ADVANCING DIVERSITY IN PR FIRMS

A Perceptions Study on Career Opportunities for Black and Latino Professionals

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Diversity and inclusion have emerged as not just a priority, but a strategic and competitive imperative for public relations firms. To satisfy the ever changing needs of clients, employing a diverse workforce is proving to be essential.

As the U.S. trade association, the PR Council is dedicated to strengthening the recognition and role of public relations firms in corporate strategy, business performance and social education; the PR Council serves as an authoritative source of information and expert comment and helps set standards for the industry.

To be consistent with this mission, action must be taken. With this study, The PR Council is forging a path to better identifying and understanding underlying issues of racial and ethnic diversity within public relations. This research will serve as the foundation to affect change and make our industry a better reflection of the world in which we work and live today.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Maintaining diversity at the top levels of PR agencies has been a challenge in the United States. Despite notable gains since the 1980s, few major PR firms have a group of senior executives that approximates the racial and ethnic demographics of American society.

In August 2015, the PR Council commissioned a perceptions study to better understand the agency experience for PR professionals of color who are advanced in their careers and who have left jobs at PR firms within the past four years. The study sought to identify trends and barriers to career advancement. It also sought to help the industry consider ways to improve inclusion and retention at PR firms. The PR Council commissioned the study to consider the perceptions of black and Latino professionals, specifically.

Key findings from the perceptions study include:

- **Most black and Latino PR professionals feel that they are making progress in PR agencies, but great strides in key decision-making roles are elusive.** Only 21% (20.6%) of Latino/Hispanic respondents feel that Latino/Hispanic PR professionals are making great strides as key decision-makers within PR agencies, which is double the rate of black/African American respondents (8.5%) who feel this way about black/African American professionals.

- **Both black and Latino PR professionals leave agency jobs for better positions elsewhere.** Based on the survey responses, the most commonly cited reason that Latino respondents left their last agency positions is that they were offered better positions elsewhere (52.9%). Among black respondents, this was the second most commonly cited reason (28.5%), with black respondents’ most commonly cited reason being dissatisfaction with compensation or opportunities for advancement (29.3%).

- **Three strategies for improving the career and work experiences of black and Latino PR professionals stand out among black and Latino respondents.** These are 1) actively recruit black/African American and Latino/Hispanic PR professionals; 2) promote more from within; and 3) increase capacity of senior staff to become more open to diverse ideas and cultures. These are the same top three for both black/African American and Latino/Hispanic respondents, but ranked differently when filtered by race/ethnic background.

- **Despite similarities in perceptions identified in the survey, there are noteworthy differences in how black and Latino PR professionals experience agency life.** The majority (79.5%) of Latino/Hispanic PR professionals believe that in the past decade,
employment prospects have progressively improved for Latino/Hispanic PR professionals. This is much greater than the rate of black/African American respondents who feel this way about opportunities for black/African American PR professionals (53.8%).

Further, Latino/Hispanic respondents appear to remain longer within the industry, with 85.7% of Latino/Hispanic respondents currently employed in some sort of PR position compared to 74.2% of black/African American respondents.

Latino/Hispanic respondents are nearly split (42.4% disagree and 39.4% agree) on whether or not they have access to support systems, professional-track training, and pipeline networks to engage and retain Latino/Hispanic PR professionals in the field. A smaller minority of black/African American respondents (30.5%) agree with this statement.

RECOMMENDATIONS
The study suggests that PR agencies have several opportunities to retain and increase the presence of black and Latino mid- and senior-level professionals. Based on the research and analysis of survey and interview data, we recommend that PR agencies employ strategies that:

1. **Start with CEO leadership.** CEOs must set the vision and tone, using their influence, visibility, and power to advocate for changes and put policies and practices in place. Diversity is a business strategy, not just a human resource function. While HR professionals can provide implementation support, and chief diversity officers can manage the work, efforts to increase the presence of high-performing black and Latino professionals in the C-suite depend on the active involvement of the CEO.

2. **Tie the advancement, promotion, and/or bonuses of senior leadership to the success of their team members.** This strategy can include specific targets around the success of underrepresented PR professionals who are part of a senior leader’s team. Examples of how this strategy is implemented in other industries merit review.

3. **Work hard to minimize the subjectivity of performance evaluations.** PR agencies should develop and apply rigorous and objective performance review systems for staff at all levels — or eliminate annual performance evaluations as the most
impactful tools used to make decisions about career advancement.

4. **Address the intercultural dynamics that are present but seldom acknowledged in PR agencies.** PR agencies should move beyond traditional diversity training to consider intercultural competence training to gain insight on how recent shifts in the PR agency workforce influences the dominant organizational culture. People come to work with diverse ways of communicating, working on teams, and interacting with colleagues. Understanding these behaviors can help build an environment that leverages the assets and talents of all team members, even if their styles are distinct from the dominant organizational culture at major PR agencies.

5. **Embrace the importance of data collection and analysis.** PR agencies have to collect information on hires, tenure, promotions, and exits in order to analyze what is happening to black and Latino PR professionals when they enter and leave a PR firm. The data should not just sit on the shelf. A report card or dashboard should be shared and disseminated each year to keep firms transparent. Further, the data analysis should inform human resource action plans for each year, and play a role in how senior leaders are compensated or incentivized.

6. **Make headhunters part of the solution.** If PR professionals can be enticed by other job opportunities to move up the career ladder, make sure they are aware of opportunities at other agencies. Many mid- and senior-level professionals are making career choices based on seeking a new challenge, higher pay, and/or the desire for more responsibility. If PR agencies want to build a talent pool for their industry, then they need to work in tandem to make sure that prospective candidates are informed about openings at other firms. Alternatively, and perhaps most obvious, PR firms need to put strategies in place to make a concerted effort to promote from within, so that “firm jumping” is not perceived as the only method of ensuring career mobility.

7. **Put supports in place to help professionals navigate the systems, culture, and expectations of the workplace,** as the firm takes a proactive role in addressing barriers to success. Organizational cultures do not change overnight. Employees still need to work within the day-to-day reality of making deadlines, interacting with colleagues, and finding ways to strengthen competencies and get ahead. While cultural events and affinity groups may play some role in creating a sense
of belonging, programs that provide executive-level coaching, introduce employees to new teams, and get talented professionals on the radar of others within the company are the most useful to retaining talent and providing career ladders for high-performing PR professionals of color.

8. **Don’t pigeonhole black and Latino PR professionals within agencies.** PR firms need to find a balanced approach that leverages knowledge of ethnic communities, if and when applicable, but that does not limit an individual’s opportunities to showcase and strengthen expertise in other content areas. Having deep knowledge around communicating to ethnic groups does not preclude an ability to provide (or gain) similar expertise around reaching consumer markets for food, technology, or healthcare, as examples.

9. **Recognize that the experiences of PR professionals of color are not universal.** While underrepresented groups in the United States may share commonalities, strategies that work for one community may not move the needle for others. PR firms should consider targeted strategies that take into account regional and cultural contexts, as well as the interplay of those contexts within a dominant corporate environment. In the case of black and Latino professionals, the subjects of this study, identities (whether ascribed or avowed) are influenced by generation, education, class, and ethnic backgrounds. These realities will impact the strategies used to address access to senior-level opportunities at PR firms.

10. **Leverage lessons learned from the advancement of women in the PR industry and see what is applicable now.** PR firms have had some success at increasing opportunities for women at various levels since the 1980s. Much of this success is due to awareness building and internal advocacy, but also to executive leadership implementing strategies and setting targets to increase the presence of women at their organizations. Today’s firms can take note of previous playbooks and assess what may be relevant for providing equitable opportunities for other groups.

11. **Take care of the voices, opinions, and perspectives of employees who are not professionals of color.** Providing increased opportunities for black and Latino talent should not imply a turn away from career mobility options for other employees. The concerns of majority employees should be valued and addressed. The best strategies include majority employees as part of the solution. Employees who are not from underrepresented groups must understand the context and
need for changes. They should also understand how it relates to the company’s bottom line. Most importantly, these employees should be able to see how increased diversity is a value add to the work in which they are directly involved.

CONCLUSION
PR firms realize that they must establish and maintain diversity to remain competitive in an increasingly diverse society. This perceptions study shares specific challenges faced by black and Latino PR professionals and makes recommendations for the ways in which PR firms can address those challenges. The PR industry has reason to be optimistic that the current trends can be reversed if proactive strategies are put in place to retain top talent at PR agencies and put black and Latino professionals on a path toward career success.
INTRODUCTION
Maintaining racial and ethnic diversity at the top levels of PR agencies has been a challenge in the United States. Despite notable gains in gender balance since the 1980s, PR agencies have struggled to address the dearth of senior executive positions held by black and Latino professionals, especially.

Few efforts, past or current, have moved the needle in a major way. Even when PR firms have been able to remove barriers to finding and hiring professionals from underrepresented groups, many of these professionals are not staying at firms. Research suggests that some professionals feel the need to switch jobs to get ahead and ensure career mobility within PR firms. Others focus on finding ways to remain in the field of public relations, but do so outside of a traditional PR agency.

There is a scarcity of industry-wide, published data on the demographics of CEO and executive team leadership across leading PR agencies. But, any casual observer of top U.S.-based PR firms can quickly assess this reality: few have a group of senior executives that approximates the demographics of American society. Although roughly 61 percent of public relations specialists are women, this female majority has yet to find its way to gender equity in the C-suite of PR firms. And, despite the projection that the United States will be a majority minority nation by 2020, in 2014, only 9 percent of public relations specialists were black/African American; 9 percent were Latino/Hispanic; and 4 percent were Asian—all under the national averages for these populations.

Major PR firms in the United States grapple with these questions: How can we meet the needs of our clients in a society that will continue to become more ethnically and racially diverse? How can we leverage the human capital required to help our clients engage multiple publics, across multiple geographies, and through multiple media?

For today’s major PR firms, it has become a business imperative to figure out how diversity can be harnessed to meet the needs of clients and their audiences in the 21st century.

THE PERCEPTIONS STUDY
This report adds to a growing body of knowledge on what major PR firms can do to attract and retain diversity among mid- and senior-level staff, as well as position black and Latino professionals to step into key decision-making roles within agencies.

In August 2015, the PR Council commissioned this perceptions study to better understand the agency experience for black and Latino PR professionals at the mid- to senior-level. With
existing research already showing some dissatisfaction among black and Latino PR professionals working within PR, this study seeks to more specifically identify the sources of this dissatisfaction and identify perceptions around real trends and barriers to career advancement for black and Latino PR professionals, and recommend ways to improve inclusion and retention of people of color at PR firms.

The PR Council identified the need for this perceptions study as a result of conversations among PR Council board members, which includes the leadership of major PR firms, based on their desire to enhance their own agencies’ diversity. A literature review revealed relevant studies on the topic of diversity within PR firms, but most focus on developing a pipeline of diverse employees and on attracting and retaining diverse employees at the entry level. These studies suggest similar problems in more advanced positions, but there is little data available on what happens next. Therefore, the need for a closer examination of mid-level and advanced PR professionals was identified to better understand why PR firms are not retaining professionals at these higher levels. The PR Council determined an outside evaluation would be most effective and enlisted the services of LM Strategies Consulting LLC, an external diversity and equity consultancy, to complete the perceptions study.

METHODOLOGY
LM Strategies Consulting LLC’s commissioned scope of work included the design of the perceptions study methodology, facilitation of focus group and individual interviews, processing of results, identification of trends and themes, and the development of recommendations to the industry.

