

An Assessment of the Effect of Information and Communication Technology on Public Relations Practice in Nigeria

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Abstract

With the growing need to meet the demands of organizations' publics, most of whom are technologically savvy, it has become incumbent on public relations practitioners to embrace Information and Communication Technology (ICT). It is against this background that this survey research, using the purposive sampling technique, sought to assess the effect of information and communication technology on public relations practice in Nigeria. A sample of 274 subjects was drawn from the population of the registered members of the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), Rivers State chapter, for the study. Findings showed, among other things, that the level of usage of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria is low; that as there are increased platforms for interaction and socialization, ICT has improved organizations' relationship with their publics; knowledge gap on new information and communication technology tends to be the greatest challenge in the use of ICT in PR practice; and that identification of the right ICT platforms was an effective way to utilize ICT in order to achieve set PR goals. It was concluded that despite the huge potentials of ICT in reaching out to organizations' publics, a number of public relations practitioners are still reluctant to use ICT. The study was recommended, among other things, that PR practitioners be trained on ICT techniques and other technical skills to meet the demands of the times. Training and retraining of PR practitioners was also recommended for the adoption of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria.

Key Words: Assessment, Effect, Information and Communication Technology, Public Relations Practice, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The dynamism of technology is fast sweeping through every facet of human endeavour. A number of professions have been inevitably caught in the frenzy of technological advancements. Today's business environment is very dynamic and undergoes rapid changes as a result of technological innovation, increased awareness and demands of customers (Agboola, 2003).

Similarly, the Internet and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is rapidly fine-tuning activities in most professions. The public relations profession is not lost out in this technology frenzy. With the growing need to meet the demands of organizations' publics, most of whom are technologically savvy, it has become incumbent on the public relations

practitioners to raise the bar of their awareness and knowledge of ICT. Of course, the public relations profession cannot afford to be eclipsed in this era of information communication technology. Recent studies have suggested that public relations professionals who were once among those labelled as “laggards” with regard to the adoption of communication technology, are now more on a par with the adopters of online tools (Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008).

Public relations has continued to transform, and the changes are monumental. In the wake of democratized content and businesses, satisfying the needs of the digitally connected consumer, public relations had to evolve a new approach (Breakenridge, 2008). There is a new PR mindset which takes into consideration how PR extends beyond the traditional realm, to looking forward to seeing how organizations and businesses can become socialized to meet the needs of their publics.

THE PROBLEM

It is no longer news that ICT is creating new frontiers for public relations practice like other professions. What to bother about now is whether public relations professionals are ICT-compliant and if they are, how ICT use affects public relations practice in its various forms. Investigating the effect of ICT on public relations practices in Nigeria was, therefore, the main concern of this work.

Given the inability of many organizations to fund the public relations departments let alone bearing the cost of acquisition and maintenance of ICT equipment, especially in developing countries which make many public relations practitioners in our clime not attuned to the latest trends in information and communication technology in their work of cultivating mutual relationships and maintaining goodwill with their various publics, delving into this study became necessary.

THE OBJECTIVES

This study was carried out to empirically assess the effect of information and communication technology on public relations practices in Nigeria. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Find out the level of usage of ICT in public relations practice in Nigeria.
2. Determine the effect of ICT on public relations practice in Nigeria.
3. Investigate the challenges of using ICT by PR officers in organizations in Nigeria.
4. Find out how ICT can be effectively utilized to achieve set PR goals.
5. Proffer ways by which ICT can be effectively adopted in PR practice in Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What is the level of usage of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria?
2. What is the effect of ICT on public relations practice in Nigeria?
3. What are the challenges of using ICT by PR officers in Nigeria?
4. How can ICT be effectively utilized to achieve set PR goals in Nigeria?
5. In what ways can ICT be effectively adopted in PR practice in Nigeria?

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This research was aimed at assessing the effect of ICT on PR practice in Nigeria. The study was limited to only PR practitioners in Rivers State.

