

THE COMPETENCES OF THE STUDENTS OF BUSINESS REGARDING THE PROCESS OF CREATING HUMAN RESOURCES

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Abstract:

The issue of the paper is economy and management students' competences seen in two aspects – their meaning in the future job and level gained during studies. The empirical material was gathered on the basis of research conducted in the years 2009-2010 by the method of diagnostic survey. The respondents were 5th year students of 3 higher education public institutions: The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and Technical University of Lublin.

The analysis of the study results revealed that in case of all the examined competences the students assessed significantly higher their role in their future professional career, compared to the level reached by them at university. In case of the four groups of competences distinguished for the purpose of our study the ranking of their significance at work corresponded, in students' opinion, with the ranking of the level concerning the competences acquired by them. It can be thus concluded that the respondents were acting rationally. During their study they were developing in the first place such competences which they regarded as the most vital for their future professional career.

Keywords: competences, business students, meaning of competences at work, the level of competences gained during studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the very origin of the science of economics and management researchers have been interested in the specific character of the managerial profession and managers' roles. Special attention has been paid to managerial skills. The first person to mention them was F. W. Taylor (Taylor, 1911). In a wider aspect, competences were appreciated in the works focusing on leaders' characteristics and conduct. Research devoted to such issues was done primarily in English speaking countries and it initiated a series of search for skills characterizing effective managers.

While analyzing the phenomena occurring in managerial education, it can be noticed that since the beginning of the 1990s we were frequently dealing with „managerial skills” or even individual skills, such as assertiveness or negotiations. These days a term which has become more common is the idea of competences. This does not mean, however, that skills have been forgotten as they are still regarded as the key component of competences. In our times managerial staff is expected to be characterized by something more than merely qualifications, proper educational background and experience; they are supposed to possess competences which can be understood as the total of their knowledge, skills and attitudes.

The issues discussed in the present work refer to the competences possessed by people studying economics and management, examined in two aspects: their role in students' future professional career and the level of competences achieved at university. The empirical material was collected on the basis of the studies done in the years 2009–2010 with the help of the diagnostic survey method. The studies involved the students of the fifth year at three universities in Lublin, namely Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II (the Catholic University), Maria Curie-Skłodowska University and Lublin University of Technology.

2. THE PROBLEM AND THE LITERATURE

In recent years competences have been commonly analyzed in many areas, e.g. a lot has been said about managerial competences, indispensable competences of the employees or key competences of the organization. Some chaos has been produced due to using the terms of “competences” and “skills” in a different context by some authors. This refers to both Polish and foreign publications. Among different opinions it is possible to come across adherers of equating these two notions. However, there are also researchers who treat skills as a phenomenon which is wider than competences. Yet the most popular view claims that skills make the key component of competences.

The imprecision regarding a different interpretation of the idea of “skills” may result from the following:

- different understanding of the terms “competences” and “skills” in different countries,
- the interdisciplinary character of the science of management and the influence of different currents,
- transferring scientific achievements from other countries without emphasizing clearly the roots of the discussed terms.

Although many publications referring to the issue of managerial skills reveal certain similarities concerning the presentation of individual skills, such as the skills of communication or steering a conflict etc., relatively little attention has been paid to the very essence of skills. One could have an impression that we often deal with something resembling

“a black box” called “managerial skills”. The idea of managerial skills often remains under the influence of training courses organized for companies where we have to do with skills developed in such a way that they should suit a particular situation. Such an approach is too procedural and too narrow. On the other hand, there is an approach in which managerial skills are presented as certain “natural” abilities whose manifestation is conditioned by the situation. R. L. Katz, the author of the classical classification of managerial skills warns us against understanding manager’s social skills as a kind of techniques which can be recalled from memory and applied if necessary and later they “come back” to memory.

In studies analyzing managers’ effectiveness, described by English-speaking authors primarily, the term „skills” is often accompanied by antonyms, such as managerial “abilities” and “competences”. In everyday English understanding “competence” means “the ability and skill to do what is needed” (Longman, 1989). In this case competence is equivalent to skills. On the other hand, “the ability” should be associated with “something that you are able to do” (Longman, 1989). On the basis of these definitions, it is hard to mark a distinct dividing line between these notions.

M. Dale suggests adopting the idea that „the ability” is a physical or mental quality of an individual. According to the author, the process of skill acquisition is affected by knowledge, attitudes and systems of values. The ability refers to behaviors related to performing tasks (task behavior), which may be acquired through learning and improving, through practice and consulting (Dale, 1993, p. 28). On the other hand, competence is understood in the aspect of skills. A competent manager is a person who does their work very well, possesses relevant knowledge and skills, and can use them adequately.

