-neurotic specialist of politics

Two men and a woman fall within this last group. Furthermore, they all have less than 10 years of working experience in PA. The participants within this group mastered *knowledge of politics* the best, followed by *networking*, *media skills* and *pragmatic*. The least mastered competences were *being able to speak and write in the leading languages*, followed by *time management*, *being critical* and *empathy and sensitivity*. As shown in table 9 the participants in group G scored significantly lower on N (Neuroticism), since their results are lower than the average results minus the standard deviation. In this respect it should also be noted that the score of 1,00 is the lowest possible score. Considering some relevant aspects of neuroticism, like furiosity, frustration, dreariness, shame and indebtedness, a logical connection can be made with one of the best mastered competences *pragmatic*. Since it is likely that pragmatic people are well able to cope with frustration and stress. Therefore it is likely that although *time management* is not a well mastered competence they will probably not experience many problems with it.

4. Conclusion and discussion

As mentioned before, while there are more PA practitioners than ever (Harris and Moss, 2001), there still is considerable confusion about what PA is and how it contributes to organizational success (Moss et al., 2010). There is limited knowledge about the profession and even less is known about the professionals in this field. Therefore, this study focused on the competences which are the most important for good PA professionals, to which extent the PA professionals mastered these competences themselves and the personality traits of PA professionals.

4.1 Conclusion

The objective of this study was to answer the following three research questions: *Which competences are the most important to be a good Public Affairs professional? To which extent does the Public Affairs professional master these competences? What kind of personality traits does a Public Affairs professional have?* In order to answer these questions a Q-sort and a questionnaire have been used. First, the research questions will be answered.

The first research question that needed to be answered was: *Which competences are the most important to be a good Public Affairs professional?* The answer was given when all the participants opinions were taken into account as shown in paragraph 3.2. Here was shown that *strategical and tactical thinking*, *networking*, *knowledge of politics* and *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)* were the most important competences. In the second part of this study the participants were divided into seven groups. Each group represented a type of PA professional, which had its own opinion on which competences were more and less important. The four most important competences of each group gave an indication of which competences were the most important for PA professionals. *Strategical and tactical thinking* was for 6 groups an important competence, *networking* was for 4 groups an important competence. Followed by *ethics* that was an important competence for 3 groups and *knowledge of politics* was important to 2 groups.

The second research question that needed to be answered was: *To which extent does the Public Affairs professional master these competences?* The answer was given when all the participants opinions were taken into account as shown in paragraph 3.2. The best mastered competences are *strategical and tactical thinking*, *ethics (honesty, integrity and reliability)*, *knowledge of politics*, *analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)* and *networking*. In the second part of this study the participants were divided within seven groups. Each group represents a type of PA professional, which has its own skills which he or she masters the best. The four best mastered competences of each group gave an indication of the best mastered competences in general for a PA professional.

Strategical and tactical thinking, *ethics* and *knowledge of politics* were according to 4 groups best mastered competences. *Analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)* was only for 1 group a best mastered competence. *Networking* stands out because it is for 2 groups a best mastered competence, while it is also for 2 groups a least mastered competence.

When the answers of the first and second research question were compared it turned out that the most important competences are the same competences as the best mastered competences. The competences that are seen as not that important, were in general not that well mastered competences. Furthermore, the most important competences were supported by more of the factors than the best mastered competences. This indicates that PA professionals are more consistent in determining the most important competences.

The third research question that needed to be answered was: *What kind of personality traits does a Public Affairs professional have?* A personality test has been taken and completed by 29 participants. The big five personality factors were measured. The big five personality factors are neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness. The PA professionals scored relatively low on neuroticism. This indicates that PA professionals are less likely to experience fear and other negative feelings like furiosity, frustration and shame. The PA professionals scored relatively high on extraversion. This indicates that they are more likely to be humored, energetic and optimistic. Furthermore, the PA professionals scored relatively high on openness. This score on openness indicates that the PA professionals are more likely to keep an open mind, give attention to personal feelings and form their own opinion. The scores of the PA professionals on agreeableness and consciousness were within the range of the norm group. Therefore, the PA professionals were not more or less agreeable or conscious then the participants in the norm group.

4.2 Relation to previous studies

De Lange (2000) performed a study to create a profile of PA professionals in the Netherlands. While making this profile, he did not focus on the relevant competences for a PA professional. Since there is limited academic research conducted into the competences of PA professionals this present study contributes to this field of study.