Operational Definition of Terms

Information and Communication Technology (ICT): the physical devices and software that link various computer hardware components and transfer data from one physical location to another

Internet: a global collection of computer networks and other devices which communicate with each other

Public Relations Practice: the deliberate, planned and systematic management process adopted by an organization to have a rapport with its publics

Publics: a group or groups of people who, by their activities, will influence the organization concerned or are themselves influenced by the organization. Publics can be internal or external to an organization.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study was anchored on the technological determinism theory. The theory was propounded in the 1960s and was made popular by Marshall McLuhan. The theory states that the technology of communication shapes the way individuals think, feel and act and how societies organize themselves and operate (Asadu, 2014). Technology drives cultural and even social changes in society (Baran, 2002).

Human society has always been shaped by the changes in communication technology. For instance, the advancement in information and communication technologies is opening new frontiers for public relations practice, the world over. McLuhan suspected that the current technological environment, when looked back upon, would be seen as a major turning point in the history of communication. As communication technology evolves and advances, so is human life as well as culture shaped.

The relevance of this theory to the study is that information and communication technology is shaping mindsets and approaches to public relations practice. With ICT, the PR practitioner is finding it easier to access publics and foster goodwill and reputation.

According to Cutlip and Center (1972), the essentiality of public relations is beyond debate in a world bound together by interdependence and swift communications yet split by recurring crises of change and confrontation. In its raw state, public relations employs the multiplexing tool of communication to create mutual understanding since communication in this regard, is supposedly a two-way act (Okon, 1998).

The demand for public relations is getting higher by the day. The need for organizations to continue to be seen in a positive light is giving rise to more attention to public relations. In an increasingly rising economic climate and increased competition with cost rising and profit dwindling, it has become imperative as well as challenging for many organizations to not only make profit but also ensure that the publics, internal and external, see them in a positive light (Ikpe & Olise, 2010)

The demands of the times have informed the need for sophistication in the public relations practice. There is this growing urgency to have information about organizations and their activities. The PR officer must ensure that this information is provided and as such endeavours

to contain any lacuna in the process. Public relations has, therefore, not only shifted from its press agency status (Blake, 1991), it is rapidly embracing the advancement in technology in its practice (Eyrich et al, 2008).

Public relations professionals now use online tools (Eyrich et al, 2008) in their practice. In fact, corporate websites, chat rooms, email, customer response facilities and electronic news release distribution, are now viewed as standard aspects of public relations practice (Galloway, 2005).

The use of information and communication technologies in PR is advancing the pace at which the public is being reached. What has undergone serious changes is the impact on the speed, conscience and wealth of access the practitioner enjoys in each step of the process of public relations. Blake (1991) attributes this dynamism in the profession to the advances taking place in the information and communication fields, which have opened vistas and opportunities in challenging messages in ways unimaginable.

The terrain of public relations practice is also shifting with the new media bringing about substantial increases in stakeholders strength through facilitating communication within stakeholder groups and between different stakeholder groups (Van der Merwe, Pitt & Abratt, 2005). The implications of new technologies with regard to their application in public relations go beyond corporate structures. The technologies are now all pervasive (Blake, 1991). One very pervasive medium of the ICT is the Internet. The Internet gives public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues and engage in direct dialogue with their publics about variety of issues (McAllister & Taylor, 2007, p.230). Anyone with a computer linked to the internet has the ability to publish information for potential global consumption and it is clear that the internet is revolutionizing many aspects of public relations research and practice (Taylor & Kent, 2006, p.145).

Today, several organizations have corporate homepage and websites with informative and persuasive details about their products/services and the image of the organization is communicated to the media and their publics across the globe (Ikpe & Olise, 2010).

According to a 2007 PRSA wired for change survey, the majority of public relations professionals state that the use of communication technology has made their activities easier by expediting the circulation of information to reach broader audiences (Eyrich et al, 2008).

In 2011, a pilot study conducted by Sergei Samoilenko of George Mason University, Deborah Ballard-Reisch of Wichita State University and Bagila Ahatova of Kazakh University of International Relations and World Languages focused on how “modern organization must depend on a new type of communication specialist to creatively solve problems and adapt to rapid organizational change, a global marketplace and constantly emerging online communities. The research project conducted in Kazakhstan was distributed to professionals holding upper-management positions in public relations. A multi-method survey probed. The respondent’s expectations about “crucial communication competencies that university graduates with a degree in public relations should possess in order to be successful in their organization.” Among the many interesting findings from the study included how the survey employers “identified competence in using new information technologies relationship building, self-control, ability to initiate dialogue as the most skills for young professionals. Whether it’s young professional entering the workforce or seasoned practitioners the competent use of

information technologies as a necessary skill which has become a part of the PR professional's daily practice (Samoilenko, 2011) cited in Breakenridge (2013, p.2).

Most organizations are beginning to embrace digital public relations. Digital public relations involves issuing online news releases to inform stakeholders about an organization's services or updates to these services, leveraging the power of journalism networks and disseminating information through the Internet (Gifford, 2010). Similarly, a recent report put forward that digital content and application in the twenty-first century will be as significant and as embedded in economic well being as was electronic power in the twentieth century. The report (Commonwealth of Australia 2005) states that like information and communication technology generally, digital content and application have the characteristics of a general purpose technology. When examining cultural forms and contents in which these new technologies are used, what is striking is the fact that new media vis-a-viz ICT; potentially make people technically more accessible for more of the time: the car, out shopping, in the office, at work, at home and when socializing (James, 2013).

According to Ikpe & Olise (2010), other technologies now adopted by the PR practitioners in their practice are: webcasting, video conferencing, video news releases (VNR) and electronic mail (e-mail). Furthermore, the PR practitioners are fast embracing social media platforms like facebook, twitter, Whatsapp, Youtube, badoo, 2go and blogs. Research has shown that public relations practitioners who embrace new technologies such as blogging are perceived within organizations as having more power, in that they are willing to be leaders in the industry and use new tools to better reach target publics (Porter, Sweetser, Trammell, Chung & Kim, 2007). The ability of nations as a whole to accommodate, handle, maintain and use these technologies could determine their place in the global system, particularly on issues related to public relations and public affairs (Blake, 1991).

However, despite the many potentials of the use of ICT in public relations practice, it remains disturbing that not many organizations have seen the need to flow with the tide. This brings us to examining the possible challenges of adopting the ICT in public relations practice in Nigeria.

First is the issue of knowledge gap among many PR practitioners in Nigeria on the latest trends in ICT. When it comes to embracing ICT, Africa cannot afford to fall too far behind, yet it lacks what it takes to even be at the periphery (Ghartey, 1990) cited in Blake (1991).

For practitioners in Nigeria, there is this seeming relapse to a comfort zone – a reluctance to shift from the conventional. With past evidence suggesting that public relations practitioners were open to using new technology (Porter & Sallot, 2003), it seems incongruous that even a traditional mainstay of public relations practice like media relations is not taking advantage of the possibilities offered by the web (Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel, 2006). This evidently is the case with PR practice and the use of ICT in Nigeria.

Similarly, there is this reluctance by PR practitioners in this clime to change their mindsets. For instance, the new PR mindset takes into consideration how PR extends beyond what people were used to in the traditional realm, what they have started to master in the online PR arena and what they have dabbled with in social media (Breakenridge, 2008).

There is also the challenge of acquiring more skills in the 21st century PR practice. Most of the practices in vogue are rather obsolete. If new media are to be embraced, public relations

practitioners will need more technical skills in areas such as web publishing, new software operation, online security, search engine optimization, web analytics and web trend analysis software operation (James 2008). They will need enhanced online information architecture skills and skills related to managing an increasing amount of complex information digitally. In fact, it is this sophisticated approach to PR practice that is gradually putting seasoned practitioners out of the business. Already there are anecdotal reports that mature practitioners are being overlooked in some cases in favour of young, relatively inexperienced (technically savvy) public relations practitioners who can take a leading role in projects that require technical know-how or first-hand knowledge of the consumption habits related to new media (James, 2008).

Meanwhile, the issues of cyber crises, corruption, low penetration of new information and communication technologies (NICTS), poor funding of media relations department, lack of expertise etc, are major factors that militate against the use of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria (Ikpe and Olise, 2010).