Many authors believe that skills are related to the effective performance of a particular activity in optimal time. So an individual can be said to have skills if the activity is performed in compliance with required standards, which does not necessarily agree with formally possessed qualifications (Creig, 1982).

The theory of skills has been developed by psychologists. A significant contribution to understanding the essence of managerial skills was made by an Oxford psychologist, M. Argyle, who developed a model of skills. The central position of the model is occupied by the idea of “skilled performance”. According to the author, acting skillfully (doing one’s job) is a result of both the aims of the work itself and the employee’s internal motivation (Argyle, 1967).

C. J. Constable believes, on the other hand, that competences are abilities to use knowledge and skills leading to playing the role of a manager effectively. Thus all managerial skills may be regarded as competences when they are used effectively (Constable, 1998). He also developed a list of abilities which are indispensable for managerial competences. They include the ability to form proper judgments, creativity, readiness to take up risk and a high level of energy.

From the point of view of pragmatics of improving managerial skills a specially valuable concept of managerial skills is that developed by K. S. Cameron and D. A. Whetten, concerning the possibility of “increasing managers’ competences in individual skills” (Whetten & Cameron & Woods, 1996). The authors present a behaviorist standpoint. According to them, abilities are different from inborn features of character (such as aggressiveness), motivation (e.g. the need to feel safe), managerial roles (e.g. supervising

others' work) and functions (e.g. planning). Abilities are something more than individual activities performed by managers, such as writing reports, and something less than repetitive actions related to performing classical managerial functions. The authors believe that it is difficult to draw a distinct line between what presents such an ability and what does not. Skills refer to cognitive knowledge and to the way of performing activities, yet they are wider than the knowledge itself. The authors claim that managerial skills include the model of a sequence of behaviors manifested towards achieving an intended result (Ibid, p. 22).

A review of the definitions suggests a dominating opinion that competences are a notion wider than skills, and the acquisition of skills is not a sufficient condition for a manager to become competent. A competent manager is a person who, due to their adequate attitude and personal qualities, will be willing and able to apply their knowledge and skills in a positive manner.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The problems discussed in the present work refer to the competences revealed by students of economics and management, analyzed in their two aspects: their role in the students' professional career and the level achieved at university.

The respondents were asked to assess 30 general competences and 10 managerial competences. The empirical study was carried out on the basis of a specially developed questionnaire.

The empirical material was collected on the basis of the studies performed in the years 2009–2010, using the method of diagnostic survey. The study included the students of the fifth year at three state universities situated in Lublin, that is:

- Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, the departments of economics, management and finance and accountancy;
- University of Technology (PL), the department of management and marketing (5th year);
- John Paul II Catholic University (KUL), the department of management.

While constructing research tools, we used the methodology applied in the project called "Tuning Educational Structures in Europe" (Gonzalez & Wagenaar, 2003), distinguishing instrumental, interpersonal and systemic competences. Due to the specific character of the university courses the questionnaire considered also managerial competences. On the basis of the construction of the Tuning tool the adopted cafeteria questions scale was from 1 (no or very insignificant meaning) to 4 (vital). The competences listed were considered in two aspects taking into account:

- the meaning they will have, according to the respondents, in their future professional career;
- the level of competences they achieved during their studies.

The questionnaire also had a demographics section including a set of independent variables characterizing the respondents, i.e. the university they were attending and their major course, their sex, age, address, mean results obtained in the final year of their study, their material and professional status and parents' educational background.

The study included the total of 292 students. After verifying the correctness of completed questionnaires, the researchers finally accepted 278 forms.

The structure of the respondents is presented in Table 1 below. The majority of the students represented the PL and UMCS (85 %). The lowest number of the respondents studied at KUL. More than 60 % of the students were female. The majority of the respondents were living permanently in urban areas (65 %). Less than 30 % of the respondents were working to earn money, and the majority of the students (64 %) defined their material status as average, and only (9 %) as difficult. While analyzing the structure of the respondents regarding their achievement at university (calculated as the arithmetic mean value of their grades from the final year), it should be noted that almost half of them (47 %) were good students with the mean result good and above.

Table 1: Respondents' structure (% , n=278)

University	
KUL	15
PL	44
UMCS	42
Sex	
F	61
M	39
Place of living	
Rural area	35
Urban area	65
Working for money	
Yes	29
No	71
Material status	
Good	27
Average	64
Difficult	9
Mean results	
up to 3.5	16
3.51-4.0	37
4.01-4.5	38
4.5 and above	9

4. RESULTS

Tables 2–5 present the results of the empirical studies. The individual tables contain arithmetic mean values calculated on the basis of respondents' individual assessment regarding the role of particular competences in their future professional career and the level of such competences that they reached at university.

