

COMPETENCIES OF HR PROFESSIONALS: A STUDY ON THE HR COMPETENCIES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS¹

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ABSTRACT

The changes in HR operations changed the expectations from an HR professionals in the last decades. Today businesses need HR managers and professionals who can contribute strategically to the organization. As a result of these developments competencies are becoming more important in the selection process of new employees. The purpose of this research is to examine existing literature concerning HR competencies and to shed light on what competencies university students on the way to becoming HR professionals have. Also analyzing the perceptions of university students regarding HR competencies and the contribution of education. Additionally the relationship between competency level and gpa is tested. With this goal in mind a survey is conducted on 301 students of Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Biga Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences and the gathered data is analyzed. Via analysis 8 dimensions of competencies (credible activist, strategic manager, change manager, culture and structure architect, business knowledge, innovator, HRM specialist, manager and leader) is found. Also the data showed statistically significant differences between education contribution and competencies. No relationship between competencies and gpa is found.

Keywords: Competency, HR competencies, human resources management

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1. INTRODUCTION

Human resources (HR) professionals are employees who specialize in human resources functions (job analysis, employee search, career management e.t.c.) and get paid for these services. The importance of their competencies becomes more apparent in the success of HR operations. In other words HR professionals' high performance depends on the competencies they have. In this context the purpose of the study is exploring the competencies HR professionals should have and determining the competency level of university students and its relationship with students' demographic characteristics.

2. THEORITICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Competency Concept

The concept of competency especially became important in the HR field in the last decade (Çetinkaya 2009). There is a rich literature on managerial competencies and the interest towards the concept is increasing everyday (Boyatzis 1982; Spencer and Spencer 1993). Competency is defined as necessary information, skills, ability and individual characteristics to do a job successfully (Rycus and Hughes, 2000, Swanson and Holdton, 2001; Ulrich, Brockbank, Yeung and Dale, 2006; Konan, 2010). However it would be a mistake to conceptualize competency as the sum of one or two of these components. Competency should be perceived as the synthesis of these components. The importance of these components varies depending on the competency. (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005).

Competency models are about information, skills, abilities and individual characteristics required for high performance. The groups composed of competencies are defined as competency models. However it should be noted that, just like competencies, competency models are more than just the listing of their components (competencies). They are the synthesis of competencies (Campion, Fink, Ruggeberg, Carr, Phillips, Odman 2011)

Competencies are used in HRM via competency models. A synthesis of the necessary competencies to finish a task successfully are created and expected behaviors from individuals on different levels of management are specified depending on the competency. This means the the behaviors reflecting information, skills, abilities and characteristics are specified as clearly as possible via competency models. Competency models can be made for individuals, teams or organizations (Dede, 2007).

The competencies of HR professionals are the competencies required for success and high performance expected from professionals who are working in the HR department designing and applying HR functions on a regular basis. The importance of competencies can be seen when the outcome or output is different even if a task or job is done with the same procedures by different individuals. The cause of this difference are the difference in competencies in these individuals (Ünal, 2010).

2.2. Past Researches On Competencies

Competencies are the subject of many researches related to HR. These researches can be divided into two categories. The first group of researches are the ones focused on the competencies of HR managers. The works of Vicere (1987), Dyer (1999), Jackson and Schuler (2003) are noteworthy in this group.

Vicere (1987) tries to detect the competencies of HR managers required for success and the importance of these competencies by the perspective of managers in different

departments. With this goal Vicere (1987) analyzed the degree of comprehension of organizations' business and strategy by HR managers also the success rate of HR methods and techniques compatible with organizational needs. Vicere (1987) specifies the competencies of HR managers as strategic management, business knowledge, inner consulting in the organization, technical expertise in HRM, HR planning, design and application of HR programs and management and leadership (Vicere, 1987). Dyer (1999) specifies the competencies of HR managers capability to be business partners with other units in the organization, technical competencies on HR functions, technical competencies on organizational development and organizational change competency. Jackson and Schuler (2003) specifies the competencies of HR managers as strategic management, management and leadership innovation, change and information management, professional and technical expertise.