The project is guided by the following questions:
• What were the experiences of black and Latino PR professionals who have recently left the field, especially around issues of inclusion, retention, and mobility in their respective organizations?
• What are the current employment trends for black and Latino PR professionals (retention, advancement, leaving the field, etc.)? How can firms improve the experience?
• What are the implications of these employment trends on advancing opportunities for black and Latino PR professionals?

This perceptions study specifically focuses on PR professionals who are advanced in their careers and who have recently (within the last few years) left jobs at public relations firms for in-house public relations positions, consulting, entrepreneurship, other PR agencies, or any number of other personal or professional reasons. This laser focus on professionals leaving firms allows for a careful examination of the reasons that mid- and senior-level black and Latino PR
professionals leave jobs at agencies and thus enables the researchers to develop recommendations for retention and advancement strategies at those levels.

LM Strategies Consulting LLC designed this perceptions study to approximate a virtual “exit interview,” which is a conversation conducted by an employer’s human resource department with an outgoing employee to help the firm assess its own performance and to understand why the employee decided to leave. These discussions can yield valuable information to helping a firm reduce turnover, increase employee engagement, and improve human resource procedures. Asking employees about their perspectives after they leave their positions allows them to speak freely about their experiences. By presenting and analyzing candid reflections, this perceptions study aims to build the field’s collective knowledge of how to retain diverse talent at advanced levels within PR firms, and how to fully leverage the unique skills and commitment that many black and Latino professionals bring to the sector.

The research protocol was designed in partnership with the PR Council to gather the perspectives and experiences of a wide sample of black and Latino professionals who are advanced in their careers in public relations. In support of the perceptions study, ColorComm served as a partner of PR Council to ensure extensive participation of black and Latino PR professionals in the study. ColorComm is a membership organization, primarily for women of color, which provides support and networking opportunities in all areas of communications, including advertising, print media, broadcast, public relations, and corporate communications.

The data collection methodology included an online survey, focus groups, individual interviews, and a literature review.

An online survey of mid- to senior-level black and Latino PR professionals who have left an agency within the last few years was conducted to provide a broad analysis of the research questions. The survey was distributed through a network established by ColorComm and reached black and Latino PR professionals across the country. In addition, the survey was sent to members of the National Black Public Relations Society and members of the Hispanic Public Relations Association. These partners selected candidates from their databases based on criteria provided by the PR Council to ensure it was sent to the target population. The email messages to members requesting participation in the survey described the study and the criteria for participation and provided a URL link to access and complete the survey. The survey ran from September 9, 2015 to September 24, 2015 and was completed by 128 black respondents and 38 Latino respondents who fit the target profile.
In addition to collecting and analyzing survey responses, to gain deeper perspective on the factors that may influence individual perceptions, the researchers conducted a subpopulation analysis, examining responses to survey questions by specific demographic categories to uncover any possible correlations between subpopulation groups and specific responses. Survey responses were cross-referenced with the following categories of black respondents to see if any differences came to light:

- Tenure in the field
- Level of education
- Job title
- People who were laid off or fired from their last agency job

The correlational analysis was completed with the following survey questions:

- Which statement best captures your perceptions of current employment trends for black/African American public relations/communications professionals?
- In the past decade, employment prospects have progressively improved for black/African American public relations/communications professionals?
- What is the primary reason for leaving your last PR position at a public relations/communications agency?
- Why do black/African American public relations/communications professionals leave the agency world?
- Do black/African American public relations/communications professionals have access to support systems, professional-track training, and pipeline networks to engage and retain black/African American PR professionals in the field?

Once subpopulation response groups were identified, some within category samples became quite small, therefore the researchers did not analyze every category for every question. Also, because these response groups are relatively small, the researchers looked for large differences in responses of 10% or more. Results that trend away from those of the full respondent group are reflected later in this report.

In addition, two focus groups of black mid-to senior-level PR professionals, one each in New York and Chicago, were completed in September 2015. Focus group participants were recruited through personal and professional contacts of the PR Council’s staff/membership and partner organization (ColorComm), as well as through individual outreach on LinkedIn by PR Council’s staff. Candidates were sent an electronic message explaining the study and asking their participation in a focus group to share their experiences and perceptions.
Six telephone interviews with mid-to senior-level black PR professionals and two interviews with PR Council board members were also completed in September 2015. Interview candidates were individually selected, based on their breadth of industry experience, through personal and professional contacts of the PR Council staff/membership and partner organization (ColorComm), as well as individual outreach on LinkedIn by PR Council’s staff. Candidates were sent an electronic message explaining the study and asking their participation in a one-on-one interview to share their experiences and perceptions.

Focus groups and interviews were designed to uncover the personal experiences of black professionals in public relations, their perceptions of how black professionals are faring in the field, and their ideas and suggestions for improved retention strategies that could be employed by PR firms interested in retaining black professionals. Focus groups and interviews were not conducted with Latino PR professionals.

To provide context to this perception study and some comparative information, a literature review of related research on diversity in the corporate, nonprofit, and public sectors was completed.

LIMITATIONS
This perceptions study offers valuable information to the field, but certain limitations should be noted.

The most notable limitation is the fact that the survey did not reach an entirely random sample of black and Latino PR professionals. The survey was sent to numerous black and Latino PR professionals and respondents self-selected for participation, but the majority of outreach was conducted through a network established by ColorComm, an organization focused on diversity issues. This distribution may have skewed the participant group towards individuals who are already engaged in and thinking about diversity in PR. In addition, because all outreach was conducted through PR Council partner organizations, a count of the number of people reached is not available. Therefore, a response rate analysis is not available either.