Table 2: The assessment of respondents' instrumental competences

Item	Instrumental competences	Role in professional career		Level reached at university		p
		mean	rank	mean	rank	
1	Ability to analyze and synthesize	3.32	9	2.55	8	1.25E-29
2	Organizational and planning skills	3.63	1	2.70	5	7.66E-38
3	Basic general knowledge	2.87	10	2.75	3	0.080313
4	Rudiments of general knowledge in particular profession	3.34	8	2.47	9	5.41E-31
5	Using mother tongue in speech and writing	3.43	6	3.04	1	7.64E-10
6	Foreign languages	3.50	4	2.14	10	1.16E-52
7	Basic IT skills	3.40	7	2.71	4	1.9E-25
8	Ability to manage information (to find and analyze information from different sources)	3.48	5	2.96	2	2.47E-16
9	Problem solving	3.57	3	2.68	6	8.01E-36
10	Decision taking	3.59	2	2.59	7	2.25E-43

Notation: p – insignificance level ($p < 0.05$ differences statistically insignificant).

Among 10 instrumental competences important in their future professional career, the respondents attributed the greatest role to organizational and planning skills (the average of 3.63 in a 4-point scale). Lower meaning was given to decision making (3.59) and problem solving (3.57). On the other hand, the lowest score was given to basic general knowledge (2.87). The ranking of the level of competences acquired during their studies looked slightly different in respondents' self-assessment. The greatest role in this importance hierarchy was attributed to the ability of communication in speech and writing using their mother tongue (3.04), the next item was information management (2.96) and then the level of basic general knowledge which was on the lowest position considering the role in the professional career. The respondents were most sceptical about their knowledge of foreign languages (2.14) which, at the same time, they indicated as quite important in their professional career (the 4th position with the mean score of 3.5).

Table 3: The assessment of respondents' interpersonal competences

Item	Interpersonal competences	Role in professional career		Level reached at university		p
		mean	rank	mean	rank	
1	Criticism and self-criticism	2.76	6	2.43	3	1.33E-07
2	Ability to work in team	3.51	1	3.03	1	1.03E-14
3	Interpersonal skills	3.41	2	2.72	2	2.14E-24
4	Ability to work in an inter-disciplinary team	3.03	4	2.37	4	1.12E-27

5	Ability to communicate with experts in other disciplines	3.05	3	2.14	6	1.14E-36
6	Understanding diversity and cultural pluralism	2.58	7	2.17	5	1.71E-10
7	Ability to work in international environment	2.91	5	1.88	7	9.72E-40
8	Ethnic engagement	2.09	8	1.71	8	1.84E-13

Notation: p – insignificance level ($p < 0.05$ differences statistically insignificant).

The analysis performed by the authors revealed a high correlation between the hierarchies of the role and the achieved level of interpersonal competences in the respondents' assessment. And thus: the ability to work in a team was regarded as most significant at work and best developed among all the competences in this group (mean 3.51 and 3.03, respectively). The second position in both classifications was occupied by interpersonal skills (3.41 and 2.72). Definitely, the lowest meaning was attributed to ethnic engagement (8th position in both ratings, with the mean of 2.09 and 1.71, respectively). At the same time, it was observed that the level of achieved competences significantly differed from the level of the meaning attributed to them in the aspect of respondents' future jobs (Table 3).

Table 4: The assessment of respondents' systemic competences

Item	Systemic competences	Role in professional career		Level reached at university		p
		mean	rank	mean	rank	
1	Ability to use knowledge in practice	3.57	1	2.24	11	3.3E-56
2	Ability to do research	2.77	11	2.24	10	4.84E-14
3	Ability to learn	3.35	7	2.99	1	7.35E-10
4	Ability to adapt oneself to new situations	3.54	2	2.75	5	5.8E-32
5	Ability to create new concepts (creativity)	3.52	3	2.55	8	1.85E-44
6	Leader's skills	3.08	10	2.31	9	1.01E-30
7	Understanding the culture and customs in other countries	2.42	12	1.93	12	4.63E-15
8	Ability to work independently	3.51	4	2.97	2	9.41E-21
9	Developing and running projects	3.32	9	2.82	3	3.32E-13
10	Initiative and entrepreneurship	3.37	6	2.57	7	2.61E-31
11	Caring about quality	3.41	5	2.58	6	1.96E-33
12	Will to become successful	3.35	8	2.81	4	1.69E-16

Notation: p – significance level ($p < 0.05$ differences statistically significant).

