

Identifying and Understanding HR Competencies and their Relationship to Organizational Practices

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With growing emphasis being placed on HR competencies as a means to increase HR's effectiveness, this study seeks to determine if competencies are predictive of success in the HR profession; understand how competencies vary by type of position within HR (entry level, manager, director and executives); determine if there is a relationship between specific competencies and particular responsibilities of HR professionals; and determine the relationship among education, years of HR experience, competencies, and compensation. Numerous areas are identified as gaps between competencies HR professionals should possess compared to current competencies necessary to function effectively as strategic business partners.

Researchers in the field of strategic human resource management have emphasized that human resource (HR) practices may lead to higher firm performance and be sources of sustained competitive advantages (Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). Competing in today's tumultuous global economy provides additional challenges to the HR function in creating the expected value to create and sustain competitive advantages. To function effectively, HR professionals must master the necessary competencies and that mastery of HR knowledge comes from knowing the concepts, language, logic, research, and practices of HR (Brockbank, Ulrich, & Beatty, 1999). Furthermore, mastery of abilities comes from being able to apply the knowledge to specific business settings.

Because there is an increased emphasis on HR competencies as a means to increase HR's effectiveness, this research study seeks to determine if competencies are predictive of success in the HR profession; understand how competencies vary by type of position within HR (entry level, manager, director and executives); determine if there is a relationship between specific competencies and particular responsibilities of HR professionals; and determine the relationship among education, years of HR experience, competencies, and compensation. Competence of an individual as defined by Becker, Huselid, and Ulrich (2001) is the knowledge, skills, abilities, or personality characteristics that directly influence one's performance.

Literature Review

To sustain the transformation of the HR function, HR professionals must develop and demonstrate a new set of competencies to fulfill their changing roles and responsibilities (Yeung, Woolcock, & Sullivan, 1996). In the widely cited and used "Michigan's HR Competency Research," Brockbank, Ulrich, and James (1997) identified five major competencies expected of HR professionals: strategic

contribution, personal credibility, HR delivery, business knowledge, and HR technology. Becker et al., (2001) suggested adding strategic HR performance management as a sixth competency.

According to Becker et al., (2001) the strategic performance management strategies support the notion that HR managers must think differently about HR. The core dimensions of this competency are critical casual thinking, understanding principles of good measurement, estimating causal relationships, and communicating HR strategic performance results to senior line managers. It is argued that with a stronger competency in strategic performance management, an HR professional would be better able to show correlation and causal relationships between HR systems and financial outcomes, customer value proposition, and even competitive advantages.

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the University of Michigan Business School, and the Global Consulting Alliance have developed the HR Competency Toolkit which helps HR professionals assess and improve their HR skills (Brockbank & Ulrich, 2004). This toolkit is now used by many HR professionals across the world. According to SHRM, competencies have emerged from being a specialized and narrow application to being a leading method for diagnosing, framing, and improving most aspects of HR.

Furthermore, the research by Brockbank et al. (1999) showed that HR activities positively impact business performance by approximately 10% (defined as the financial performance of the business over the last three years compared to major competitors). Strategic contribution accounts for 43 percent of HR's total impact on business performance which is almost twice the impact of any other domain. These are all reasons why competencies are being discussed by academicians and practitioners as ways of creating sustainable competitive advantages. "Today, after being hidden for a long time, the concept of competence has appeared prominently on the educational stage again" (Klink & Boon, 2002).

Many other research findings have pointed to the relationship of HR and HR competencies to increasing profitability and creating competitive advantages. Losey (1999) stated that there is an emerging group of human resource professionals who see the opportunity to turn human capital strategy into a long-term competitive advantage. He commented that in the 1990s there was a wake-up call for the human resource profession. More than ever, organizations now seek greater creativity and productivity from people. Part of the strategy in being creative and maximizing productivity is to possess the necessary competencies enabling these outcomes.

Baill (1999) emphasized that the challenge that comes with HR moving into a more critical role at the management table is that the expectations for its contributions also increase. This challenge is made even greater because the requirements are not only changing, but are also growing. In addition to traditional HR disciplines, the HR function is now looked to for expertise in designing organizations and organizational systems and for managing major changes to increase competitiveness. Such outcomes require competency in strategic contribution and ability to deliver HR services.

The increasingly global nature of competition requires that firms utilize all of their available resources in order to survive and succeed. Wright, McMahan,

McCormick, and Sherman (1998) concluded that this phenomena has resulted in an emphasis on the alignment of all functional activities of the firm (e.g., finance, marketing, operations) toward the achievement of strategic objectives. One consequence of this trend is that many have called for a new strategic role for the HR function. This role entails two major aspects. First, the HR executive should provide input into the firm's strategy to ensure that the firm has the human resource capabilities to implement new strategies. Second, the HR function needs to ensure that the HR programs and practices are in place to effectively implement the strategy.