However, since this study does not seek to analyze the proportions of black or Latino professionals who have had certain experiences, rather it is designed to uncover and detail personal perceptions, the researchers believe that the access to large numbers of PR professionals through this network enhanced the study and does not negatively affect the value of the findings or recommendations.
The other limitation of the study is its emphasis on black PR professionals. The PR Council initially planned this study with LM Strategies Consulting LLC to focus exclusively on black PR professionals. After further reflection, the PR Council decided that incorporating data from Latino PR professionals would enhance the body of information, even though resources were not available to examine this population group as extensively as the one that focused on black PR professionals. While some trends and comparative conclusions can be suggested, further research is needed on the perceptions and experiences of Latino PR professionals.

Finally, it is also important to note that this perception survey intentionally focused on the experiences, ideas, and beliefs of PR professionals who have left PR agency jobs. This sorts for those professionals with some level of dissatisfaction and allowed the researchers to focus on the reasons for this dissatisfaction, but at the same time limits access to information about what firms may be doing right, or the positive experiences of black and Latino PR professionals. A broader analysis would likely yield additional valuable information for the field.

SNAPSHOT OF BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN SURVEY RESPONDENTS
Survey respondents varied widely by job type, tenure in the field, geography, gender, and age. A snapshot of key black PR professional respondent characteristics follows.

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**Educational Background**
- 4% Bachelor Degree
- 52% Bachelor Degree
- 41% Master Degree
- 3% Doctorate

**Age Distribution**
- 31% < 31
- 41% 31 - 40
- 20% 41 - 50
- 8% 51 +

**Employment Location**
- 26.2% Washington, DC/DC Metro Area
- 26.8% New York/New York Metro Area
- 5.4% Other

Most black/African American respondents are employed in major metropolitan areas.

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Survey respondents varied widely by job type, tenure in the field, geography, gender, and age. A snapshot of key black PR professional respondent characteristics follows.
Most black/African American respondents have more than four years working in the field of PR (71.1%). Yet the majority of black/African American respondents have tenure of only 1 - 4 years at the last PR firm where they were employed (60%) and another 25% have less than 1 year tenure.

At their last job with a PR firm, more black/African American respondents held Account Supervisor or Senior Account Executive positions (41.7%) than any other position.

Respondents are currently employed in a variety of PR and other professions, with the majority still employed in a PR position (74.2%).

Only 36.9% participated in an exit interview when they left their last job with a public relations/communications agency.
KEY SURVEY RESPONSES FROM BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN RESPONDENTS

The responses from black PR professionals revealed:

Few respondents (8.5%) feel that black/African American PR professionals are making great strides as key decision-makers within PR agencies.

Which statement best captures your perceptions of current employment trends for black/African American public relations/communications professionals? (Check one)

- 8.5% Black/African American PR professionals are making great strides as key decision-makers within public relations/communications agencies and companies that provide public relations, communications, and related services.
- 55.1% Black/African American PR professionals are making some progress as key decision-makers within public relations/communications agencies and companies that provide public relations, communications, and related services.
- 36.4% Black/African American PR professionals are making little progress towards becoming key decision-makers within public relations/communications agencies and companies that provide public relations, communications, and related services.

However, the majority (53.8%) believe that in the past decade, employment prospects have progressively improved for black/African American PR professionals.

In the past decade, employment prospects have progressively improved for black/African American public relations/communications professionals.

- 1.9% Strongly Agree
- 51.9% Agree
- 26.9% Disagree
- 8.3% Strongly Disagree
- 11.0% No Opinion
The top two reasons black/African American respondents left their last agency position are: they were offered a better position elsewhere and they were dissatisfied with their compensation or opportunities in the position they held (57.8%).

**What is the primary reason for leaving your last PR position at a public relations/communications agency? (Check the one that best fits)**

- 28.5% I was offered a better position elsewhere, in terms of pay, schedule, opportunities for advancement, and/or job satisfaction.
- 0.8% I wanted to join a minority-owned firm.
- 29.3% I was dissatisfied with compensation and/or opportunities for advancement in my previous position.
- 8.1% I wanted to start my own business.
- 3.3% I was dissatisfied with the lack of diversity and/or lack of sensitivity to my culture or background at my last employer.
- 2.4% I experienced life changes, such as moving or family changes.
- 13.0% I was laid off or fired.
- 4.0% I decided to pursue further education or education in another field.
- 10.6% I wanted to pursue interests more attuned to my personal passions, ethics, and/or education.

The majority of black/African American respondents (89.4%) believe black/African American PR professionals leave agencies due to negative experiences, limited opportunities, or finding a better opportunity elsewhere.

**In your opinion, why do black/African American public relations/communications professionals leave the agency world? (Check the ONE most important)**

- 8.6% Pushed out of their jobs/encouraged to leave through informal suggestion.
- 13.4% Find better opportunities elsewhere.
- 8.7% Have to deal with subtle or outright racist attitudes or hostile behaviors.
- 33.7% Have limited opportunities for advancement.
- 0.0% Prefer to work as consultants.
- 1.0% Feel their communities are underrepresented as clients.
- 0.0% Want to pursue further education or education in another field.
- 3.8% Dissatisfied by the lack of engagement with African American communities by their employer, in terms of efforts to be good corporate citizens, company charity activities, and/or accountability to the communities their agencies serve.
- 15.4% Experience feelings of isolation within the agency or field.
- 4.8% Limited availability of mentors to help with career advancement.
- 10.6% Want to pursue interests more attuned to their personal passions, ethics, and/or education.
Respondents were asked to identify strategies from a checklist that they believe are used by PR firms to attract, retain, and support the career experience of black/African American PR professionals. While 82.5% of respondents indicated one or more of the strategies, 17.5% checked “other.” A further exploration of “other” shows that all those respondents believe PR agencies are making no efforts to retain or advance black/African American PR professionals.

*Note: Respondents were asked to check all that apply and therefore these percentages are not intended to sum to 100%.