When the most important competences were compared with table 3, which showed the competences related to PA tools, it stands out that most of the competences that did not relate to a specific PA tool were not that important competences. The competences that were the most important according to PA professionals, are related to several PA tools. Thus, there could be concluded that competences that are related to most of the PA tools were more likely to be

important for PA professionals, and that competences that were not related to a PA tool at all were more likely to be seen as more general and less important competences for PA professionals.

When the best mastered competences were compared with table 3, which showed the competences related to PA tools, it stands out that the best mastered competences are related to several PA tools. The competences that were not related to a specific PA tool are more widespread within the competences in table 6. Thus, there could be concluded that competences that are related to most of the PA tools were more likely to be also the best mastered competences by PA professionals. The competences that were not linked to specific PA tools are very widespread in table 3. There could be concluded, that some of the more general competences, are quite well mastered by the PA professionals, while it were not the best mastered competences. The most important competences are related to several PA tools. Therefore, there could be concluded that the PA tools roughly predict whether a competence is seen as important for PA professionals.

The competences in table 2 are divided into knowledge (n=5), skills (n=16) and behavior (n=7). This results in a ratio of approximately of 1/3/1. The most important and best mastered competences have approximately the same ratio. Therefore, there seems to be no relationship between the type of competence and whether the competence is rated as important or best mastered.

4.3 Limitations

Of course every study has its own limitations. The first one concerns to the list of competences where two competences accidently have been switched. In the literature *analytic and research minded* even as *conceptual thinking and problem solving* were identified as relevant competences. While these competences were presented as *problem solving* and *analytic (research minded and conceptual thinking)* during the present study to the participants.

While conducting the Q-sorts some participants made some helpful suggestions for missing competences. Since this study had already been started these suggestions could not be taken into account anymore. The suggestions made by these participants for additional competences were: forming a coalition, idealist, creativity, interpretation, taking initiative and goal oriented. This might be interesting for future research.

Even though the personality test gave some insight in the personality of PA professionals, the fact that only 29 PA professionals participated in this test, does not contribute to the reliability of the results. From a theoretical point of view it would have been better if this test was conducted by every PA professional in the Netherlands to give a more reliable insight into the personality of PA professionals.

To properly interpret the results in table 5 and 6 in paragraph 3.2 it is important to have knowledge of the fact that some of the participants could have affected the outcome by the way they placed the cards in the Q-sort table. This remark relates to the fact that a limited number of participants placed a competence in the 'less important area' of the Q-sort table since they presume that this competence should be in place, because otherwise they should not be able to properly function as a PA professional at all.

4.4 Future research

In previous paragraphs a few directions for future research have already been mentioned. But there are more elements which can be studied in future research.

First of all, some of the participants of this study suggested that some competences were missing in their point of view. In future research it might be helpful when interviews were conducted before the list of competences was completed to gain a more extensive insight in relevant competences. This additional insight would provide a better basis for defining the competences so that these can be used for a new online Q-sort. When an online Q-sort will be used it is less time consuming to include more participants in the study. The participants are not bounded to meetings with a researcher. Although it is less likely that they will participate, much more participants can be approached. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare these results with a questionnaire, instead of a second Q-sort, in which the same competences are mentioned as in the online Q-sort. This approach could lower the aspect of social desirable answers.

Another way to gain more insight in the personality of PA professionals is to use a digital questionnaire for a more expanded personality test. This test could be taken online so that more participants could be included. For this purpose there are big five personality tests available which also measure five sub straits for each of the personality traits. Although this is more time consuming then the test performed in this study, it would provide a better insight.

It stands out that there still is no generally accepted definition of PA. Future research could provide a better basis for a more generally accepted definition.

In this profession there are a lot of other aspects which can be studied in future research. Perhaps it is possible to gain insight in how PA contributes towards organizational success? Is PA something you can measure? Or is it just an effort which probably helps an organization? There are a lot more questions which can be studied one day.

4.5 Practical relevance

Besides the fact that this study contributes to the existing literature on PA, it also has some practical relevance. This study reveals that *strategical and tactical* thinking is one of the most important competences for a Public Affairs professional. It also shows that it is a competence which is mastered at a high level by Public Affairs professionals, according to themselves. This knowledge can be useful for HR professionals in order to create adequate job descriptions for a position or in a selection process.

This study is also relevant for Public Affairs professionals in the field. They can compare themselves with the competences which are the most important for a PA professional. Based on this comparison they can develop some goals for personal growth. Perhaps this study is of good use for people who want to make a career switch.

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