Given this requirement, it is clear that HR professionals must be fully competent in strategy development, implementation, and evaluation. Wright, McMahan, Snell, and Gerhart (2001) found that HR professionals are not the only ones who see value in HR practices—top line-executives also believe that a number of HR activities are critical to the firm's competitive advantage.

Learning from such companies as General Electric, Starbucks, Nordstrom, Target, and 3M, respect about the companies is not how they are structured or their specific approaches to management, but instead, on their ability to innovate or to respond to changing customer needs. Such organizational capabilities are key intangible assets. You can't see or touch them, yet they can make all the difference in the world when it comes to market value. Developing the capability or having the competency to respond effectively to changing customer needs ensures survival of an organization and maintaining sustainable competitive advantages.

An approach within the strategic perspective on HRM pertains to how the overall set of HRM practices is generally associated with firm performance and competitive advantage (Ferris, Hochwarter, Buckley, Harrell-Cook, & Frink, 1999). Central here is the resource-based perspective (Barney, 1991) such that, collectively, a firm's human resources are believed to have implications for firm performance and provide a unique source of competitive advantage that is difficult to replicate (P. Wright, McMahan, & McWilliams, 1994). These findings are further supported by Hayton (2003) where he concluded that a firm's human capital is believed to be an important source of sustained competitive advantage. This is especially so for those firms operating in complex and dynamic competitive environments where the capability to rapidly acquire and assimilate new market and technological capabilities is the key to enduring advantage over competitors.

In another study, business knowledge, customer orientation, effective communication, credibility and integrity, and systemic perspective were identified as competencies corresponding to structures and needs in organizations (Yeung et al., 1996). Furthermore, revamping HR's visions, strategies, structures, systems, and processes cannot be effectively implemented if the new competencies required are not being developed. Hence, the critical need for emphasis to be placed on developing the core HR competencies in organizations.

A competency model can serve as an integrative framework for an organization's entire HR system. It can help align the HR system vertically with the organization's strategic objectives, or horizontally with other HR functions, to ensure harmony and consistency across the many facets of HR activities that impact human performance (Rothwell & Wellins, 2004).

Moreover, taking talent-management expertise forward is central to the future success of the entire HR profession (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2003). The authors reiterate that the HR profession "can evolve into a true decision science of talent and aspire to the level of influence of disciplines such as finance and marketing." To achieve such success as a profession, specific resources and capabilities of a company may be used to permanently influence its goals (Zaugg & Thom, 2003). In order for these potentials to be developed into competitive advantages, they must be scarce, valuable, and permanent. Additionally their ability to be imitated, transferred, or substituted must be limited (Wenger, 1999: 53 ff.) as cited in Zaugg & Thom (2003).

With a shifting role of HR given the changing business demands, organizations must establish new covenants with customers, manage disruptive technologies, create new forms of engagements with employees, and face scrutiny of investors who determine a firm's market value by assessing its intangibles, not just its present or past earnings (Ulrich & Beatty, 2001). Tied to the changing demands of the HR professions are the new competencies enabling HR to be effective in driving firm performance and creating sustainable competitive advantages.

This study will survey HR professionals to determine the percentage of time they spend on various activities and the extent to which they feel competent in performing these activities.

Method

The study used a cross-sectional design collecting data at one point in time rather than a longitudinal research where data are collected from a sample at different points in time in order to study changes or continuity in the sample's characteristics (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). The target population was HR professionals in the upper Midwest region of the United States. HR professionals for the purpose of this study include individuals who practice in the field of human resource management and hold full-time exempt positions.

Survey Design

Based on theories, concepts, and frameworks discussed in the literature review, the author designed a survey as the primary means of data collection for the study. The instrument included three sections. The first section sought information on the participants' position classification (job title), industry, years employed in HR, years in current position, and highest educational attainment. The second section dealt with the participant identifying the competencies, skills, and attributes that HR professionals should possess and the competencies the participants' employers emphasize in various employment practices. Compensation information was also included in this section. The third section listed 12 specific strategies and activities based on the review of literature and empirical studies (Becker & Huselid, 1998; Brockbank et al., 1999; Giannantonio & Amy, 2002). A scale of 1 – 5 was used to indicate the level of competence needed in one's job as well as the level of the

employee’s competence for the specific HR activity. A rating of 1 represented least competent and a rating of 5 represented the highest level of competence.