Alexander's (2004) comprehensive exploration of the challenges for the public relations curricula brings to fore the need for a review. Identifying the need for educators to provide a thorough grounding in how technology can facilitate relationship management, Alexander (2004) states that there is "an urgent need for academics and practitioners to review current course and subject contents and work towards ensuring that future practitioners are capable of working in the new public relations environment"(p.4).

METHODOLOGY

The survey research design was used to assess the effect of information and communication technology on public relations practice in Nigeria. For clarity, survey research design involves a collection of original data from a large population that cannot be observed directly (Rubin and Babbie, 2005). In the course of carrying out the person to person survey, interviews were conducted. During the interview, care was taken to ask simple and short questions that were easy to understand and would elicit co-operation from the respondents.

The population of this study was all the registered members of the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations, Rivers State chapter. The Nigeria Institute of Public Relations, Rivers State chapter, has a membership strength of 1368 (NIPR, 2014). The Nigeria Institute of Public Relations was chosen because practising members were expected to avail the researcher first hand information and experience they have garnered over the years from various organizations as officers and consultants.

A sample of 274 subjects was drawn from the population. The sample size was arrived at by using Taro Yamane's formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

N = Where n = sample size
population (1368)

The computation in the light of the above is as shown below:

$$n = \frac{1368}{1+1368(0.05)^2} = 274$$

Therefore, 274 formed the sample size of the population.

The study adopted the purposive sampling technique. In purposive sampling, specific elements that satisfy the set out criteria are selected (Osaat, 2009). This technique was used because the study concerned public relations practitioners who were in the best position to state the effect of ICT on their practice.

The questionnaire was the principal tool used to elicit information for the study. It was a 16-item structured instrument with close-ended questions. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section one deals with the background information about respondents, namely: status, sex, age, educational qualification, and work experience. Section two deals with the psychographic data bordering on ICT and its impact on public relations practice.

In carrying out this study, data were basically collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were the questionnaire and interview questions while the secondary source comprised previously documented materials and research works and journals of other scholars obtained from the Internet and library.

The research instruments used in the study (i.e. questionnaire and personal interview questions) were constructively reviewed, scrutinized and criticized by the supervisor and other research experts.

Data generated from the field were analyzed using the descriptive statistics - simple percentages and frequency distribution tables.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Assessing the Level of Usage of ICT in PR Practice in Nigeria

Level of usage	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	29	10.58
High	51	18.61
Very low	40	14.60
Low	140	51.09
Undecided	14	5.11
Total	274	100

Table 1 above is highly revealing. A majority of the respondents (140 or 51.09%) felt that the usage of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria is low. Fifty-one (18.61%) respondents argued that it is high. Forty (14.60%) respondents believed that ICT usage in PR practice is very low in Nigeria. While 29 (10.58%) respondents felt ICT usage is very high in PR practice, 14 (5.11%) were undecided.

Table 2: Effect of ICT on PR Practice in Nigeria

Effect	Frequency	Percentage
Advanced pace of reaching the publics	70	25.55
Improved relationship with the publics	100	36.50
Ease in circulation of information to broader audience	65	23.72
Guarantees leading position in the PR industry	35	12.77
Undecided	4	1.50
Total	274	100

As table 2 shows, a simple majority of the respondents (100 or 36.50%) view the effect of ICT on PR practice as improved relationship with publics; 70 (25.55%) respondents saw

advanced pace of reaching the organization’s publics as the effect of ICT, while 65 (23.72%) said its effect is in the form of information circulation to broader audiences. Yet, 35 (12.77%) believed that the use of ICT tends to guarantee a leading position in the PR industry. Only 4 (1.50%) respondents were undecided.

Table 3: Challenges of using ICT in PR Practice in Nigeria

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Knowledge gap on NICT	98	35.77
Low penetration of new information and communication technologies	79	28.83
Poor funding	31	11.31
Epileptic power supply	60	21.90
Undecided	6	2.19
Total	274	100

From table 3 above, knowledge gap on new information and communication technologies posed a major challenge to its use in PR practice in Nigeria. This was the position of a simple majority of the respondents (98 or 35.77%). While 79 (28.83%) respondents saw low penetration of new information and communication technologies as a challenge, poor funding posed a concern as well for 31 (11.31%). Sixty (21.90%) saw epileptic power supply as a challenge in the use of ICT, and 6 (2.19%) were undecided.