The second group of researches are the ones those focused on all the HR professionals including the managers. The works of Lawson and Limbrick (1996), Heneman (1999), Hunter (1999) Schoonver (2003), McEvoy, Hayton, Warnick, Mumford, Hanks, Blahna (2005), Ramlall (2006), Ulrich, Allen, Brockbank, Younger, Nyman (2012) are noteworthy in this group.

Lawson and Limbrick (1996) interviewed 23 CEOs and specified the competencies of HR professionals as interpersonal relationship, proactive decision making, innovative thinking, HR knowledge, business knowledge, leadership and planning, initiative, intuition, belligerence, utilizing, adaptation, change focus, intellectual independency, availability and general business skills.

Heneman (1999) states HR professionals need both analytic and social competencies to create value in the organization. Analytic competencies are related to data mining, analysis and interpretation of results whereas social competencies are related to leadership. Heneman (1999) emphasizes both competencies are required for success and they should not be thought apart.

Hunter (1999) suggests that HR field is very different from its past. According to Hunter (1999) the competencies of HR professionals necessary to provide consultancy to management are technical knowledge about HR applications and processes, process design, competency identification and training design, relationship and communication management, business knowledge, strategic skills, cultural change and institutional change management (Hunter, 1999)

Apart from these the research of Giannantonio and Hurley (2002) asks managers what are expected of new graduates who are going to work in HR departments. The research suggests that new graduates who want to be HR professionals should have competencies related to active listening, social, leadership, customer service, conceptualization, organizational dynamics, decision-making, adaptation, analytic, verbal skills (Giannantonio and Hurley, 2002).

Schoonover research (2003) specifies the competencies expected of HR professionals as work ethics implementation and organization, legal counseling, customer focus, mentoring and consultancy, ability management, technological expertise, salesman management, information management, virtual team work, evaluation and measurement skills, employee supporter.

McEvoy *et. al.* (2005) groups the competencies of HR professionals as job commitment, adaptation and initiative, HR function expertise, change management,

organizational development, leadership, interpersonal relations, mentoring and team team skills, connecting HR and business strategies, management consultancy and seeing the big picture (McEvoy *et. al.* 2005).

Ramlall's research (2006) suggests that business knowledge, HR implementation and strategic contribution are important competencies for HR professional where as ethical standarts, credibility in the organization are somewhat less important as HR competencies.

One of the most important researches regarding competencies of HR professionals is done by RBL group (2012) The research is conducted on more than 20.000 people and has academic and institutional credibility. Brockbank and Ulrich as leaders of the research specifies 6 competencies. These competencies are strategic positioner, credible activist, capability builder, change champion, HR innovator and inventor, technology proponent (HR Competency Model, 2012).

Literature review shows that there is a rich body of literature concerning HR competencies. Some of these researches focuses on competencies and some of them examines the competency models. After reviewing the literature 10 competencies are determined. These are credible activist, strategic manager, change manager, culture and structure architect, business knowledge, innovator, HRM specialist, HR planner and operator, manager and leader, technology advocate in this research.

2.3. Competencies Of HR Professionals

2.3.1. Credible Activist

Credible activist competency is defined as being able to build strong interpersonal relationship and taking initiative in the organization (Ulrich *et. al.* 2009).

2.3.2. Strategic Manager

Strategic manager competency is about culture management and easing the way to change but most importantly being able to contribute to strategic decision making process. Also keeping up with the developments in the market is an important part of this competency (Ulrich and Brockbank 2005).

2.3.3. Change Manager

Change manager competency can be defined as managing the implementation of change and serving as a consultant to upper management change (Güleş and Burgess, 2000; Brockbank and Ulrich, 2002).

2.3.4. Culture and Structure Architect

Culture architect competency is about preeserving present culture and helping develop a new culture which will result in high organizational performance (Ulrich *et. al.* 2009). Structure architect competency is about defining organizational talents and creating, evaluation and running an organizational structure which will result in high performance and success (Brockbank *et. al.* 2012).

2.3.5. Business Knowledge

Business knowledge competency can be defined as having expert knowledge about business functions, customer need and expectations, competitors, financial situation of the organization (Yeung, Brockbank and Ulrich, 1994)

2.3.6. Innovator

Innovator competency is about creating new opportunities for future and easing the way to growth of the organization instead of staying dependent on past successes (Ulrich *et. al.* 2009).

