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This optimism is global despite the industry being at different stages of development around the world. The United Kingdom (UK) is the most optimistic country, with Latin America the least.

These are some of the findings presented by Francois Ingham, director general, Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA), chief executive, International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO) and master, The Company of Public Relations Practitioners at the National Prisa Conference held at the Indaba Hotel in Fourways last week.

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This optimism, profitability and growth is because of three key drivers:

Firstly, corporate reputation is increasingly valued by companies – take, for example, the United Airlines incident.

Secondly, market spend is moving from other sources to PR. “We have been experiencing this since the 2008 financial crash, with clients nervous to spend money,” he explains, adding that despite the crash and the recession, PR has grown 10% every 10 years in the UK.

“Thirdly, we are seeing the merging of services and PR firms offering non-traditional services. The number of people working in the UK in PR has grown from 60,000 to 80,000, but this is because of their job descriptions changing and now including PR or elements of PR.”

The areas of expertise that are growing are digital and online offerings followed by corporate relations and then marketing communications and public affairs or government relations. “All over the world, including Africa, digital or online is the biggest growth area. However, while the industry is being led by social media, globally it still suffers from a skills gap in this area.”

Last year growth came from the technology, consumer products, healthcare and financial professional services sectors.

The biggest issue that all PR industries grapple with globally is staff retention. “This could be because we do not pay enough to attract the type of people we want out of university and this, in turn, is influenced by the fact that we do not charge enough because we do not believe in the value of what we do,” he says.

“We must ask, ‘What is holding back recruitment?’ Is it expected salary levels, a lack of transferrable skills or a lack of interest for potential recruits? I would say if you get an intern, pay them!”

In conclusion, he was upbeat about PR today and in the future. “We are blessed to work in a vibrant industry of the future, that is powerful now and will get more powerful. It is growing in every region of world and strongly with CEOs increasingly appreciating our work. PR is no longer an afterthought, but is increasingly being placed at the beginning and not the end of the process, and at the heart of the company or brand’s strategy”.

What needs to happen now, he says, is for us to strike a happy medium between where our digital work can sit with our traditional media relations. “It is a fallacy that media relations are dying. There is always room for PR. PR is not dead; it is well and alive.”

He foresees the growth of the last 20 years leading to an even more vibrant PR community.

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.

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