The perceived value of internal communication within Local Government

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The aim of the research was to establish the perceived value of internal communication within local government and identify how perception and external influences will affect job opportunities and the development of internal communications within local government in the next 5 years. In addition to communicators working within local government the research findings will be of interest to local government managers and also managers and communicators outside of the sector.

The value of internal communication to any organisation is something which is difficult to measure. However, understanding the value which the principal holds within an organisation can allow direct changes to be made to improve internal communication and allow it to be implemented as a strategic tool to further an organisational growth.

There were a number of areas identified within the findings as having a significant effect on the value of internal communication in local government, with the main one being management recognition.

Government initiatives were also viewed as significant to the perception of internal communication. CPA was viewed by all respondents as having the most direct and long term impact on development of internal communications and also that the effect Best Value had had was minimal, indirect and even then only short term.

Although from the outset of the research it appeared that the development of any local government department is ultimately controlled by central government, a view which was reiterated by respondents, current perceptions exist that the recognition of the value of internal communication no longer has to be reinforced by central government because managers on their own have recognised that internal communication is imperative to build a successful council, and as such have built up a strong commitment to developing the function long term.
1.0 Introduction

Internal communication is the communication which takes place within an organisation and focuses on communicating with and informing those publics inside the organisation, such as employees. Internal communications tactics are more internally based and include tools such as employee newsletters, the intranet (internal internet), organisation of team briefings and other communications which take place within the organisation. (See Appendix A for a full list of internal communications tactics)

According to Mounter ((2004) cited in Gregory 2004) Internal communication used to be the poor relation of a business, however now successful businesses know that they need effective internal communication to align employees with company goals. Internal communication is as much a tool as financial analysis. Internal communication is not a soft issue it has a proved impact on performance.

Mounter (2004) identifies communication as the link between an organisation’s compelling need for change and an employee’s compelling need for security and notes the growth of internal communications down to the fact that

“The average employee expects more than a pay cheque from his or her employer. Companies need to engage their employees in
improving the business. A properly planned and executed communication strategy motivates employees. It is the corporate glue that helps build teams, reinforces pride in working for a company and encourages people to work that bit harder to beat the competition.”

Mounter 2004 (cited in Gregory 2004)

Internal communication is viewed by many as an area of public relations and as reflected through the increase in the practice of internal communication, the role and perceived value of Public Relations has also been developing since the mid 1970’s. Lancaster (2005) states that a key factor of this growth is recognition by managers of the importance of creating and maintaining ‘relationships’ with a wide range of people and groups. If, as Lancaster (2005) implies that communication ‘exists’ by an organisation simply carrying out its day to day operations, then they necessarily communicate certain messages to those who interact with the organisation, who will then form perceptions about the organisation itself and its activities.

In 1996 it was predicted that the internal communication function would grow in numbers, resources and status and would become more strategic in its practice. “Internal communications practitioners reported that on average, their work was becoming increasingly more strategic and that they work more closely with the business and have a clearer idea of their roles and priorities than they did in the previous three years.” (Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001)) Changes
acknowledged by respondents of a Business Intelligence survey (Gatley, and Clutterbuck 1996), were that senior management were increasingly recognising the value of internal communication, and it is this recognition which forms the initial grounding for the research topic.

Although Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001) outlined a number of significant changes within internal communication, identified through the responses given to the 1996 questionnaire, their findings do not distinguish between changes in internal communication in local government and those in internal communication in private sector organisations. Lucas (quoted in Evans and Inman 2002) indicates that even before we look at how internal communication roles are affected by perception, overall perceptions that exist within the public sector should be acknowledged as they too will affect job opportunities within the public sector as a whole, not just those within local government communication.

To reinforce this it is important to recognise that the constraints and pressures affecting the perceptions of those in public sector communication are different to those of their equivalents in private sector. And there will also be variation between organisations within the same sector. The factors affecting communication professionals within local government will be different to those in the NHS or police even though they are all part of the public sector.

As part of the public sector, local government is subject to the initiatives and assessments introduced by central government.
“Today’s 21st century council is scrutinised, assessed and inspected on an almost daily basis. In 2002 the government published a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of county, unitary and metropolitan councils. CPA’s were carried out on the behalf of the Government by the Audit Commission and rated councils as excellent, good, fair, week or poor. Whether they liked it or not, councils were in a league table.”

(Evans and Welham 2004)

Evans and Welham (2004) state that one of the criteria used to judge councils is their standing with the public and key partner organisations. It is widely acknowledged that communication plays an important part in perception of a council and therefore in its overall rating. Never before has communication been so much at the centre of what councils do and how they think. A review of the structure of local government in the late 1990’s increased the number of unitary authorities, especially in the cities. Despite this there are still several layers of local government: Metropolitan authorities, Unitary councils, County councils, District councils and Parish and town councils.

Councils have to communicate a complex variety of messages to a number of different audiences. Due to the increase in communication within local government, the creation of a communications consultation industry with surveys, sampling and focus groups abounding. Good councils use this information as a basis for policy development. (Evans and Welham 2004) They also found that the nature of
democracy means that local authorities can simultaneously work with or oppose central government. The two spheres of government are closely inter-linked and they are likely to remain so, as long as local government funding relies on the central exchequer so heavily and the implementation of government policy implies a key role for local government’s services.

Rose and Lawton (1999) recognise the audit commission as a driving force within local government change, however they focus on the changes created by and within other public service assessments, notably the move from Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT) to Best Value. CCT, introduced in the 1980’s was adapted to white collar services in the early 90’s, to increase the range of public sector services subjected to compulsory competition. Its introduction lead to increased awareness of the factors affecting performance within local government and induced further research into the root causes of the problems local government was encountering. However there were a number of flaws within the assessment and so it was decided that CCT needed to be developed and in 1997 the labour government marked a shift in policy and switched to Best Value. Best Value is implemented over several years and it rests on the assumption that local authorities can use a number of different factors to increase performance. (Rose and Lawton 1999)

“A modern council – or authority – which puts people first will seek to provide services which bear comparison with the best. Not just the best that other authorities provide but with the best that is on offer
from both the public and private sectors. Continuous improvements in both the quality and cost of service will therefore be the hallmark of a modern council, and the test of best value.”

(Rose and Lawton 1999)

Initiatives such as Best Value and the appointment of the audit commission, which provides guidelines for local authorities, have impacted on communication practices within local government but these alone can not be the drivers behind the development and increased value now placed on internal communication.