The respondents who were assessing 12 systemic competences (Table 4) regarding their role in their future professional career and the degree of their realization attributed the highest position to the ability of using knowledge in practice (mean indication of 3.7). However, this particular ability was found on the 11th position when they were rating the competences achieved at university (with the mean score of 2.24). The highest position in the hierarchy of the competences acquired at university was occupied by the ability to learn (2.99). The students were unanimous in determining the last, 12th position, which was given in both ratings to understanding the culture and customs in other countries (mean scores of, respectively, 2.42 and 1.93).

Table 5: The assessment of respondents' managerial competences

Item	Managerial competences	Role in professional career		Level achieved at university		p
		mean	rank	mean	rank	
1	Managing change	2.92	9	2.23	8	3.24E-25
2	Specialist knowledge	3.49	2	2.18	9	2.19E-55
3	Knowledge concerning management	3.23	3	2.80	2	2.4E-14
4	Knowledge concerning strategic management	3.09	6	2.59	5	8.13E-16
5	Knowledge concerning managing human resources	3.09	7	2.65	3	1.12E-12
6	Knowledge of legal problems	2.86	10	2.30	6	1.54E-19
7	Knowledge of financial issues	3.21	5	2.61	4	1.14E-21
8	Knowledge of marketing	3.21	4	2.86	1	3.18E-09
9	Global thinking and action	2.97	8	2.28	7	3.28E-26
10	Professional experience	3.66	1	1.65	10	2.6E-86

Notation: p – significance level ($p < 0.05$ differences statistically insignificant).

The respondents also assessed the role and level of managerial skills. The most significant role in the context of their future work was attributed to professional experience (with the mean score of 3.66) which, however, they had hardly acquired during their studies (10th position, with the mean of 1.65).

Summing up, it should be noted that in case of all the analyzed competences the respondents gave a much higher score to their role in their future professional career, compared to the level they had reached at university.

The general character of the significance and the level of the particular groups of competences acquired by the students is presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Mean values for scores in individual groups of competences

Lp.	Type of competences	Xm	SD	V(%)	Ym	SD	V(%)
1	Instrumental competences	3.41	0.20	5.99	2.66	0.24	9.00
2	Systemic competences	3.27	0.33	10.18	2.56	0.31	12.22
3	Managerial competences	3.17	0.24	7.44	2.41	0.34	14.20
4	Interpersonal	2.92	0.42	14.53	2.31	0.40	17.42

Notation: Xm – mean score for the significance of competences in one's professional career; Ym – mean score for the level of acquired competences; SD – standard deviation; V – variation coefficient.

Analyzing the obtained empirical data, we can observe that in case of their future professional career the respondents attributed the greatest significance to instrumental competences (mean score of 3.41 in 4-point scale), followed by systemic (3.27), managerial (3.17) and interpersonal competences (2.92). The same sequence (though with much lower mean scores) was obtained in the analysis of respondents' self-assessment regarding the level of individual competences achieved by them at university.

5. SUMMARY

The analysis of the study results revealed that in case of all the examined competences the students assessed significantly higher their role in their future professional career, compared

to the level reached by them at university. In case of the four groups of competences distinguished for the purpose of our study the ranking of their significance at work corresponded, in students' opinion, with the ranking of the level concerning the competences acquired by them. It can be thus concluded that the respondents were acting rationally. During their study they were developing in the first place such competences which they regarded as the most vital for their future professional career.

The relationships between the ratings look slightly different when particular partial competences are considered. Among the total of forty competences analyzed in the study the respondents pointed to professional experience as the most vital competence in their future job. However, the students admitted that this particular competence was the least developed one during their time at university. Young people often associate professional experience merely with full-time employment related directly to their work. Taking into account the fact that the respondents were full-time students, it is hard to expect them to have this type of experience. Practice, however, may be acquired in other ways, as well, by getting a placement with a company, becoming active at the university (student self-government, sports associations, scientific societies), becoming involved in voluntary work, participating in foreign exchange programs (student exchange, placements, summer jobs). According to the experts in the job market, any form of professional activity taken up during university studies may become not only an entry in one's CV but also initiate their professional career (Kořakowski, 2010, p. 22).

The lowest positions in both ratings were taken by the competences related to working in multi-cultural teams, i.e. understanding diversity and cultural pluralism, ethnic engagement, understanding the culture and customs of other countries. This may suggest that the respondents do not intend to look for a job abroad after graduation. Yet progressing globalization of the job market has provoked a situation in which international corporations are playing an increasing role, also among the enterprises operating in Poland (Mucha-Leszko, 2003, pp. 87–89). Co-operation with people from other countries requires paying attention to cultural differences as well. Moreover, this type of organizations often require from their employees to be able to communicate using the language of the owner of the capital, and this particular competence had a rather low score among the respondents.

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