Table 4: Effective Utilization of ICT in PR Practice

Utilization	Frequency	Percentage
Create socialization	88	32.12
Identifying right ICT platforms	102	37.23
Improved two-way symmetrical communication	30	10.95
Acquisition of technical know-how	52	18.98
Undecided	2	0.73
Total	274	100

Table 4 above reveals that the effective utilization of ICT in PR can be achieved through identifying with the right ICT platforms. This was the view of 102 (37.23%) respondents. Creating socialization through ICT was seen by 88 (32.12%) respondents as a way to effectively utilize it. Thirty (10.95%) believed that it is through an improved two-way symmetrical communication. That ICT would be effectively utilized through acquisition of technical know-how was the view of 52(18.98%). Only 2(0.73%) were undecided.

Table 5: Recommendations for effective adoption of ICT in PR Practice

Recommendation	Frequency	Percentage
Review of PR curricula	60	21.90
Training and retraining of PR practitioners	128	46.72
Improved funding for PR department	55	20.07
Synergy with other departments	25	9.12
Undecided	6	2.19
Total	274	100

From table 9 above, 128 respondents, representing 46.72% recommended the training and retraining of PR practitioners while 60(21.90%) opted for the review of PR teaching curricula. Fifty (20.07%) respondents recommended improved funding for PR departments while 25(9.12%) opted for synergy with other departments. Only 6(2.19%) respondents were undecided.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Research Question 1

What is the level of usage of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria?

Table 1 showed that the level of usage of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria it is low. It exposes our laggard status when it comes to embracing new media in the practice of public relations. One wonders why there is this reluctance to maximize the sterling prospects of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria.

However, the result confirms Galloway (2005) who observes that many public relations practitioners are struggling with the impact of new media, especially the Internet. It further confirms Alfonso & de Valbuena Miguel's (2006) view that practitioners are not fully embracing new media, are ill-equipped to do so and have fear of the technology.

Research Question 2

What is the effect of ICT on public relations practice in Nigeria?

With the assumption that Nigerian public relations practitioners now use ICT in the practice, this question sought to determine the effect of new technologies on the profession.

The finding from this research question on the effect of ICT on public relations practice in Nigeria was that a great effect of ICT on PR was improved relationship between organizations and their publics. This was the view of the majority of respondents (100 or 36.50%). This result therefore, corroborates Ikpe and Olise (2010) who argue that people and media organizations would tend to associate more with companies recognized in a positive light globally. The mere fact that an organization has a website can boost its image. Again, 70(25.55%) of the respondents seeing its effect on PR practice as advanced pace of reaching the publics, further reechoes James (2008). According to James, what is striking is the fact that new media potentially make people technically more accessible: in the car, out shopping, in the office, at work, at home and when socializing. So PR practitioners are reaching more persons now than before through the ICT.

Research Question 3

What are the challenges of using ICT by PR officers in Nigeria?

This question set out to consider the possible challenges in the use of ICT by public relations practitioners in Nigeria.

Furthermore, the finding from research question 3, which bordered on the challenges of using ICT in PR practice in Nigeria, was that the knowledge gap on the new information and communication technologies poses a threat to its usage in the profession. This result (obtained from 98 or 37.77% of the respondents) strengthens Ikpe and Olise (2010) who argue that the required expertise is lacking in most developing countries. Okafor (2002) attributes this situation to the fact that early practitioners included people who rose through the ranks and graduates from other disciplines like marketing, psychology, journalism, linguistics, etc who did not receive any formal training in public relations.

If new media are to be embraced, public relations practitioners will need more technical skills in areas such as web publishing, new software operation, online security, search engine optimization, web analytics and web trend analysis software operation. "They will need enhanced online information architecture skills and skills related to managing an increasing amount of complex information digitally" (James, 2008, p.142).