Although the tools of communication used in organisations of any sector fall under the same umbrella, there is sufficient evidence pointing towards the fact that sectors need to be clearly identified and researched separately. The research intends to gain a deeper understanding of how senior managers and communications professionals, such as those working within internal communication in local government perceive internal communication, and how strongly factors such as business strategy and government initiatives affect it. Ultimately establishing how highly the area of internal communications within local government public sector is valued would, potentially, indicate how secure employment over the next 5 years will be in the field.
1.1 Research Aim

To establish the perceived value of internal communication within local government and identify how perception and external influences will affect job opportunities and the development of internal communications within local government in the next 5 years.
1.2 Research Objectives

1. Critically analyse secondary data to determine any research gaps and gain deeper understanding of the research topic.

2. Establish and critically evaluate current perceptions of internal communication held by communications professionals working within and outside local government.

3. Critically evaluate themes in the value placed on internal communication within local government by the above and assess factors that may have influenced any changes.

4. Ascertain why current perceptions of internal communication within local government exist and identify how job opportunities within local government communication could be affected by current perceptions.

5. Critically evaluate how and to what extent central government effects the development of internal communication within local government.

6. Identify the external factors effecting the development of internal communication within local government and asses the extent to which they aid the development of local government internal communication.
2.0 Literature Review

The literature review can be separated into four interrelating areas: The growth of internal communication within local government, perception and the theories surrounding it, strategic value of internal communication and the influence of external agency. These sections were identified throughout the process of reviewing the literature and allow different theories to be compared and contrasted within a specific topic whilst allowing the broader areas to also be related back to one another.

2.1 The growth of communication within local government

Within local government, communications professionals and departments responsible for communication are now on the same level as other senior managers. (Appendix B). This indicates that the value of communication within local government has increased because these departments very rarely existed until recent years, let alone existed on the same level as other senior departments.

Communications is viewed by many as a Public Relations tactic. (Richardson (1988) Lancaster (2005)) The value of employing public relations tactics within local government is not a recent phenomenon. As Richardson (1988) identifies, “from as far back as the early 1940’s well established councils had been engaged
continuously in carefully selected aspects of public relations designed to achieve their communication objectives.” Local government has however only recently begun to acknowledge the value of internal communication as a public relations tool.

Richardson (1988) does not acknowledge internal communication in his assessment of public relations within local government. However “At the time that this text was completed in the early months of 1988 the relationships between central and local government were fast diminishing. The media constantly seized and magnified the differing views expressed by protagonists” and so the internal communication function was probably not as important to local government as it is today, because their externally perceived public image was so unstable. At the same time, in the late 1980’s, central government appointed a new body which has been accredited with inducing some of the changes which have actually lead to the increase in the perceived value of internal communication within local government today. The audit commission is an independent external agency, which regulates government practices to ensure they are providing the best service at ‘best value’. (http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

Although initiatives set by central government may focus primarily on service, due to the nature of how the public sector as a whole is funded there has to be financial restrictions to ensure they keep within their budgets. Financial control systems (FCS’s) and the relationship that they have with organisational culture are ever increasing (Goddard 1997). The values and beliefs of those working within local
government are considered central to the link between the two which reinforces the initial idea that the perceptions within local government are central to the development of internal communication and the effectiveness governmental initiatives have upon it.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in 1996 Gatley and Clutterbuck discussed the direction that they expected internal communication to follow over the coming decade. Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001) discussed the findings of the 1996 survey in relation to their own more recent research in 2001 (Appendix C). Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001) identified a number of patterns that had taken place within internal communication and at the time internal communications professionals were surveyed and a number of themes within their perceptions were identified. Vanston and Sykes (2001) also identified a number of key themes in their study however unlike Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage they only surveyed local authorities and not a mix of organisations from different sectors.

Although Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001) draw attention to a clear and significant growth in internal communication across the board, Lucas (2002) highlights the fact that existing perceptions within the public sector are not in alignment with those of the public sector and so if this idea is to be built upon then it is suggested that the findings of research into private sector communication, such as Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage's (2001), is not in alignment with that of public sector communication and as such generalisations should not be made upon. Vanston and Sykes (2001) demonstrate that Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and
Cage’s findings are however applicable to local government because 85 per cent of authorities they surveyed now have one or more (up to five) full time members of staff dedicated to the internal communications function (Appendix D)

2.2 An overview of perception and the theories surrounding it

Understanding perception is important to the research topic because it is the value of internal communication perceived by individuals that the researcher feels will affect its development in the future. Perception is the process by which individuals organise and interpret their sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment, (Robbins 2002). Understanding the cognitive processes that lead to perceptions being formed should allow the researcher to acknowledge how different factors are affecting the perception process and as a result how to then interpret them.

Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki (2002) state that perception involves a four stage information processing sequence:
Stage one Selective Attention/Comprehension. Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki argue that because an individual does not have the mental capacity to fully comprehend all the physical and social stimuli in the environment, they selectively perceive only subsets. This is where, according to Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki, attention comes in. Attention can be focused on information either from the environment or from memory. Research has shown that at this stage individuals tend to pay attention to salient stimuli which is the stimuli that stands out from its context. (Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki (2002)).

Stage two is where information is encoded, where the ‘raw’ information collected in stage one is interpreted into mental representations. To do this perceivers assign pieces of information to cognitive categories which are mental depositaries for storing information. People, events and objects are interpreted and evaluated by comparing their characteristics with information contained in a schema (plural schemata), which is mental picture or summary of a particular stimulus. Cognitive category labels are needed to make schemata meaningful. The interesting thing about the encoding process is that it can result in differing outcomes of the same person, event or object which can occur for numerous reasons such as personality differences or a person’s schemata used for interpretation containing different information. (Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki (2002))

Stage three involves the storage of information in the long term memory. Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki use the analogy that long term memory is like an apartment complex consisting of separate units connected to one another and although
different people live in each apartment they sometimes interact. Long term memory is made up of three compartments containing categories of information about events, which can be both general and specific, semantic materials, which is the general knowledge about the world, and people, with categories within this compartment containing information about a single individual or groups of people.

The fourth and final stage of the process is the retrieval and response. People retrieve information from memory when they make judgements and decisions; people’s ultimate judgements and decisions are according to Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki (2002), either based on the process of drawing on, interpreting, and integrating categorical information stored in long term memory or on retrieving a summary judgement that was already made.