33.0% Offering professional development opportunities, such as trainings and conferences.
28.9% Offering opportunities to network in the field, within and outside of the company.
23.7% Offering affinity groups within the company.
26.8% Promoting from within.
22.7% Actively recruiting black PR professionals.
13.4% Increasing capacity of senior staff to become more open to diverse ideas and cultures.
12.4% Requiring or strongly encouraging cultural competency training for supervisors and HR staff.
13.4% Offering a program tailored for black PR professionals, such as a formal mentoring program.
17.5% Other (please specify).
Respondents support a variety of ideas as to how agencies can improve the work and career experience of black/African American PR professionals. Highest ranked are: actively recruit black/African American PR professionals, increase capacity of senior staff to become more open to diverse ideas and cultures, and promote more from within.

What can public relations/communications agencies do to improve the work and career experience of black/African American public relations/communications professionals? (Check the ONE most important)

- **Offer more professional development opportunities, such as trainings and conferences.**
- **Offer more opportunities to network in the field, within and outside of the company.**
- **Offer affinity groups within the company.**
- **Promote more frequently from within.**
- **Actively recruit black/African American PR professionals.**
- **Increase capacity of senior staff to become more open to diverse ideas and cultures.**
- **Require or strongly encourage cultural competency training for supervisors and HR staff.**
- **Offer a program tailored for black/African American PR professionals, such as a formal mentoring program within the agency or field.**
- **Other (please specify).**

Only a minority (30.5%) agree there is access to support systems, professional-track training, and pipeline networks to engage and retain black/African American PR professionals in the field.

Black/African American public relations/communications professionals have access to support systems, professional-track training, and pipeline networks to engage and retain black/African American PR professionals in the field.
SUBPOPULATION ANALYSIS OF KEY SURVEY RESPONSES FROM BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN RESPONDENTS

To gain a more in-depth perspective on the factors that may influence individual perceptions, the researchers analyzed survey responses by specific demographic categories to determine if there were any notable correlations and identified a few areas of interest.

In exploring tenure in the PR field, those in the 1-4 years group express a difference in why they believe black PR professionals leave the agency world: Nearly 30% indicate feelings of isolation as the number one reason black/African American professionals leave the agency world, as compared to only 15% of the overall group. This suggests that feelings of isolation may be a significant cause for leaving within the first four years at an agency, but if they stick it out they begin to feel less isolated.

In addition, the 10-15 years of tenure in the field group may have different beliefs on why black public relations professionals leave the agency world. They demonstrate a much higher response rate than the average for “dissatisfied by lack of engagement with [black] communities” and much lower (0 compared to 15%) for “feelings of isolation.” This data could suggest several differences experienced by this group: after many years in the field, they develop their own network and no longer feel isolated, priorities change over time, and/or an older generation puts more importance on engagement with their communities.

The 16+ years of tenure in the field group may have a grimmer outlook on improvements in employment prospects for black professionals, as compared to the overall group: 39% in the 16+ years group agree/strongly agree with the statement, over the last decade, employment prospects for black/African American PR professionals have progressively improved, compared to 54% of the overall group. This may be due to different expectations of career advancement or simply based on years of observations; younger professionals may be more optimistic.

It is interesting to note that in all tenure groups, “tenure at last agency job,” remains relatively steady at more than 50% indicating 1-4 years. For example, 70% of the 10-15 years group indicates they held their last agency job for 1-4 years, and 63% of the 16+ group indicates this as well. This is consistent with reports from the focus groups as well as individual interviews, where many participants expressed a belief that at least for black PR professionals, if they have not advanced within four years of employment in a firm, they will not be promoted and should look for another job.

In examining the relationship between level of education and perceptions, there is a notable difference in how those with a bachelor’s degree perceive employment prospects and those with a master’s degree. When asked if, in the past decade, employment prospects have progressively improved for black PR professionals, 43% of the bachelor group agrees/strongly agrees, while 68% in the master degree group agree/strongly agree. Most likely this simply means that employment prospects are better for those who hold master’s degrees than they are for those who hold bachelor’s degrees, and respondents are attributing this change to race when it appears to be education level in this case.
SNAPSHOT OF LATINO/HISPANIC RESPONDENTS

Survey respondents varied widely by job type, tenure in the field, geography, gender, and age. A snapshot of key Latino PR professional respondent characteristics follows.

62 Latino/Hispanic initial respondents. Of these, 38 indicated they had left a PR firm within the last few years and were asked to complete the full survey. National respondents, concentrated in major metro areas.

Most Latino/Hispanic respondents are employed in major metropolitan areas.

Where they work:
- 14.8% Chicago/Chicago Metro Area, IL
- 9.3% Washington, DC/DC Metro Area
- 27.8% Los Angeles/LA Metro Area, CA
- 20.4% Miami/Miami Metro Area, FL
- 22.2% New York/New York Metro Area, NY
- 5.5% Other

Most Latino/Hispanic respondents have more than four years working in the field of PR (86%). Yet the majority of Latino/Hispanic respondents have tenure of only 1-4 years at the last PR firm where they were employed (70.6%) and another 5.9% have less than 1 year tenure.

Tenure:
- 5.9% < 1 year
- 70.6% 1 - 4 years
- 23.5% 5 - 9 years
- 0.0% 10 - 15 years
- 0.0% 16+ years

At their last job with a PR firm, the majority of Latino/Hispanic respondents held Account Supervisor or Senior Account Executive positions (63.9%).

Last position:
- 0.0% President, CEO, or Managing Partner
- 19.5% Vice President, Executive Vice President, or Senior Vice President
- 36.1% Director or Account Supervisor
- 27.8% Senior Account Executive or Account Executive
- 8.3% Consultant
- 8.3% None of the above
Key survey responses from Latino/Hispanic respondents

The responses from Latino PR professionals revealed:

Approximately 21% (20.6%) of respondents feel that Latino/Hispanic PR professionals are making great strides as key decision-makers within PR agencies.