Research Question 4

How can ICT be effectively utilized to achieve set PR goals in Nigeria?

The question sought to find out how to effectively use ICT in PR practice to get results and it revealed that the identification of the right ICT platforms could enhance its effectiveness. This was the view of 102(37.23%) respondents. This result corroborates McLuhan's "the medium is the message" concept. The choice of a medium determines to a large extent, its success or otherwise. There is also the need to consider whether target publics have access to new media technologies such as the Internet which becomes an issue when communication strategies target publics without such access due to geographic or socio-economic factors (Badaracco, 2007).

Research Question 5

What are the recommendations for effective adoption of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria?

Research question 5 sought to determine ways through which ICT could be effectively utilized in PR practice in our country. In response, a whopping 128 (46.72%) respondents recommended the training and retraining of PR practitioners. Ikpe and Olise (2010) echo the imperativeness of regular training of PR practitioners to meet their demands, noting that regular training is the key.

However, James (2008) notes that support for upgrading skills and engaging in professional development experiences may continue to be challenging. This result is further strengthened by Breakenridge (2012) who argues that "the future of PR and communication is how you adapt and learn the new practices and how you help your peers to adapt" (p.6).

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was conducted to assess the effect of information and communication technology on public relations practice in Nigeria. The survey method of research was adopted for the study. The findings reached showed that, the level of usage of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria is low; ICT has improved organizations' relationship with their publics, as there are more platforms for interaction and socialization; and that knowledge gap on new information and communication technology tends to be the greatest challenge in the use of ICT in PR practice. Identification of the right ICT platforms was an effective way to utilize ICT in order to achieve set PR goals. Training and retraining of PR practitioners was, therefore, recommended for the adoption of ICT in PR practice in Nigeria.

In view of the findings, the following conclusions are hereby reached.

Despite the huge potentials of ICT in reaching out to organization's publics, a number of public relations practitioners are still reluctant to opt for the new order. This is disturbing, especially against the backdrop of the fact that the terrain of public relations practice is also shifting with new media bringing about substantial increases in stakeholders strength through facilitating communication within stakeholders and between different stakeholder groups (Van der Merwe, Pitt and Abratt, 2005).

Similarly, ICT is taking a positive toll on organizations' quest to meet the needs of ever-demanding publics. In the wake of democratized content and businesses satisfying the needs of the digitally connected consumer, PR had to evolve with a new approach (Breakenridge, 2002).

Again, the issue of knowledge gap on ICT tends to place most PR practitioners way below par compared to their counterparts elsewhere. The imperativeness of adjusting and acquiring the needed skills in this ever competitive terrain, cannot be underestimated.

Beyond, the medium absolute, dexterity and finesse is required by the PR practitioner to be able to identify the right ICT platforms to reach out to target publics. The world is getting digitalized but generally less developed countries (LDCs) like Nigeria have low level of technology of penetration. Looking out for the right medium would make the use of ICT effective in Nigeria.

Most PR practitioners are reluctant to change their mindset to accommodate new trends in the practice. To be on top of the game in the PR industry, training and retraining of practitioners is necessary.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the conclusions reached, the following recommendations are here put forward.

1. Frantic efforts must be made by organizations to maximize the latent potentials of ICT, especially in their quest to create goodwill.
2. As public relations practice in the twenty-first century is evolving, practitioners cannot afford to be eclipsed, hence they need to blend with the times. This therefore requires training on ICT and other technical skills to meet the demands.
3. The need for funding of the PR department must be a top priority for organizations. Beyond the traditional press agency is the urgency for PR practitioners to not only socialize with their publics but also provide timely information to check against misinformation and speculation.
4. Since there are concerns on penetration of new information and communication technologies (NICTs), PR officers must continue to harness relevant ICT platforms to reach out to the publics. Creation of websites, facebook, twitter accounts etc could help them reach a vast majority of target publics.
5. Proper funding of the public relations department is key, since money is required to carry out most PR activities. In fact, an organization's continued presence on the Internet requires money, even designing and maintaining a website does. Regular funding must be made available to make the PR officer's job easier and result-oriented.

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