Building upon the four stage information processing sequence, psychologists have identified a number of perceptual sets, in an attempt to account for perceptions which are dependant on certain factors. The factors included within a perceptual set are motivational, emotional, social and cultural. Such factors in a set have effects such as readiness, attention, selection and interpretation. Once individuals have formed a basic perceptual set, it is used as a filter that determines how new attitudes and perceptions are formed. This filter process is referred to as a frame of reference. (Bettinghaus and Cody 1994) Personality differences can, like with stage three of Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki’s (2002) information processing sequence, affect how perceptual sets are applied. Individuals with a particular
interest in a subject are likely to perceive that subject more quickly. Eriksen (cited in Dobson et al. (1981) pp 67-70)

In addition to the theories of information processing and perceptual sets, attribution theory is one of the most well known relating to perception, and particularly how people are perceived by others. Attribution theory was founded by Fritz Heider (cited in Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki (2002) p166). Heider proposed that behaviour can be attributed either to internal factors within a person or external factors within the environment. As with stage two of the information processing model, Hilton and Slugoski (1986) argue that salient stimuli are likely to be more dominant within the context of attribution theory. Another model of attribution that builds upon Heider’s is that of Weiner (cited in Buelens, Kreitner, and Kinicki (2002) p167). Weiner developed an attribution model to explain achievement behaviour and to predict subsequent changes in motivation and performance. Weiner believes that a persons’ performance of undertaking a task leads him or her to judge whether it was successful or unsuccessful and this evaluation then produces a causal analysis to determine if the performance was due to internal or external factors. Weiner argued that future performance is more uncertain when individuals attribute either their success or failure to external causes. However Anderson ((1981) cited in Schneider (1995)) proposes that perceptions are actually based on weighted averages of what we already know and that these averages tend to give negative information more weight than positive information rather than cause by the theories of attribution discussed above.
The internal and external focus that dominates Weiners’ model of attribution is contrasted by Jung’s theory (cited in Buelens, Kreitner and Kinicki, 2002) which does not acknowledge any external influences affecting the perceptual process. Jung’s theory is associated with personality, but it is important to acknowledge his work as it relates personality to the perception process. Within the context of Jung’s theory, the term cognitive style refers to the mental processes associated with how people perceive and make judgements from information. According to Jung, two dimensions influence perception and two others affect individual judgement. Perception is based on either sensation, using ones physical senses to interpret situations, or intuition, relying on past experience. In turn judgements are made by either thinking or feeling. Jung proposed that an individual’s cognitive style is determined by the pairing of ones perception and judgement tendencies. The resulting four cognitive styles are Sensation/thinking (ST), Intuition/thinking (NT), Sensation/feeling (SF), and Intuition/feeling (NF). If Jung’s theory is valid then individuals with different styles should seek different kinds of information when making a decision. (Buelens, Kreitner and Kinicki, 2002)

According to both Robbins (2002) and Schneider (1995) factors that influence perception can reside in the perceiver, in the case of the research the individual responsible for internal communication within a local government. The target: The initiative or policy which outlines new strategy for local government, and the situation: the activities of the external environment at the time the policy or initiative is introduced. Although logical in their approach and both Robbins and Schneider’s’ findings are easily applicable to a wide range of situations, they do not address
how the value of something, in the case of the research internal communication, is perceived. Value within the ideas of the researchers examined is “the mode of conduct or end state of existence that is personally or sociably preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end state of existence.” (Robbins 2002) Therefore it refers to value as something which is internal to an individual and not externally what something is perceived to be worth.

2.3 Strategic value of internal communication

Communication is an umbrella term for a great range of tools, skills and actions that enable messages to be sent and received. Within recent years, both internal and external communication has taken on a more strategic role within business. (Quirk 2000) However Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001) found that only half of the internal communications professionals they researched assessed their work against the business objectives and they argue that if internal communications professionals are to prove their strategic value to the organisation, they must find a way to measure the impact of internal communication on the bottom line.

“The problem is that too often those on the front line report that there are fatal disconnects between business strategy and the communication strategy. The real value of internal communication lies in its ability to turn strategy into action.”

Quirk (2000)
Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001) conclude from their own research and that of Gatley and Clutterbuck (1996) that the internal communication professional of 2006 will play a more strategic role within their organisation. Although research supports that this has actually occurred within internal communications in local government, it is important to recognise that this assumption was quite an easy one to be made. At the time of their prediction business as a whole was shifting towards a more strategic culture and the importance that strategy played in an organisation’s day to day practices was developing. All areas of business from finance to human resources (HR) were increasing in their strategic importance, not only internal communication as Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001) would suggest.

The forecast for 2006 was ambiguous and although the findings of both reports (Gatley and Clutterbuck (1996) and Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001)) are substantial in their volume, the forecast is not really telling us anything that wasn’t already known at the time. This is reinforced because one year prior to Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage’s research, Quirk had discussed how internal communication could be used to aid overall business strategy but that it had not developed fully. Additionally in 2001 it was found that 41% of local authorities had a written strategy for communication, with 46% planning to do this in the near future (Vanston and Sykes 2001) giving clear indication that an increase in strategy was almost inevitable in the area of internal communications. However, Vanston and Sykes’s (2001) research (Appendix D) demonstrates that not all local authorities viewed communication as a major strategic factor in building a successful council and only
36% of the councils that they surveyed had an internal communications strategy in place at that time. Additionally 76% of councils had agreed that external communication had been agreed as corporate priority, reinforcing a sound base for Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage’s (2001) predictions.

Quirk (2000), like Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001), does not differentiate between organisations or even between sectors. Quirk’s focus on internal communication strategy places great emphasis on the value of branding and how internal communication can be used to reinforce the brand and add value. Quirk’s ideas are however, more applicable to private sector organisations because although branding may be included within the strategy of local government, it is not one of the key factors affecting their success. It is not as though you choose between your local governments the way that you can choose where to buy your groceries. The publics of any local government are predetermined by the area individuals choose to live in.

As predicted both the organisational strategy of local government and the specific strategy for internal communications within local government has developed in recent years. The importance that strategy plays in the growth of the internal communications function in local government, in terms of budget and resource allocation, has not however been established. Although the internal communications function is more strategic than it has been previously whether strategy has lead, or will it lead to future growth in the area of local government internal communications, is something that was not found from existing research.
2.4 The influence of external agency

There is conflicting evidence that supports and disputes the idea that internal communication has increased in perceived value within local government. Richardson (1988) identifies external recognition by the Institute of Public Relations (IPR), which demonstrates that development of communication within the public sector is extremely important. In a more general context the IPR have introduced a public affairs strategy but within this internal communication is not identified or discussed in its own right.

“The overriding aim of our public affairs strategy is to enhance the reputation of the PR industry and ensure that professional standards are driven higher.”

(www.ipr.org.uk)

The IPR’s public affairs work covers a broad range of factors affecting PR communication within the public sector and highlights specifically local government through the introduction of their Local Government Group. The group is directed towards those who work with professional communications in local government and was identified by Richardson (1988) as significant in the future development of communication within local government.