2.3.7. HRM Specialist

HRM specialist competency can be defined as having expert knowledge about HR functions and experience as a technical HR professional. Employee selection, training design, legal expertise, compensation can be listed as examples to these functions (Dyer 1999; Cascio, 2005).

2.3.8. HR Planner and Operator

HR Planner and operator competency is about predicting future problems, reacting to sectoral or organizational changes with HR planning, developing and implementing plans and programs compatible with organizational goals. (Vicere, 1987).

2.3.9. Manager And Leader

Management and leadership competency can be defined as selecting the best employees available, developing the workforce, good relationships and effective communication with subordinates and employees (Vicere, 1987).

2.3.10. Technology Advocate

Technology advocate competency can be defined using the best methods technology made available and increasing the communication in the organization by utilizing social media (Schramm, 2006; Ulrich and Brockbank, 2012).

3. RESEARCH MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses tested in the research are stated below:

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between competencies and gpa.

Hypothesis 1a: There is a statistically significant relationship between credible activist competency and gpa.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a statistically significant relationship between strategic manager competency and gpa.

Hypothesis 1c: There is a statistically significant relationship between change manager competency and gpa.

Hypothesis 1d: There is a statistically significant relationship between culture and structure architect competency and gpa.

Hypothesis 1e: There is a statistically significant relationship between business knowledge competency and gpa.

Hypothesis 1f: There is a statistically significant relationship between innovator competency and gpa.

Hypothesis 1g: There is a statistically significant relationship between hrm specialist competency and gpa.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a statistically significant relationship between manager and leader competency and gpa.

4. DATA COLLECTION

Survey is used a data collection tool in the research. After an extensive literature review the competencies that are used in the study are determined. Survey is composed of two parts. First part retains questions concerning competencies and contribution of education. Second part retain demographic questions, gpa and program.

The scales of Vicere (1987) and Ulrich *et. al.* (2012) are used to form the scale of this study. Items 6-10, 12-15, 18-19, 20-26, 28-46 and 50 are from the research of Vicere (1987) and Items used in the study are from Vicere (1987) and items 1-5, 11, 16-17, 27, 47-49 are from the research of Ulrich *et. al.* (2012).

5 pointed likert scale is used in the study. After a pilot study the survey is conducted on 301 students.

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

After the data collection, data is analysed via SPSS program. Analysis includes demographic frequencies, factor analysis, descriptive statistics and a regression analysis to test the hypotheses. Pilot study resulted in 8 dimensions and hypotheses regarding 2 old dimensions are discarded as a result of this finding.

5.1. Demographics

158 of the participants (52,5%) are female and 143 of the participants (47,5%) are male. While 58,1% state that they took HR education 41,9% state they didn't take HR as a class. 76,4% of the participants state that they are considering HR as a career.

5.2. Reliability and Factor Analysis

The survey used in the study is subjected to factor analysis. Best factor structure is reached via varimax transformation. To get this structure 3 items which have low factor values are discarded. Analysis resulted in 8 factors and the total variance explained by these factors is 57,56%. The table below presents all the items in a descending factor order.

HR planner and operator dimension and HRM specialist dimension combined as one dimension. Also technology advocate dimension and manager and leader dimension also combined as one dimension as a result of the analysis.

Reliability of the scale used in the study is measured by Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient. As it can be seen in Table 1 coefficient values for scales are found between 0,635 and 0,905 and as a result it can be said that the scales used in the study are reliable.