Which statement best captures your perceptions of current employment trends for Latino/Hispanic public relations/communications professionals? (Check one)

- 20.6% Latino/Hispanic PR professionals are making great strides as key decision-makers within public relations/communications agencies and companies that provide public relations, communications, and related services.
- 64.7% Latino/Hispanic PR professionals are making some progress as key decision-makers within public relations/communications agencies and companies that provide public relations, communications, and related services.
- 14.7% Latino/Hispanic PR professionals are making little progress towards becoming key decision-makers within public relations/communications agencies and companies that provide public relations, communications, and related services.

Nearly half (47.2%) participated in an exit interview when they left their last job with a public relations agency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current Employment Status</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed/started own business in public relations/communications</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed at another public relations communications firm</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed at a private company or nonprofit, still working in public relations/communications</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed at another private company or a nonprofit, not currently working in public relations/communications</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ADVANCING DIVERSITY IN PR FIRMS | 20
Further, the majority (79.5%) believe that in the past decade, employment prospects have progressively improved for Latino/ Hispanic PR professionals.

In the past decade, employment prospects have progressively improved for Latino/Hispanic public relations/communications professionals.

The top two reasons Latino/Hispanic respondents left their last agency position are: they were offered a better position elsewhere and they were laid off or fired (67.6%).

What is the primary reason for leaving your last PR position at a public relations/ communications agency? (Check the ONE that best fits)

- 52.9% I was offered a better position elsewhere, in terms of pay, schedule, opportunities for advancement, and/or job satisfaction.
- 0.0% I wanted to join a minority-owned firm.
- 11.8% I was dissatisfied with compensation and/or opportunities for advancement in my previous position.
- 5.9% I wanted to start my own business.
- 5.9% I was dissatisfied with the lack of diversity and/or lack of sensitivity to my culture or background at my last employer.
- 5.9% I experienced life changes, such as moving or family changes.
- 14.7% I was laid off or fired.
- 2.9% I decided to pursue further education or education in another field.
- 0.0% I wanted to pursue interests more attuned to my personal passions, ethics, and/or education.
The majority of Latino/Hispanic respondents (97.0%) believe Latino/Hispanic PR professionals leave agencies due to negative experiences, limited opportunities, or finding a better opportunity elsewhere.

**In your opinion, why do Latino/Hispanic public relations/communications professionals leave the agency world? (Check the ONE most important)**

- 3.0% Pushed out of their jobs/encouraged to leave through informal suggestion.
- 51.6% Find better opportunities elsewhere.
- 3.0% Have to deal with subtle or outright racist attitudes or hostile behaviors.
- 12.1% Have limited opportunities for advancement.
- 0.0% Prefer to work as consultants.
- 9.1% Feel their communities are underrepresented as clients.
- 0.0% Want to pursue further education or education in another field.
- 0.0% Dissatisfied by the lack of engagement with Latino/Hispanic communities by their employer, in terms of efforts to be good corporate citizens, company charity activities, and/or accountability to the communities their agencies serve.
- 6.1% Experience feelings of isolation within the agency or field.
- 12.1% Limited availability of mentors to help with career advancement.
- 3.0% Want to pursue interests more attuned to their personal passions, ethics, and/or education.

Latino/Hispanic respondents were asked to identify strategies from a checklist that they believe are used by PR firms to attract, retain, and support the career experience of Latino/Hispanic PR professionals. While 83.9% of respondents indicated one or more of the strategies, 16.1% checked “other.” A further exploration of “other” shows that all those respondents believe PR agencies are making no efforts at all to retain or advance Latino/Hispanic PR professionals.

**What are public relations/communications agencies doing to attract, retain, and support the career experience of Latino/Hispanic public relations/communications professionals? (Check all that apply)**

- 32.3% Offering professional development opportunities, such as trainings and conferences.
- 29.0% Offering opportunities to network in the field, within and outside of the company.
- 22.6% Offering affinity groups within the company.
- 45.2% Promoting from within.
- 45.2% Actively recruiting Latino or Hispanic PR professionals.
- 12.9% Increasing capacity of senior staff to become more open to diverse ideas and cultures.
- 29.0% Requiring or strongly encouraging cultural competency training for supervisors and HR staff.
- 9.7% Offering a program tailored for Latino or Hispanic PR professionals, such as a formal mentoring program.
- 16.1% Other (please specify).

*Note: Respondents were asked to check all that apply and therefore these percentages are not intended to sum to 100%.*
Being a Latina within one of the top 10 PR global firms gave me the opportunity to stand out and help the agency attract Hispanic clients[].

Latina/Hispanic female, 31 - 40 age group, 10 - 15 years in PR

Latino/Hispanic respondents support a variety of ideas as to how agencies can improve the work and career experience of Latino/Hispanic PR professionals. Highest ranked are: actively recruit Latino/Hispanic PR professionals, promote more from within, and increase capacity of senior staff to become more open to diverse ideas and cultures.

What can public relations/communications agencies do to improve the work and career experience of Latino/Hispanic public relations/communications professionals?
(Check the ONE most important)

- 12.1% Offer more professional development opportunities, such as trainings and conferences.
- 6.1% Offer more opportunities to network in the field, within and outside of the company.
- 0.0% Offer affinity groups within the company.
- 21.2% Promote more frequently from within.
- 33.3% Actively recruit Latino/Hispanic PR professionals.
- 12.1% Increase capacity of senior staff to become more open to diverse ideas and cultures.
- 9.1% Require or strongly encourage cultural competency training for supervisors and HR staff.
- 6.1% Offer a program tailored for Latino/Hispanic PR professionals, such as a formal mentoring program.
- 0.0% Other (please specify).
Latino/Hispanic respondents are nearly split (42.4% disagree and 39.4% agree) on whether or not they have access to support systems, professional-track training, and pipeline networks to engage and retain Latino/Hispanic PR professionals in the field.