The recognition from the Local Government Group of the developments in local government communication, in the form of their Excellence Awards (Richardson
1988) reinforces Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage’s (2001) findings that the perceived value of communication has increased. When Richardson discussed the 1986 IPR Local Government Group’s Excellence Awards, which cover a wide range of communication issues related to local government there was no recognition of the value of internal communications however there is now an award specifically for the function. (http://ipr.org.uk). The awards themselves do however demonstrate that internal communication is still not perceived as highly as external communication, a perception that is one of the most prominent that internal communications professionals would change, (Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage 2001), because “the civic newspaper and magazine categories are still the most hotly contended.” Vanston and Sykes (2001)

The recognition of the value of internal communication affects the perceived value of it by others. The highest forms of recognition within organisations are those of managers and staff, and externally it is from agencies, like the IPR stated above. Understanding management within local government is beneficial to the research because unlike some private sector organisations local government is extremely hierarchical and structured.

The change in how communication is perceived by managers is, at least in part, responsible for the growth in this area. If managers thought internal communication was invaluable to their organisation then they would have not allocated resources to it.
“A sure indication of any departments perceived value to an organisation is its budget.”

Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001)

2.5 Summary of literature

The literature reviewed has allowed the fundamental theories of each area related to the research topic to be compared and contrasted. The underlying ideas of Schneider et al have enabled a deeper understanding of how perceptions are formed and how internal factors such as personality, discussed by Jung, can be as influential on the perception process as those factors which are external. The perception individuals have about internal communication within local government will undoubtedly be affected by their experiences of the different contributing factors such as external agencies identified by Richardson (1986), government initiatives (Rose and Lawton 1999) and organisational strategy. There is however a crossover of certain internal and external factors. Perceptions of the external, such as organisational strategy, will be affected also by the internal, such as long term memory. (Jung 2002).

Although the secondary research contains numerous reports and journals researching areas within the public sector, there are comparatively very few directly relating to the research topic of local government and because local government is considerably affected by the central government in power at the time, the secondary research which does exist have depended largely on the political standpoint of the author.
Within the literature the focus of research has not been on qualitative data collection but rather the employment of large surveys that have produced only quantitative data. A large percentage of research that covers the generic areas of the research topic, such as internal communication, has deduced findings from survey based studies and has concentrated largely on the breadth of data rather than depth and although quantitative results are easy to understand the research is only able to scratch the surface of the drivers behind internal communication development. In surveys such as those carried out by Clutterbuck et al. a wide range of businesses were researched and generalisations based upon. However, such generalisations may not be applicable to that of internal communication within local government as it is so distinct.

Of the literature reviewed there is none that focuses on the value of internal communication within local government or even its value within the public sector as a whole. Nor are there any research findings on how factors, such as organisational strategy and government initiatives, have contributed to the increase in internal communications practices within local government. Perceived “value” in reference to the research title is how great a role individuals feel communication plays within the success of local government overall. Although perception theory and processes, such as Buelens, Kreitner and Kinicki’s (2002) four stage information processing sequence, can be applied to the research to determine how individuals’ perception processes could be affected, such theories do not hold any real weight when trying to establish how value is perceived by such individuals.
The demonstration of substantial substantive and contextual lacunae identifies that there is definite justification for research into this area being undertaken. Perception underpins how the different factors identified throughout the research affect the development of internal communication within local government, but there is currently no research explaining if and how they relate to one another.
3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Methodology

The researcher used the triangulation of research to ensure validity and reliability. The study consists of secondary research; such as journals, articles and books and primary research; structured in-depth interviews, allowing triangulation to occur. Triangulation is identified as employing a number of data collection methods to offer an increased chance of validity and reliability and so the data collected provides a true reflection of the subject being studied.

“The use of two or more independent sources of data or data collection methods within one study, in order to help ensure that the data is telling you what you think it is telling you”

(Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003. p.492)

The researcher has undertaken an interpretivist philosophy regarding the research topic. Interpretivism is the most appropriate philosophy as it is concerned with the attitudes and perspectives of participants and is more interested in the depth rather than the breadth of data acquired. Interpretivism acknowledges that the truth can only ever be subjective, because individuals filter their own truth and interpret this
based upon their own values and ethics (Rudolph cited in Bryman and Bell, 2003). With the collection of qualitative data the researcher has taken an inductive approach, which understands the meanings that humans attach to actions and allows theory to be built, rather than tested.

3.2 Strategy: Exploratory, descriptive and explanatory.

In the same way a researcher can employ more than one strategy it is possible to have more than one purpose for carrying out research. Exploratory studies are a valuable means for finding out “what is happening; to ask questions and to asses phenomena in a new light.” (Robson, 2002, cited in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003 p96) Flexibility of research is important in exploratory studies, a point which is reinforced by Adams and Schvaneveldt (1991) (cited in Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003) who state that flexibility does not mean absence of research direction but that the focus becomes progressively narrower as the research progresses.

According to Robson (2002) the object of descriptive research is ‘to portray an accurate profile of persons, events or situations’, something which is pivotal to the research aim of this study being achieved. Description within research should be thought of as a means to an end and not the end itself (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003 p97). This is why there is also an explanatory purpose to the research. Explanatory studies are those which establish a causal relationship between variables (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003 p97). In the case of the
research topic the variables are the perceptions of respondents, government initiatives and the relationship they have with the development of internal communication within local government.

Qualitative research in the form of structured interviews provided a deeper insight into the perceptions of managers and communications professionals, and enabled perceptions to be placed within the context of the respondent’s own value system. Within the original research proposal (Appendix G) both qualitative and quantitative methods were suggested for data collection to provide the most valid data. However the research topic has, since the proposal, evolved and is now much more focused on one specific area of communication within only local government, and not the entire public sector as this was too broad. The changes to the research topic occurred due to the findings of secondary data, outlined below, and also because the researcher felt that covering such a broad area would not allow a great depth of data to be collected. Because the content of qualitative research can be quite ambiguous coding of interview responses was employed so key themes could be systematically identified.

3.3 Secondary research

As discussed in the previous chapter there are numerous books, articles, journals and reports which were reviewed and the views of which contributed to the current understanding of the research topic. Secondary data allowed a deeper understanding into the background of the research area and the research aim and
objectives to be clearly identified. It highlighted the relevant perception theories, established the background of local government and identified how the value of internal communication has developed within it in recent years. As new themes were discovered, the literature review was amended throughout the formation of the research. Key areas acknowledged within the literature review helped to form the basis for the interviews and allowed the findings from the interviews to be compared back to those from previous research into the area, ultimately allowing any changes to be identified. Without the secondary research the primary research focus could not have been identified and as a result data collection methods employed would not have been the most appropriate for the research topic.

3.4 Limitations of secondary research

The literature review is a very time consuming process, but certainly essential to ensuring the research was structured and focused.