As a way to determine the construct validity of the instrument and to enhance its effectiveness, a pilot study of the survey was conducted on a stratified sample of 12 HR professionals including senior executives, HR managers, and HR generalists. Respondents were asked to review the instrument and provide feedback on the utility of the questions, recommend additional questions, eliminate questions, and determine if the questions collected the appropriate data needed to fulfill the purpose of the study. Items that were consistently identified by the focus group were included in the final survey.

Sample

The target population for the study was HR professionals in the upper Midwest region of the United States belonging to professional HR associations. Surveys were sent to 224 HR professionals at 66 different organizations. The 66 organizations were selected through stratified random sampling as a means to ensure population validity. The organizations represented Fortune 500 companies; other large and medium-sized companies in retail, banking and finance; state and local public agencies; and the agriculture, education, manufacturing, and transportation industries.

Given that this study utilized correlational and causal-comparative research among other statistical tools, it was imperative to include at least 30 companies in the research. Due to statistical power analysis, 224 employees from 66 companies were selected enabling higher levels of reliability, validity, and generalizability. The sample included VPs of HR, HR directors, HR managers, HR generalists, and HR specialists. The sample only included exempt level HR professionals.

Responses were received from 108 of the 224 participants for a response rate of 48%. There were three surveys that were undeliverable. As shown in Table 1, about half of the participants were in management positions and the vast majority had at least a bachelor’s degree. The average HR experience for the sample was 10.45 years.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	N	Percent
Job Category		
HR Manager	37	34.3
HR Generalist	27	25.0
HR Director	19	17.6
HR Specialist	18	16.7
VP	7	6.5
Education		
High school diploma/GED	13	12.0
Bachelor’s degree	60	55.6
Graduate degree	35	32.4

Results

HR Activities

It is important to understand the activities in which HR professionals are engaged and determine if these activities are value-added. Ulrich (1998) stated that HR cannot expand its role in an organization without the requisite expertise. Becoming a strategic partner demands a degree of knowledge about strategy, markets, and the economy. In addition Ulrich stated “to meet the increased expectations of their organizations, HR professionals must begin to act professionally. They must focus more on the deliverables of their work and less on just getting their work done. They must articulate their role in terms of the value they create. They must create mechanisms so that business results quickly follow” (p.10).

Regardless of this profound advice, HR departments in global organizations are still overwhelmingly preoccupied with transactional issues, according to a survey from Price Waterhouse's Global Human Resource Solutions. Survey respondents said that 59% of their energy was absorbed by administrative matters and only 6% was spent on strategic concerns (McShulskis, 1998).

As shown in Table 2, HR professionals spend most of their time functioning as internal consultants, staffing activities, and implementing HR strategies. On the other spectrum, the least time is spent dealing with legal issues, labor relations, and quite notably partnering with senior executives on strategy formulation.

HR scholars have continually advised that to be effective as strategic business partners, HR professionals must be able to partner with senior executives on strategy formulation. So why aren't more HR professionals spending more time on this critical activity? This study did not specifically address this question, but a comparison could be drawn between competencies performing tasks where HR professionals are spending most of their time as compared to competencies of performing tasks such as strategy formulation.

Table 2
Percentage of time spent on various HR activities

Activity	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Internal consultant	108	0	40	15.74	9.61
Staffing	106	0	90	14.40	18.27
Implementing HR strategies	108	0	45	11.00	9.90
Administrative tasks	108	0	40	9.44	9.45
Change agent	108	0	30	8.37	7.90
Designing HR strategies	108	0	40	7.69	7.62
Compensation	108	0	70	7.44	11.70
Organizational assessment	106	0	35	7.27	6.59
Partnering with senior executives on strategy formulation	108	0	25	6.16	5.80
Labor relations	108	0	25	5.24	6.48
Legal matters	108	0	15	5.06	4.73

Table 3
Percentage of HR professionals agreeing that a competency area was critical

Core Competency Area	N	Percent
Knowledge of the business	70	64.9
Strategic contribution	59	54.6
Personal credibility	38	35.2
HR delivery	65	60.2
HR technology	53	49.1
HR measurement	17	15.7

Critical HR Competencies

As Table 3 indicates, not all participants of the study agreed that the listed competencies were seen as critical to success in the HR profession. The results showed that knowledge of the business, HR delivery, and strategic contribution were viewed as the most important competencies. Quite surprisingly, especially given the emphasis on ethical standards and emphasis on gaining respect in organizations, personal credibility was cited with relatively low frequency as compared to the other measures.

Self-Ratings of Competencies

When asked if they understood the business in which they worked, 57.4% of the respondents stated a level of 4 on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 being the highest level of understanding. