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## **COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION CURRICULUM FOR HR PROFESSIONALS**

### **Abstract**

This paper describes a competency framework for design of a competency-based curriculum for dual postgraduate HRM education at the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, within the University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius”. The competency is much more than just knowledge and skills. It involves ability to meet complex demands, by drawing and mobilizing personal traits (including abilities, values and attitudes/behaviour) in a particular context. The concept of key competencies has become a vital component in the vocabulary of educational policy-makers and reformers and the question of assessing and measuring the output of educational processes is a discussion topic that triggers keen interest all over the globe. Human resource management (HRM) must meet

higher expectations that confront contemporary organizations and the HR profession should be upgraded. HR professionals must not only observe, but also understand and adapt to the changing business conditions and business trends. HR professionals are expected to contribute by the competencies they possess. HR practices must become more integrated, aligned, and innovative. HR professionals with the right competencies will be more likely to engage employees, to serve customers, and to create intangible shareholder wealth.

**Key words:** Human Resource Management, Competency framework, HR professionals, Education curriculum.

## INTRODUCTION

Corporate restructuring, globalizing business, industrial democracy, workforce diversification and constant changes in employment/labour laws have propelled HRM as one of the pivotal areas for organizational success. Along with HRM's new strategic role (Huselid, 1995; Ulrich,) there came new role demands and requests on HR practitioners and consultants (Baill, 1999; Dyer, 1999; Hunter, 1999; Losy, 1999). As the field of HRM has generally evolved, so have the concerns of professionalism (Wiley, 1995). As noted by Wilhelm (1990), this increased focus on professionalism is well represented by the HRM professional degrees offered by many leading colleges and universities (Adler & Lawler, 1999; Brockbank, Ulrich, & Beatty, 1999; Heneman, 1999; Kaufman, 1999).

Clearly, competency models and competency-based HRM systems are at the forefront of HRM practice. Although private industry has made use of this approach, the trend has not been as widespread in educational institutions preparing HRM professionals. It is time for colleges and universities to prepare the next generation of HRM professionals in the same fashion that highly skilled HRM professionals are changing their own organizations, namely, through identification and development of critical competencies (Wooten & Elden, 2001).

Seminal efforts by Boyatzis (1982), Dubois (1993), and Spencer and Spencer (1993) have illustrated empirically sound approaches for differentiating levels of employee performance. Competency models for general management have numerous implications for the practice of HRM, specifically in the areas of recruitment, selection, performance management, job analysis and training/learning needs assessment. Use of competency models can be used to create integrated HRM systems that are clearly directed toward successful performance.

One of the first models produced was by the School of Business at the University of Michigan. The components of this model are well documented (Ulrich et al., 1989). Actually the most widely cited study of HR competencies is the work conducted by Ulrich and colleagues (1994, 1995, 1997, 2007, and 2012). In the first wave of his research, Ulrich found that technical HR skills, change agent skills, and knowledge of business were critical to success for HR professionals. The second wave added the notion that strategic knowledge and skills were critical, including areas such as: knowledge of financial management, customer demand, and external competitive threats. In the third wave of surveys, researchers added two more areas of HR competency: culture management and personal credibility. Boyatzis, Cowen, and Kolb (1995) have illustrated how a competency-based approach was used to redesign the MBA programme at the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. The effort was designed specifically to reflect

the added value of multiple stakeholders and focus on learning outcomes. Kesler (1995) also demonstrated the use of HRM competencies in redesigning roles and HRM practices in a multinational corporation. Morris (1996) illustrated how a competency model and developmental sequence successfully restructured an HR function for a telecommunications organization. Of particular importance in this case was the utilization of a partnership with line managers in the organization. Kochanski and Rose (1996) chronicled the use of competencies in the redesign of HRM practices and provided successful evidence from two multinational organizations. The McBer Company also developed a competency model for HRM managers that are composed of three general areas. As noted by Yeung (1996), these competencies involve the areas of goal and action management, interpersonal and people management, and analytical reasoning. The results of Lawson's (1990) study produced a senior-level competency model depicting the characteristics of highly effective HRM leaders. This model was "intended to define and describe prescriptively the competencies and related behaviours required by superior performers from both the Chief Executive Officers' (CEOs) and the HR practitioners' perspective" (Lawson & Limbrick, 1996). This model consists of five competency clusters. These are: goal and action management, functional and organizational leadership, influence management, business knowledge, and HR technical proficiency. Kaufman (1999) reviewed the literature of the development of the fields of industrial relations and HR and concluded that the biggest gaps between what employers want in HR graduates and what they are getting are in the areas of written and oral communication skills, leadership, negotiation skills, knowledge of organizational dynamics, and strategic understanding of HR. Summarizing key findings concerning competencies required for success in HRM, Barber (1999) concluded that university HR curricula today should include: (a) traditional HR functions, (b) change management and leadership skills (communication, negotiation, etc.), and (c) business skills (understand the language of business and be able to function as effective business partners). Furthermore, Barber suggested that the proper role of an educational institution is not to produce graduates fully qualified in each of these three areas, but rather to provide a broad-based educational foundation on which professionals continue to build through experience and training (McEvoy, Hayton, Warnick, Mumford, Hanks & Blahna, 2005).

The project "Development of key competency framework for HR professionals, as a basis for creating a dual educational system for HRM in Republic of Macedonia" was recognized as a need and a high priority by the Ministry of Education and Science of Republic of Macedonia and it received a financial support from the UNESCO 2014-2015 Participation Programme.

The project had several main aims:

- i. to identify the main competencies required from Macedonian HR professionals at the highest career level;
- ii. to create curricula of a HRM dual study programme as postgraduate studies at the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research (ISPJR), University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” based on the identified competencies as a predetermined learning outcomes;
- iii. to examine the possibilities and the capacity of introducing dual HRM studies in Republic of Macedonia.

The dual HRM educational system, based on the French model, would enable a connection between the theoretical and the practical knowledge of HRM, through a combination of academic and professional studies. The advantage of ISPJR as a scientific, research and higher education institution (which organizes HRM postgraduate studies continuously since 1991) is that besides the two components mentioned above, it easily adds the research methodology for HRM as a third component, which raises the gained competencies to the most advanced level, building capacities and skills for analysis, in order to make the most appropriate business decisions and recommendations based upon primary data.

## METHODOLOGY

Taking a competency-based approach to HR education curriculum design involves: firstly, identifying what competencies are critical to professional performance, and secondly, addressing if and how personal traits, abilities, and skills can be incorporated into an educational programme in addition to specialized HR knowledge.

Therefore, the competency framework design is based upon the DeSeCo methodological approach (Rychen & Salganik, 2002) as most suitable for identification, definition and selection of the key competencies for HR professionals at the highest career level.

In the first phase of the creation of the competency framework for HR professionals in Republic of Macedonia, a preliminary exploratory research was conducted, which consisted of a literature review of the up-to-date existing competency models for HR professionals in developed countries. In this phase, a draft HR competency framework was synthesized from the selected models: Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank & Ulrich's (2012) HR competency model, the American competency model (Society

for Human Resource Management, 2012) and the Canadian HR competency model (Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations, 2014) aiming at describing the necessary competencies for HR professionals.

In the second phase, six focus groups with HR professionals were held. The respondents (N=48) mainly came from the private sector. Representatives of the top 100 most successful companies in Republic of Macedonia were invited to participate, as well as members of the Macedonian Human Resource Association (MHRA) executive board. Selected graduated students were invited from the alumni database of ISPJR who are experienced and had worked as HR professionals at the higher career levels. HR professionals from the public sector were also invited, in order to ensure that the framework will have a universal character, i.e. to make sure if the framework could be applied in all sectors regardless of the ownership, size, location or the type of industry.

The respondents were asked to:

- ✓ point out which of the proposed competencies add greatest value to all stakeholders;
- ✓ select competencies that are necessary to them personally to successfully perform their everyday working assignments and attain maximum performance;
- ✓ answer how the competencies can be most rapidly and most effectively acquired and developed by the HR professionals; and
- ✓ assess the possibilities and the capacities of the companies to accept students-interns in their HR departments.

The third phase included two expert panel meetings in Skopje and Paris, of HRM university professors and HRM consultants from: the Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, University “Ss. Cyril and Methodius” – Skopje, Macedonia; the centre for Continuing Education within the University of Sorbonne, France; and the Bled School of Management, Slovenia. During the meetings, experiences and best practices were shared with regard to:

- ✓ the implementation of the competencies frameworks for HR professionals in the educational curricula;
- ✓ the implementation of the competencies frameworks for HR professionals in the companies; and
- ✓ the legal requirements and the regulations related to the HRM competencies.

Special attention was dedicated to the description of the procedures and the manner the dual system for HRM studies functions at the University of Sorbonne,

and about the design of its curricula. In the final phase, the findings from the previous project activities were generated and synthesized into a research report in the form of a study (Borota Popovska & Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2015) and a research paper separately.

## RESULTS

Nine competencies were identified and selected, as the most valuable and significant for the HR professionals at the highest career levels, across both – the private and the public sector and different types of industries. They are defined as the following:

1. *HR expertise* - Knowledge about the principles, experiences and the functions for effective human resource management;
2. *Mediation* - Ability to manage and facilitate the relations between the employer, the union (if there is one), the managers, the employees and all the other internal and external stakeholders, in order to enable a productive working environment, based on mutual cooperation and respect;
3. *Consultation* - Ability to give advice/guidance to all stakeholders of the organization;
4. *Leadership and direction* - Ability to lead and to contribute to the initiatives and the processes in the organization
5. *Communication* - Ability for efficient and effective exchange of information with all stakeholders;
6. *Global action* - Ability to value, understand and manage differences and diversity;
7. *Ethical practice* - Ability to integrate key values, integrity and accountability in all organizational and business practices;
8. *Knowledge of the business* - Ability to understand and apply information in order to contribute to the organization's strategic plan; and
9. *Argument-based decision making* - Ability to interpret information when making decision and recommendations for the business.

Competencies can be either technical or behavioural (Society for Human Resource Management, 2012). Technical competencies primarily reflect the knowledge-based requirements of a specific job category (e.g., HR professionals). The behavioural competencies are more general and at surface level can apply across multiple job categories. Behavioural competencies describe the specific and

observable behaviour associated with effective job performance and reflect the ways in which knowledge is applied.

More precisely, the competence *HR expertise* is an indispensable technical competence which presupposes specific knowledge, and the other competencies such as: *communication, mediation* or *ethical practice* are behavioural competencies, which are also very important for the working performance of the HR professionals but, at the same time, they are necessary and required in other job categories i.e. professions.

There is also a list of sub-competencies, which are the most important and describe each of the general competencies; and the desired behaviour at the highest level of acquisition of the competencies is furthermore described inside the competency framework (Borota Popovska & Topuzovska Latkovikj, 2015).

## CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion it is important to highlight that this competency framework represents a major step for the HR profession and the HRM education in the Republic of Macedonia. The HRM educational curricula should be developed and the dual system should be implemented successfully, as soon as possible in the near future. The ongoing self-evaluation of the study programmes and the feedback from the companies where students will have their internship, and later will be employed, as higher level HR professionals, should give us insights about the quality and the correctness of the competency framework and the directions for its revision. Indicators for each of the competencies should be also developed which will enable their measurement and assessment in the processes of recruitment and selection, training and development, and performance management/appraisal.

We hope that this paper and its findings will enrich the scientific and professional HRM literature and that it will directly and indirectly serve to: the lawmakers for higher education and the HR profession itself in the country; managers; HR professionals and the future HRM students.

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