There were a number of limitations that were identified throughout and after the secondary data collection and analysis. Within the literature, perception theories were discussed and a number of key authors, such as Buelens, Kreitner, Kinicki, Schneider and Weiner, were identified. The theories allowed insight into how people and objects are perceived. However none of the authors included theories of how value is affected by the perception process, and particularly value which is placed externally to an individual. This did pose as a significant limitation to the
research as it is the application of perception theories that underpin the research findings.

3.5 Primary research

After a thorough in-depth analysis of the secondary research, structured in-depth interviews were identified as the most appropriate method of data collection. Not only do they fall within the interpretive philosophy but also allow respondent perceptions, the understandings of which are pivotal to achieving the research objectives, to be fully established. (A copy of the interview questions can be found in Appendix E)

3.6 Sample

It is impossible to collect or analyse all data available, due to time, budget and access restrictions and so the research used sampling methods to identify the most appropriate individuals to the research topic. The smaller number of cases for which data needs to be collected allows more time to be spent on designing the most appropriate interview questions to obtain the most reliable results.

The research objectives dictated non probability sampling as the most appropriate for the research, as in-depth research focusing on a small selection of individuals will provide an information rich study and allow a greater understanding of the research topic.
Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2003, p171) identify self-selection sampling as the most appropriate non probability sampling method for exploratory research. Self-selection occurs when you allow a case, usually an individual, to identify their desire to take part in the research. Saunders Lewis and Thornhill (2003) highlight two ways of doing this. Publicise your need for cases by advertising through appropriate media or, ask individuals to take part. And then collect data from those who respond.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2003, p176-177) acknowledge that cases that self select often do so because of their feelings or opinions about the research questions or stated objectives. Self selecting cases often consider the research topic to be of interest or consider it important and are therefore willing to spend their time on it. This was desirable to the researcher as it is the perceptions and opinions that are of interest and of use when meeting the research aim.

Although not the primary sampling method, snowball sampling also occurred within the research but only at the first level. This is because by the time it had begun the sample was already at a manageable size and so it was not necessary to continue the snowball sampling.

The sample for interviewing was identified through secondary research and is made up of individuals who are leaders and experts in the field of local government communication, a type of respondent also known as an elite individual. (Arksey and Knight (1999))
The sample included Chair of the IPR’s Local Government Group, the head of corporate communications at a metropolitan council, an IPR Local Government Group Excellence Awards judge who helped select finalist an winners of the internal communication award, a finalist of the IPR Local Government Group Excellence Award for internal communication and the managing director of a PR company that specialises in strategic communications support for the public and voluntary sector. The individuals were selected because of the insight that the researcher felt they would provide into the research topic. Within the literature the IPR’s Local Government Group was identified by Richardson (1988) as a catalyst for development of communication within local government, but as noted in the literature review Richardson does not discuss internal communication specifically. Therefore the research felt it critical to the research to collect data from at least one respondent with connections not only to the IPR but to the Local Government Group in particular. Because of snowball sampling being allowed in the research the researcher actually interviewed two individuals who work as part of the group.

The recognition of elite individuals as a type of sample lead Arksey and Knight (1999) to outline basic requirements and guidelines to ensure that research involving the participation of elite individuals is successful.

3.7 Interviews

Interviews were administered personally, unless in most of cases where this was inappropriate or inconvenient and they were then administered remotely via
telephone and in one case via email due to time restrictions on the respondents’ part.

The interviews consisted of structured questions. The questions asked to Chair of the IPR’s Local Government Group were the same as those asked in an interview with the managing director of a PR company and remained the same for all other respondents because it was viewed as imperative to get as much reliable and valid data in the time given. Interviews covered a number of respondents from different areas of research topic to give as valid and reliable result as possible.

3.8 Advantages

Interviews allowed a deeper understanding of the existing perceptions of internal communication to be gained and probing was possible where there were particular opinions or perceptions that the interviewer felt needed more research although this was also structured and kept to a minimum.

One main advantage to using telephone interviews in the research was that a wider geographical spread of respondents that could be contacted, respondents were based from Leeds to London and so it was far cheaper and quicker to conduct some interviews remotely by telephone than physically getting to interview all respondents face to face.
For personal interviews to be carried out with all respondents the interviewer would have had to spend a great deal of time and money travelling. Telephone interviews do obviously take up a reasonable amount of time however the cost of conducting an interview of this type will still be lower than a personal one.

It has been acknowledged that in personal interviews, respondents’ replies are sometimes affected by characteristics of the interviewer, such as class and ethnicity. Evidently, this gives telephone interviewing an added advantage if the interviewer would be perceived negatively by the respondent. The remoteness of the telephone interviewer removes the potential source of bias to an extent. The interviewers facial expressions cannot be seen nor can their reaction to a response and these are therefore not able to affect the answers given by respondents.

Email interviews were not desirable to the researcher from the outset of the research as they become more of a survey due to the lack of personal involvement. Because the views of each individual included in the sample were considered extremely valuable to the research it was decided that if email was the only way a respondent could give their opinions then it would be better to use email than to lose the respondent altogether.

3.9 Limitations

Any research conducted and data collected is constrained by limitations. Whether that is limitations affecting the amount of data that can physically be collected or
limitations that affect the quality of the results and, even additionally factors that limit the reliability and validity of data they all need to be acknowledged. However because research is subject to limitations the recognition of the limitations alone allows resolutions to be identified.

Because in depth interviews were identified as the most appropriate to the research this meant that from the outset the researcher had to leave a great length of time for analysis. And the analysis itself would be difficult to carry out and also to present the findings in a way that would be clear and easy for the reader to understand. Although the use of perception theory, derived from secondary research, allows speculation of why current perceptions exist, the researcher could not clearly identify one specific reason or another for why perceptions do currently exist.

For a more accurate account of the development of internal communications to be detailed the term development needs to be defined. One of the difficulties that the researcher experienced was that the term ‘development’ could be interpreted by respondents in numerous ways. The specific development of internal communications lies in two key areas. The first is the growth of resources allocated to the function, i.e. more money, more staff and making the function separate from HR. The second is the development of the practices employed within the area i.e. as staff with higher qualifications and more experience, more strategic approach, more emphasis on benchmarking and the introduction of new methods such as consultations.
Although advantages of employing remote methods of data collection were discussed previously one of the largest limitations encountered by the researcher was that the use of different methods produced substantially different amounts of data. As would be expected, the face to face interview proved to be the most useful for collecting large amounts of data, however the data collected via email was marginal in comparison.