Table 1. Reliability and Factor Analysis

Items	Factor Loads	Cronbach Alpha
Credible Activist		0,789
Forming effective relationship (2)	,729	
Having strong communication skills (3)	,721	
Getting successful results (1)	,622	
Self-analysis and self-development (4)	,622	
Holding promises in the given time (5)	,578	
Strategic Manager		0,754
Desire to know the strategies of organization (8)	,646	
Awareness of the requirement compatibility between HR strategy and organization mission, and working towards this objective (10)	,578	
Perceiving the vision, mission and goals of the organization in a holistic view (7)	,489	
Being able to predict present and future HR needs (9)	,462	
Being able to do a SWOT analysis of the organization (6)	,469	
Change Manager		0,813
Being able detect key individuals regarding organizational change and informing top management on these individuals (13)	,677	
Supporting HR applications and policies that are helping organizational change (12)	,620	
Trying to start change in the organization (11)	,591	
Designing and evaluating effective communication methods regarding change (15)	,553	
Detecting the resistance to change and offering solutions (14)	,459	
Culture And Structure Architect		0,635
Monitoring HR projects and programs and evaluating success and performance (39)	,671	
Evaluating the present culture and desired culture regarding vision, mission and goals and finding the necessary differences (18)	,440	
Helping shared values to have a positive effect in the workplace (16)	,417	
Believing in the harmony of strategy, operations and behaviors in the organization and working towards this end (17)	,404	
Business Knowledge		0,811
Being able to analyse financial statements regarding the organization (20)	,715	
Having knowledge about all the functions of organizations (production, marketing, finance) (21)	,706	
Being able to calculate the financial outcomes of HR plans and operations (22)	,685	
Evaluating the importance of organizational functions regarding survival and being able to make suggestions about HR departments' provision of resources towards these functions (23)	,586	
Innovator		0,822
Keeping up to date with latest developments in legislation regarding HRM (24)	,722	

Keeping up to date with new and successful theories, trends, developments and applications in HR field and making suggestions in the organization (25)	,666	
Supporting modern and creative approaches in HR planning and operations (26)	,538	
Being able to analyze present HR planning and optimizing the workforce (27)	,523	
HRM Specialist		0,905
Being able to design systems to make the workplace better (32)	,685	
Being able to design compensation systems compatible with vision, mission and goals of the organization (30)	,653	
Being able to evaluate the use and costs of alternative HR projects (37)	,651	
Being able to design and develop effective policies and applications regarding the safety and health of the workforce (33)	,649	
Being able to design and develop career planning systems compatible with organizational and individual goals (31)	,626	
Being able to develop short term plans and programs compatible with the mission, vision and goals of HR department (36)	,616	
Keeping up with changes in work conditions and making necessary changes in HR planning and operations (35)	,608	
Being able to predict the duration of implementation of HR projects and programs (38)	,585	
Being able to design and develop performance evaluation systems compatible with the vision, mission and goals of the organization (29)	,561	
Being able to design and develop selection system that can support the current and future HR needs of the organization (28)	,484	
Being able to provide or contribute to solutions of problems (current or future) regarding HR operations (34)	,455	
Manager And Leader		0,801
Having high adaptation and reacting quickly and effectively (46)	,675	
Being able to lead individuals, explore their potentials, motivate them and guide them (43)	,672	
Being a good listener(41)	,667	
Managing the conflicts in the workplace effectively (44)	,650	
Encouraging social media tools in the workplace (48)	,633	
Having both verbal and written effective communication skills (42)	,630	
Having an effective vision (45)	,536	
Being able perform on a high level to complete the tasks given (40)	,512	
Being able to support the use of new methods and technologies in HR operations and planning (47)	,429	

5.3. Descriptive Statistics

The factor analysis shows 8 dimensions of HR competencies and the analysis is continued with descriptive analysis of these dimensions. Also t-test is used to detect statistically significant differences between competencies and the contribution of education. As it can be seen in table 2. the average of credible activist competency is 3,99 while perceived contribution of education towards this competency is 3,47. Participants rated themselves highest on this competency. Also they rated the contribution of education lower on this competency. The difference between these are statistically significant ($p=0,000$). Strategic manager competency average is 3,69 and the contribution of education is 3,59 regarding this competency. The difference is statistically significant ($p<0,05$). Change manager competency average is 3,65 and the contribution of education is 3,54 regarding this competency. The difference is statistically significant ($p<0,05$). Culture and structure architect competency average is 3,70 and the contribution of education is 3,67 regarding this competency. The difference is statistically insignificant. Business knowledge competency average is 3,54 and the contribution of education is 3,67 regarding this competency. The difference is statistically significant ($p<0,05$). Innovator competency average is 3,49 and the contribution of education is 3,64 regarding this competency. The difference is statistically significant ($p<0,01$). HRM specialist competency average is 3,50 and the contribution of education is 3,60 regarding this competency. The difference is statistically significant ($p<0,05$). Manager and leader competency average is 3,91 and the contribution of education is 3,73 regarding this competency. The difference is statistically significant ($p<0,01$).

Only in the culture/structure architect competency no significant difference between the competency and the education contribution can't be seen (3,70 and 3,67 in order). Other than this competency a significant difference can be seen between competency level and education contribution in all other 7 competencies.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Variables		Avg.	sd	t	df	Sig
Credible Activist	Competency	3,99	0,56	10,281	298	,000
	Edu. Contrubiton	3,47	0,80			
Strategic Manager	Competency	3,69	0,59	2,245	297	,026
	Edu. Contrubiton	3,59	0,73			
Change Manager	Competency	3,65	0,65	2,181	298	,030
	Edu. Contrubiton	3,54	0,80			
Culture and Structure Architect	Competency	3,70	0,64	0,496	298	,620
	Edu. Contrubiton	3,67	0,86			
Business Knowledge	Competency	3,54	0,77	-2,493	298	,013
	Edu. Contrubiton	3,67	0,84			
Innovator	Competency	3,49	0,80	-2,810	298	,005
	Edu. Contrubiton	3,64	0,84			
HRM Specialist	Competency	3,50	0,68	-2,215	298	,028
	Edu. Contrubiton	3,60	0,76			
Manager And Leader	Competency	3,91	0,62	3,027	298	,003
	Edu. Contrubiton	3,73	0,91			

5.4. Competency And GPA Regression Analysis

To test the hypotheses regression analysis is used to see if there is a relationship between gpa and HR competencies of students. As a result of the analysis no relationship between gpa and any competency dimension is found. As it can be seen in Table 3 regarding H1 no relationship can be seen between competencies and gpa.

In this context H1a, H1b, H1c, H1d, H1e, H1f, H1g, H1h are rejected.

Table 3. Competency And GPA Regression Analysis

Dependent Variables	S. Beta	t	F	Adj. R ²	p
Credible Activist	-0,062	-0,993	0,985	0,004	0,322
Strategic Manager	-0,047	-0,741	0,550	0,002	0,459
Change Manager	-,020	-,315	0,099	0,004	0,753
Culture and Structure Architect	-0,011	-0,172	0,030	0,004	0,864
Business Knowledge	-0,022	-0,346	0,120	0,003	0,730
Innovator	-0,037	-0,595	0,354	0,001	0,553
HRM Specialist	0,000	-0,013	0,000	0,000	0,990
Manager And Leader	0,019	0,307	0,094	0,004	0,759

6. DISCUSSION

Extensive research on the literature shows many competencies regarding HR and different perspectives. Trying to synthesize all these we tried an explorative factor analysis and developed a 47 item scale composed of 8 competencies. Competencies are credible activist, strategic manager, change manager, culture and structure architect, business knowledge, innovator, HRM specialist, manager and leader. This partially supports the works of Brockbank *et. al.* (2012) and Vicere (1987). Explorative factor analysis resulted in partially different dimensions regarding technology advocate and HR planner and operator. It is not surprising to see HRM specialist and HR planner and operator being perceived in the same dimension. The shift of technology advocate is also understandable because in its core it focuses on developing communication within the organization which is a very important part of being a manager and leader.

Descriptive statistics shows statistically significant differences between competencies and the contribution of education in 7 of the competency dimensions. Especially in managing and leading, students perceive education as a contribution. Additionally students believe themselves to be credible activists. As a result of these findings it can be said that the new generation of HR professionals will try to position themselves as credible activists and take the road to becoming managers and leaders of their future organizations.

After analyzing the gpa and competencies and finding no relationship between them it can be said that gpa isn't an indicator when it comes to competencies. The purpose of this analysis was to see if gpa can be used an indicator of competencies. In this context

organizations shouldn't use gpa as a variable when hiring new HR professionals. Also this result shows tells us that the education that focuses on information transaction isn't doing its job when it comes to competencies. It will be more helpful to focus on developing competencies instead of information transaction, especially in this information age where it is very easy for students to find necessary knowledge regarding technical information, regulations, legislations and policies about their careers.

One of the purposes of this research was to create a reliable scale regarding competencies and future researches can focus on the relationship between competencies and organizational outcomes and behavioral outputs within the organizations.

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