

Salary & Ethics: An Examination of Public Relations Practitioners' Moral Decision Making Capabilities Related to Earnings

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If public relations professionals are self-professed ethical watchdogs of their firms, then it is relevant to examine their moral reasoning abilities. Moral reasoning is a key concept central to ethical decision making and behavior (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2011; Lennick & Kiel, 2008; Pennino, 2010). This pilot study examined moral reasoning related to compensation levels of public relations professionals practicing in various industry sectors in the Midwest who are governed by a professional code of ethics. Data collected from a generalizable sample were analyzed with one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) using weighted cases to simulate equal groups. Results indicate that respondents' lower compensation brackets correlated with higher N2 scores, supporting Piff et al.'s conclusion (2012) that individuals in higher income brackets display a lower ability to defend their decisions with moral reasoning. Results from Q2 concur with Frankel's (1989) assessment that professional codes of ethics serve as regulators of moral behavior of individual workers. Professionals working in the nonprofit, human services, and educational organizations (which require adherence to codes of ethics) demonstrated higher degrees of moral reasoning than individuals working in corporations. Even individuals who are members of professional organizations with codes of ethics demonstrated lower moral reasoning scores when they worked for corporations. This study suggests that ethics training and education is essential for preparing students for public relations posts in corporations.

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