With telephone interviews one of the main limitations was that it was not possible to use visuals to aid questions however this was resolved through all respondents being sent information via email before the interview to allow them to think about how they were going to answer. Just as telephone interviews cannot allow the respondent to see visual aids they do not allow the researcher to engage in observation either. The researcher was not in a position to respond to signs of confusion or unease of the respondents’ face when they had been asked a question.

Gregory (2004) emphasised that although telephone interviews are particularly suitable for collecting structured information there are comparatively less probing opportunities than with personally administered interviews but this was not particularly limiting to the research as the researcher acknowledged that probing should not play a great role in structured interviews anyway.

One of the limitations encountered in the first interview was the researcher’s lack of experience of conducting face to face research. Fortunately the respondent was
familiar with being interviewed and gave an extremely detailed response to all the
questions which meant that further probing was not required. Research
inexperience did not however apply to the telephone interviews as the research
had worked for a number of years in telephone based market research.

Testing, mortality and maturation limit validity of data (Saunders, Lewis and
Thornhill (2003)). The latter was particularly applicable due to the nature of
perception. If over the period of the research an event had occurred to change the
opinions of respondents the validity of the data would be seriously affected.

The affects of perception, as identified within the previous chapter, will not only
have affected how answers to the research were interpreted by the respondent but
it also needs to be taken into account how the respondents culture/subculture may
have affected their perception of the researcher and as such their perception of the
questions being asked.

3.10 Resolutions

In order to overcome the limitations which have been identified there are certain
things that the researcher acknowledged to make interviewing more successful.
The researcher viewed it as vital to remain ethical throughout this research and
therefore the research was introduced;
“Prospective respondents have to be provided with a credible rationale for the research in which they are being asked to participate!”

Bryman and Bell (2003)

The respondents needed to be made aware of why their time was being taken up and so a short rationale was read out at the beginning of the telephone interview explaining the purpose of the research and to explain who the researcher was and their motives behind contacting them.

The researcher re-assured the respondents that it was not a sales call and that the interview would be conducted under the market Research Society’s (MRS) code of conduct. For those who were contacted as a result of snowball sampling this was not applicable as they had been contacted by the previous respondent and told about the research before the researcher contacted them.

3.11 Before the interview

Before the respondents were approached to consider taking part in an interview the researcher collected bibliographical information about each. This is something which Arksey and Knight (1999) outline as imperative when contacting respondents, who they refer to as elite individuals. There are two clear advantages for the researcher from doing this the first being the researcher was able to identify the most preferable respondents in terms of their suitability and likelihood of being
able to answer the research question, and secondly when it came to the researcher actually contacting each of the respondents they would have a much better knowledge of the person they were speaking to and would also be able to build rapport much more quickly than if they were simply cold calling them to take part.

3.12 During the interview

Asking Questions

The researcher ensured that each respondent was asked exactly the same questions. It has been acknowledged that variation in the ways a question is asked is a potential source of error. (Bryman and Bell (2003)). The researcher avoided the tendency to alter questions in any way. It was imperative for the researcher to appreciate the importance of keeping to the exact wording of the questions. Experiments in question wording suggest that even small variations in wording can exert and impact on replies. Bryman and Bell (2003)

Question Order

The same concept applies to question order. Varying the order of the questions can result in certain questions being omitted. It may also infringe upon the replies the researcher receives, if some respondents have been previously asked a question that they should have been asked, where as others have not, a source of
variability in the asking of questions will have to be introduced and therefore a potential source of error. And so the order of questions within the interviews remained the same for all respondents.

**Probing**

This is a highly problematic area for structured interviews, the interview is structured for a reason and therefore additional questions are not desirable if the original question isn’t answered. An example of this would be where a recipient does not understand a question, thus they may require additional information that may be interpreted as prompting so it is essential to pre-empt any questions that may cause problems and have probes prepared.

In order to overcome probing issues, the researcher acknowledged ways to achieve a more detailed answer whilst ensuring their own views were not pushed upon the respondent. If a respondent’s answers were not detailed enough additional standardised probing questions were employed. Questions which ensured that the interviewer did not give any of their own opinions, as personal experiences and views were not drawn upon.

**Prompting**

This can occur when the interviewer suggests a possible answer to a question to the respondent. Bryman and Bell (2003) acknowledged the incorrect way to prompt
is to ask an open question and suggest possible answers to only some of the respondents. To avoid this, all respondents received the same prompt and this was by repeating the same question again. Additionally the guidelines of the market research society’s code of conduct highlight the value of not disclosing already established common themes identified by other respondents. It was important not to acknowledge to the respondents the similarities and differences of their views and other peoples, as the respondent may have changed their answers to what they think they should have been saying.

3.13 Ethical Issues

Ethics refer to the appropriateness of behaviour in relation to the rights of those who become, or are affected by, the subject of their work. Ethical issues cannot be ignored; they directly affect the integrity of any piece of research and of the disciplines that are involved. The main ethical principles to acknowledge are; harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy, and deception, Bryman and Bell (2003).

Consideration to participant privacy and confidentiality provided the backbone on which research practices were based. All data is presented anonymously and does not refer to age, gender, race or job title unless otherwise stated acceptable by the participant, however at any time the participant may change their mind and their identity be withdrawn from the analysis. This is reinforced within the 1998 Data Protection Act. It states that personal data must be accurate, adequate and
relevant, be processed fairly and lawfully and be obtained only for one or more specified purpose. Such information is not disclosed and only the researcher, participant and dissertation tutor have access to it.

Although there are disadvantages to following an ethical code of conduct it was felt that for this research data may actually benefit from anonymity being available to respondents e.g. more open and honest responses due to answers not being able to be linked back to the individual.
4.0 Findings, Analysis and Discussion

The perceptions of interview respondents should, according to perception theories identified in chapter two, be an average of the information that they have received previously, be more likely to place more emphasis on negative experiences and additionally be subjected to any one of the perceptual errors. If in the past respondents’ experiences of internal communication have been poor then the perceived value individuals have of it may be less. However this should not be taken to mean that internal communication is actually of little value but that it is perceived that way by the individual because of their previous experience.

4.1 Data reduction

Miles and Huberman (1994) break down analysis into three areas: data reduction, data display and drawing and verifying conclusions. The researcher used data reduction, (first layer coding) to condense the interview answers and (pattern coding) to identify the key themes in each which forms the basis for comparisons of the primary and secondary data and thus enabling a discussion of what was found. Following are content summaries of the responses to the interview questions asked. (A copy of the full answers respondents gave can be found in Appendix F)
1. During the period that you have worked in communication have you noticed a development in the practice of, and value placed upon, internal communication in local government?

