

# What We Now Know About The Career Path of Social Media Managers

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About a year ago, the IPR Digital Media Research Center (DMRC) met to discuss the topic of our next research project. Marcia DiStaso, Ph.D., APR, co-author of the study and chair and professor of the public relations department at the University of Florida, serves as the IPR DMRC director. The IPR DMRC identified a gap in the field—understanding the career path of a social media professional. Diane Schwartz of Ragan Communications agreed this would be an important area to study, as there is limited research about this specialization that is a critical function in most organizations. So, the three organizations—the Institute for Public Relations, Ragan Communications, and the University of Florida Department of Public Relations—partnered together to conduct this study.

The purpose of this study was to get an overview of what the social media manager position looks like in an organization and what their career path may be. First, we conducted a literature review of the research and found it fairly thin as it specifically relates to the job of [social media](#) professionals. Based on the research (or lack of), we weren't sure about their common level of experience, what decisions they are involved in within their department, or even their overall function within the organization. Do people see social media as a strategic function, and are there promotion opportunities for social media managers? We decided to find

out.

We pre-tested and surveyed more than 450 respondents, which we published in a report in October 2020, to explore the career path of social media professionals.



What we found out has an impact on the function. One important finding is 31% of respondents said they were the only person who manages social media for their organization. In 2018, researchers Nathan Gilkerson, Betsy Anderson and Rebecca Swenson discussed in a [PR Journal research article](#) how some social media professionals are experiencing an “accelerated” process on the job with an “always-on” mentality due in part to the 24/7 nature of social media. Having a solo person managing social media creates this “always-on” mindset. Some said they didn’t have any days off, uninterrupted vacations, or any back up to help them if they were out of the office.

Before we published the data, we presented the findings to nearly 100 social media managers in March 2020. Some talked about the pressures they faced being the only one managing social media and working more than the standard 40-hour workweek, which is not unusual for the PR industry. However, nearly half of the respondents in the survey said they worked more hours than their colleagues. This contributes to employee burnout.

But social media managers in this study were ambitious. Seventy percent of social media managers wanted to be promoted in their positions, while only 40% saw that possibility in their current roles. More than half (57%) of the social media managers did not anticipate being in their current role for more than two additional years. Having a clear path forward for social media managers helps with employee growth,

motivation and retention.

Another key finding was that social media professionals are involved in strategic conversations. While the most popular answer to what they do was content creation, strategy came in second place. In fact, at least two-thirds of social media managers are involved in social media strategy (76%) and almost as many are involved in department/function strategy (68%). Forty-one percent participate in the overall business and organizational strategy.

Finally, the perception that social media is managed primarily by an intern or those straight out of college is not accurate. Only one-quarter of the survey respondents were under the age of 30. In fact, 80% of respondents had never taken a social media course, most likely due to it not being offered when they were in college. Additionally, 40% managed a team with nearly 40% reporting to an SVP/VP or the C-suite. In fact, almost 60% said their perceived value to the organization in terms of their responsibilities was at least “above average.” These findings indicate that for many organizations, social media positions are not entry-level roles.

Clearly, social media has seen its importance and perception grow in organizations as more companies realize its critical value to both internal and external stakeholders, but there is much more research to be done to study the careers of social media managers.

**To download the full report, please click [here](#).**