**Latino/Hispanic public relations/communications professionals have access to support systems, professional-track training, and pipeline networks to engage and retain Latino/Hispanic PR professionals in the field.**

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**PERCEPTIONS STUDY FINDINGS**

The combined data collected from surveys, interviews, and focus groups reveal some strong perceptions of how black and Latino PR professionals advance (or do not advance) within PR agencies.

An analysis of survey responses reveals:

- **Most black and Latino PR professionals feel that they are making progress in PR agencies, but great strides in key decision-making roles are elusive.** Only 21% (20.6%) of Latino/Hispanic respondents feel that Latino/Hispanic PR professionals are making great strides as key decision-makers within PR agencies, which is double the rate of black/African American respondents (8.5%) who feel this way about black/African American professionals.

- **Both black and Latino PR professionals leave agency jobs for better positions elsewhere.** Based on the survey responses, the most commonly cited reason that Latino respondents left their last agency positions is that they were offered better positions elsewhere (52.9%). Among black respondents, this was the second most commonly cited reason (28.5%), with black respondents’ most commonly cited reason being dissatisfaction with compensation or opportunities for advancement (29.3%).
• Three strategies for improving the career and work experiences of black and Latino PR professionals stand out among black and Latino respondents. These are 1) actively recruit black/African American and Latino/Hispanic PR professionals; 2) promote more from within; and 3) increase capacity of senior staff to become more open to diverse ideas and cultures. These strategies are the same top three for both black/African American and Latino/Hispanic respondents, but ranked differently when filtered by race/ethnic background.

• Despite similarities in perceptions identified in the survey, there are noteworthy differences in how black and Latino PR professionals experience agency life. The majority (79.5%) of Latino/Hispanic PR professionals believe that in the past decade, employment prospects have progressively improved for Latino/Hispanic PR professionals. This is much greater than the rate of black/African American respondents who feel this way about opportunities for black/African American PR professionals (53.8%).

Further, Latino/Hispanic respondents appear to remain longer within the industry, with 85.7% of Latino/Hispanic respondents currently employed in some sort of PR position compared to 74.2% of black/African American respondents.

Latino/Hispanic respondents are nearly split (42.4% disagree and 39.4% agree) on whether or not they have access to support systems, professional-track training, and pipeline networks to engage and retain Latino/Hispanic PR professionals in the field. A smaller minority of black/African American respondents (30.5%) agree with these statements.
FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEWS: DEEPER ANALYSIS OF BLACK/AFRICAN AMERICAN RESPONDENTS

The individual interviews and two focus groups offer additional insights regarding the experiences, or perceptions thereof, of black PR professionals at PR agencies.

Several themes emerged from the in-depth conversations, including these highlights:

- **The organizational culture of many PR agencies thrives on out-of-office social networks** that may prevent black PR professionals from getting ahead based on merit and job performance alone. Black PR professionals often feel unduly pressured to socialize after work hours—and that their job security and career mobility are dependent on building relationships outside of work with team members.

- **Performance reviews are often subjective without clear, objective criteria for career advancement.** This negatively impacts the career outlook for black PR professionals, especially at the mid-level. Unlike other business industries, which have tried to embrace an objective set of metrics for job performance, PR agencies often use tools that give supervisors too much leeway to make assessments that have little to do with work product and talent and more to do with perceptions of “polish” and “readiness” that hint at unacknowledged cultural biases.

- **The most successful black PR professionals often have high-level advocates within a PR agency** to support career mobility, provide opportunities, and highlight their good work behind closed doors. These advocates are more than mere mentors; they are decision-makers who can make the difference between a promotion, a new opportunity with the firm, or a lay off.

- **Although PR agencies may lose black professionals at the mid-level, those professionals are not necessarily leaving the communications field.** They are making use of other sectors to practice their trade. In several cases, they are still performing as PR professionals, albeit as in-house staff, consultants, or freelancers. (This is also supported by the survey results and holds true for Latinos surveyed as well.)

- **Beyond the account supervisor level, there is the perception that black PR professionals need to leave a firm to get a promotion in title, income, and/or responsibilities.** Insights from focus groups and individual interviews point to a glass ceiling once professionals have been at a firm for roughly 5 to 7 years. This glass ceiling may have an impact across all ethnic groups, but given the small percentages of black PR professionals at most mainstream PR firms, the drop off of mid- and senior-level professionals is acutely noted by entry-level
employees envisioning a clear path for career success. This is supported by the survey responses, where “tenure at last agency job,” remains relatively steady at more than 50% at 1-4 years, no matter how many years of experience in the field. For example, 70% of the 10-15 years tenure in the field group indicates they held their last agency job for 1-4 years, and 63% of the 16+ group indicates this as well.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on research and analysis of survey and interview data, LM Strategies Consulting LLC makes the following recommendations to retain and increase the presence of black and Latino mid- to senior-level professionals at PR firms:

1. **Start with CEO leadership.** CEOs must set the vision and tone, using their influence, visibility, and power to advocate for changes and put policies and practices in place. Diversity is a business strategy, not just a human resource function. While HR professionals can provide implementation support, and chief diversity officers can manage the work, efforts to increase the presence of high-performing black and Latino professionals in the C-Suite depend on the active involvement of the CEO.

2. **Tie the advancement, promotion, and/or bonuses of senior leadership to the success of their team members.** This strategy can include specific targets around the success of underrepresented PR professionals who are part of a senior leader’s team. Examples of how this strategy is employed in other industries merit review.

3. **Work hard to minimize the subjectivity of performance evaluations.** PR agencies should develop and apply rigorous and objective performance review systems for staff at all levels—or eliminate annual performance evaluations as the most impactful tools used to make decisions about career advancement.