All respondents noted that there has been quite a move towards internal communication over the past ten years, and although respondents agreed that there has always been interest in internal communication, it has in recent years gone further up the agenda in local government as a result of central government initiatives. The role of management recognition in relation to the development of internal communication was one of the rationalisations behind this question. Within the responses it was acknowledged by one respondent that although they had noticed the move of internal communication up the management agenda they felt that “this was rarely with commensurate increases in staff or revenue resources”. This indicates that this respondent assigns how strongly internal communication is valued within an organisation to the resources allocated to it, which was one of the fundamental opinions drawn from the secondary literature regarding value, “A sure indication of any departments’ perceived value to an organisation is its budget.” (Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001))

2. Do you feel that the perceived value of internal communication is a true reflection of the role that it plays within local government?

It was identified through the primary research that corporately a lot of the councils now are much more aware that internal communications is vital to building a
successful council but it is still second order priority because external communications and the relationship with the media is extremely important and therefore when it comes down to resourcing communications the resource is always going to be around the external. In terms of whether or not the perceived value of internal communication is a true reflection of the role that is actually plays within local government many of the respondents answered indirectly, however the researcher does acknowledge that the question may have been slightly ambiguous: “The assumption is that one knows what the perceived value by staff is, and again the true reflection of the role which it plays in local government.” However it was recognised that across the board the perceived value of internal communication is catching up with the perceived value of external communications and because more councils now are conducting communications audits and recruiting specialists in internal communications it should be apparent to each local authority how valuable their staff perceive internal communications to be.

3. How strongly do you agree that strategy is a key success factor of internal communication within local government?

This question brought contrasting responses and although all respondents agreed that the internal communications practice was justifiably more strategic than in previous years, “the percentage of authorities who have written/adopted a strategy has had a big rise: in the districts it was 33% in 2001 and it is now 77%, for the larger authorities it was 36% in 2002 and 72% now.” It was felt that the emphasis on organisational strategy as a whole had sometimes overridden the internal
communication focus. “Internal communication has come forward in the respect that now what we are seeing is a linking of internal communication strategy to the corporate strategy as a whole. I think the strategic side of communications has taken on a lot more emphasis.” The importance of strategy was reinforced through the recognition that “Unfortunately, most of the effort goes into the medium in use rather than at the strategic level where the likely impact on employees could influence the decisions.” However “the kind of health warning that I would give is that it is very easy to loose sight of what the organisation needs because I think a lot of the time you end up thinking “we have to do a report and it should be 70 pages and it should be in this type of language” and so you end up actually loosing touch with the staff and you loose touch with what staff feel could be done to improve the internal communications and it is the kiss of death to loose sight of your ‘customers’.”

4. How do you feel government initiatives such as Best Value, and CPA’s have affected the development of internal communication within local government, if at all?

It was a running theme throughout the views of all respondents that predictably, some initiatives have had greater effect on the development of internal communications within local government than others. CPA was viewed by all respondents as having the most direct and long term impact on development and also that the effect Best Value had had was minimal, indirect and even then only short term. “CPA has actually enabled councils to become more strategic and
therefore the internal communication strategy has become more strategic, and that’s probably a good thing.” “CPA has frequently picked up problems with internal communications, which is leading to it being addressed.” Additionally the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and Investors in People (IIP) were mentioned but this was only by one of the respondents. “There is a huge crossover between HR and internal communications and this has been recognised by IIP.” Literature relating to the subject of government initiatives and internal communication is not representative to the findings of the primary research. Best Value is the focus of researchers, such as Vanston and Sykes (2001) and Rose and Lawton (1999), but this is unjustifiably so as it was viewed by respondents as having the least impact on internal communication of all the government initiatives identified.

5. To what extent do you feel that recognition of local government communication by external agencies, such as the IPR Local Government Group’s Excellence Awards, has encouraged the growth of internal communication within local government?

Throughout the reviewing of secondary data it was identified that only Richardson (1988) and the IPR had discussed the recognition of local government communications by external agencies. Because Richardson’s research was dated the researcher felt that recognition by external agencies may have had a greater effect on the development of internal communication in more recent years. It was identified through the primary research that although the activities of external
agencies relating to local government internal communication have increased they do not have as strong an effect on its development in terms of resource allocation as other factors. This does not mean however that they do not have a positive impact on the way local government internal communications is perceived. “The local government group itself has done a huge amount to actually raise the profile of internal communication, because they have a special category in the awards [for internal communication].” However it was recognised that “Communication in councils should be developing because they are committed to it and not because they are seeking recognition from external sources.”

6. Do you feel that there is still room for development of internal communication within local government? If so, how do you expect internal communication to develop within local government over the next 5 years?

Evans and Welham (2004) recognised that good councils use consultation methods as a basis for future changes and this was reinforced through the responses to the final interview question. Development of internal communication was expected to be more focused on the practices employed within the function rather than the physical growth relating to staff and resource allocation. Room for development will depend on the individual council; the internal communication function in a council already labelled excellent will differ in focus compared to development in poor or even good councils. Mounter (2004) stated that listening is fundamental to communication and that communication is a two way process involving listening at least as much as telling. This was strongly reinforced within
the primary research and this is one of the areas of internal communication approach that is expected to develop in the future. “Its quite a new role for communications and to orchestrate a consultation, which has actually made a difference to the way in which a council is run and the communications strategy of how that is done, rather than it being all one way is actually managed to get a much more two way approach to communications in the council which is good practice.”

Additionally research undertaken by one of the respondents had shown that the government is expecting local authorities to work in partnership with each other, however “some find it difficult to make partnerships across their own organisation. This has to change.”

**Coding**

Analysis of the full text of the above summaries identified a number of first layer codes. The codes identified are ORG-STR (Organisational strategy), which was established to have a clear relationship between not only the development of internal communications practice, but also the internal communications strategy. INTCOM-STR (Internal communications strategy) was identified by all respondents either directly or indirectly, for example referring to actual strategy or the planning or measuring of internal communications. RES (Resource) refers to the budgetry allocation of resources and also the number of staff working on internal communications. And finally AGND (Agenda) which refers to the way and how
often internal communications is referred to by, or how highly it is perceived to be worth to, senior management.

Subsequent pattern codes derived from the first layer codes include DIR (Direct relationship), APP (Approach) and MAN (Management). DIR can be applied to many of the key areas that were found to have an impact on the development of internal communications within local government. It was identified by the researcher that there needed to be recognition of the strength of relationship between factors because not all factors, such as external recognition, have a strong and direct relationship to the development of internal communications. APP encompasses numerous areas highlighted by interview respondents that affect the development of internal communication is terms of how the function works. Changes in the approach to internal communications include the emphasis on ensuring that the function is two way and also the ways that professionals evaluate the functions success. MAN covers how and where management can directly result in the development internal communications.