4. **Address the intercultural dynamics that are present but seldom acknowledged in PR agencies.** PR agencies should move beyond traditional diversity training to consider intercultural competence training to gain insight on how recent shifts in the PR agency workforce influences the dominant organizational culture. People come to work with diverse ways of communicating, working on teams, and interacting with colleagues. Understanding these behaviors can help build an environment that leverages the assets and talents of all team members, even if their styles are distinct from the dominant organizational culture at mainstream PR agencies.

“The work environment needs to be culturally sensitive, active recruiting of black PR professionals from different areas would be helpful in getting good talent.”

Black/African American female, 30 or under age group, 5 - 9 years in PR
5. **Embrace the importance of data collection and analysis.** PR agencies have to collect information on hires, tenure, promotions, and exits in order to analyze what is happening to black and Latino PR professionals when they enter and leave a PR firm. The data should not just sit on the shelf. A report card or dashboard should be shared and disseminated each year to keep firms honest and transparent. Further, the data analysis should inform HR (human resource) action plans for each year, and play a role in how senior leaders are compensated or incentivized.

6. **Make headhunters part of the solution.** If PR professionals can be enticed by other job opportunities to move up the career ladder, make sure they are aware of opportunities at other agencies. Mid- and senior-level professionals are making career choices based on seeking a new challenge, higher pay, and/or the desire for more responsibility. If PR agencies want to build a talent pool for their industry, then they need to work in tandem to make sure that prospective candidates are informed about openings at other firms. Alternatively, as perhaps most obvious, PR firms need to put strategies in place to make a concerted effort to promote from within, so that “firm jumping” is not perceived as the only method of ensuring career mobility.

7. **Put supports in place to help professionals navigate the systems, culture, and expectations of the workplace,** as the firm takes a proactive role in addressing barriers to success. Organizational cultures do not change overnight. Employees still need to work within the day-to-day reality of making deadlines, interacting with colleagues, and finding ways to strengthen competencies and get ahead. While cultural events and affinity groups may play some role in creating a sense of belonging, programs that provide executive-level coaching, introduce employees to new teams, and get talented professionals on the radar of others within the company are the most useful to retaining talent and providing career ladders for high-performing PR professionals of color.

8. **Don’t pigeonhole black and Latino PR professionals within agencies.** PR firms need to find a balanced approach that leverages knowledge of ethnic communities, if and when applicable, but that does not limit an individual’s opportunities to showcase and strengthen expertise in other content areas. Having deep knowledge around communicating to ethnic groups does not preclude an ability to provide (or gain) similar expertise around reaching consumer markets for food, technology, or healthcare, as examples.
9. **Recognize that the experiences of PR professionals of color are not universal.** While underrepresented groups in the United States may share commonalities, strategies that work for one community may not move the needle for others. PR firms should consider targeted strategies that take into account regional and cultural contexts, as well as the interplay of those contexts within a dominant corporate environment. In the case of black and Latino professionals, the subjects of this study, identities (whether ascribed or avowed) are influenced by generation, education, class, and ethnic backgrounds. These realities will impact the strategies employed to address access to senior-level opportunities at PR firms.

10. **Leverage lessons learned from the advancement of women in the PR industry and see what is applicable now.** PR firms have had some success at increasing opportunities for women at various levels since the 1980s. Much of this success is due to awareness building and internal advocacy, but also to executive leadership implementing strategies and setting targets to increase the presence of women at their organizations. Today’s firms can take note of previous playbooks and assess what may be relevant for providing equitable opportunities for other groups.

11. **Take care of the voices, opinions, and perspectives of employees who are not professionals of color.** Providing increased opportunities for black and Latino talent should not imply a turn away from career mobility options for other employees. The concerns of majority employees should be valued and addressed. The best strategies include majority employees as part of the solution. Employees who are not from underrepresented groups must understand the context and need for changes. They should also understand how it relates to the company’s bottom line. Most importantly, these employees should be able to see how increased diversity is a value add to the work in which they are directly involved.

**Hispanic professionals are often pigeonholed for Hispanic-audience focused work and/or within ‘multi-cultural’ teams. This disheartens younger talent that have grown up more bicultural and don’t want to be limited in the types of clients they have.**

Latino/Hispanic male, 30 or under age group, 5 - 9 years in PR
CONCLUSION

PR firms realize that they must establish and maintain diversity to remain competitive in an increasingly diverse society. This perceptions study shares specific challenges faced by black and Latino PR professionals and makes recommendations for the ways in which PR firms can address those challenges. The PR industry has reason to be optimistic that the current trends can be reversed if proactive strategies are put in place to retain top talent at PR agencies and put black and Latino professionals on a path toward career success.

ENDNOTES


iii. Throughout this report, LM Strategies Consulting LLC uses “black” to denote black/African American and “Latino” to denote Latino/Hispanic survey respondents, respectively. Ethnic identities, whether ascribed or avowed, are often informed by generation, country of origin, region, and social constructions. This use of terminology is based on the preference of the authors. The survey instrument, however, used black/African American and Latino/Hispanic on specific questions to align with terminology used by the U.S. Census Bureau categorizations, as applicable.

iv. The PR Council staff suggested “public relations/communications professionals” as the appropriate terminology to be used throughout the survey instrument. This use of terminology is based on the preference of the PR Council.
FURTHER READING


It always seems impossible until it’s done.

Nelson Mandela
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Edelman
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Ogilvy Public Relations
Weber Shandwick
The PR Council, established as the Council of Public Relations Firms in 1998, is the U.S. trade association representing America's leading public relations firms. Its members are the premier global, mid-size, regional, and specialty firms across every discipline and practice area. The PR Council's mission is to advocate for and advance the business of public relations firms by building the market and the value of firms as strategic business partners.