From codes identified and used in analysis a data display network was created to demonstrate the relationships between the different factors that affect the development of internal communications within local government. Data display is particularly useful to the research, because there are a number of key factors affecting internal communication in local government and comparisons of these needed to be made in order to establish the most dominant, because clearly they are not all equal in their effect.
4.2 Data display
As shown in the data display the factors found to affect internal communications development are not only numerous but the relationships between them are complex. In relation to the literature the primary research both confirms and disputes certain areas. Because the emphasis of the research lies in the understanding and application of the different theories and models of perception the use of more than one theory at a time lead to conflicting assumptions of the reasons behind a certain perception existing.
5.0 Conclusion

In order to conclude the success of the research it is beneficial to establish whether or not the research aim and objectives were satisfied fully. This allows the researcher to discover if they have done what it is that they originally set out to do.

The aim of the research was to establish the perceived value of internal communication within local government and identify how perception and external influences will affect job opportunities and the development of internal communications within local government in the next 5 years.

Due to the nature of the sample used in the primary research the perceived value can only be that of a subgroup and not the perceived value of local government overall. As outlined in chapter three, section 3.9, preconceptions and biases are going to exist within the respondents. All had an interest in local government communication and some were clearly advocates of the employment of internal communications. From the primary research it was identifiable that the sample place great value on internal communications but they feel that although manager and other staff perceptions are increasing, their perceived value of internal communication does not yet reflect its true and potential value to local government. There was a strong feeling that internal communication will continue to develop
across the board and so there is justification to assume that there will be long term job opportunities within the area until 2010.

The research objectives are individually broken down so it can be established whether each has been fully satisfied.

1 Critically analyse secondary data to determine any research gaps and gain deeper understanding of research topic.

This objective was fully satisfied through analysing a wide range of secondary research sources including books, reports, journals, websites and articles. Because there were a number of secondary research sources that could be compared and contrasted it allowed a much more concise analysis to be undertaken and a gap was identified within the secondary research providing justification for the primary research to be undertaken.

2 Establish and critically evaluate current perceptions of internal communication held by communications professionals working within and outside local government.

This objective was fully met through primary research and the process of data reduction within the process of analysis. Primary research obviously allowed much more current perceptions to be identified than those which would have been
acknowledged through secondary research. As Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2003) identify, the maturity of data can seriously affect its validity and reliability.

3 Critically evaluate trends in the value placed on internal communication within local government by the above and assess factors that may have influenced any changes.

This objective was clearly met through comparing secondary and primary research and also specifically through the analysis of the first question asked to each interview respondent. The trends identified were that internal communication has increased in value and practice over the last ten years. With this development have come a number of other trends including local government taking on a more corporate approach and an increase in the emphasis put on the strategic value of internal communications to the wider organization as a whole. Factors identified to have influenced this are CPA and the new generation of communications professionals taking a different viewpoint of what internal communication should do and how it should be done.

4 Ascertain why current perceptions of internal communication within local government exist and identify how job opportunities within local government communication could be affected by current perceptions.

This objective was only partly met through the research. As discussed in 3.9 the use of perception theory derived from secondary research allows speculation of
why current perceptions subsist, however the researcher could not clearly identify one specific reason or another for why perceptions currently exist. However, the current perceptions of all respondents at the time of being interviewed were that there is definite room for development of internal communications from the approach of professional communicators, such as more consultation and research, to the allocation of staff and resources across the board of local authorities, indicating that there are, and will continue to be, job opportunities in the future.

5 Critically evaluate how and to what extent central government effects the development of internal communication within local government.

This objective was met through analysis of interviews and through secondary research. Four key central government initiatives were identified and were clearly distinguished in regard to their effect on the development of internal communication within local authorities. Surprisingly it wasn’t Best Value which had the greatest impact, as secondary research would have suggested, but instead CPA.

6 Identify the external factors effecting the development of internal communication within local government and asses the extent to which they aid the development of local government internal communication.

This objective was met through the primary and secondary research. External factors, such as external recognition from the IPR’s local government group which
was discussed in the interviews, was found to be minimal in the effect which it has had, or will have, on the development of internal communication in the future. Although the views of respondents were varied regarding external recognition, notably down to their professional standpoint on the IPR, all respondents viewed other factors as more instrumental to the development.

**General conclusions**

There are other factors that affect the development of internal communication that were not explicit within existing literature or made explicit within the research aim and objectives. Although management was identified by a number of authors, such as Clutterbuck, Kernaghan and Cage (2001) and Lancaster (2005), as a contributing factor to the development of internal communication, it was not made apparent how large the role managers actually have within internal communication development is. “According to MORI managers communicating in a team setting is the most trusted medium [of internal communication]. Yet few are being clear about how they might appraise their management on their ability to do more than present.” It is the communication by management that links the different factors which contribute to the development of internal communication within local government. Organisational strategy leads to greater strategic focus of internal communications which in turn allows communications professionals to develop and refine their practices. The professionals responsible for internal communications can only develop the function if their managers accept that this is necessary to build a successful council.
Although from the outset of the research it appeared that the development of any local government department is ultimately controlled by central government, a view which was reiterated throughout the primary research, “to some extent councils need almost that stick waved over them which is to say “you've got to do it,” because otherwise resources won’t be made available”, and one which is to an extent always going to be true. Current perceptions exist that the recognition of the value of internal communication no longer has to be reinforced by central government because managers on their own have recognised that internal communication is imperative to build a successful council, and as such have built up a strong commitment to developing the function long term.

**Recommendations**

Because the research did not focus on a single organisation it is not possible to make specific recommendations based on the research findings. Even from the sample used to collect primary research it was clear that perceptions differ between even the different types of local authorities that currently make up local government.

**Reflections**

The research topic was one which was unfamiliar to the researcher. There was no background in local government or even strong ties to the public sector as a whole. After conducting the research it is if felt that the focus could have been narrower
and could, for example, have only looked at how strongly one factor such as central government initiatives, have affected the development of internal communication over the last ten years. Alternatively the research could have focused more on how effective particular internal communications methods are within local government.

It is felt that even on reflection interviews were the most appropriate form of data collection to gather the primary research. However due to time restrictions it was not possible to conduct all interviews via the same method and because there was inconsistency in the approach the depth of data produced by each method varied greatly.

The researcher has not only learnt about the research process and how the current perceptions surrounding internal communication in local government expect it to develop in the future, but that internal communication within local government is an area that offers the people working within it the opportunity to influence that development. As a PR student a great deal of previous work experience and education has focused on external communication and media relations and the measurement of such methods. However now knowing that the success of external communications lies heavily on the successful execution of strategic internal communications it is this area that is now much more appealing when considering employment after graduation.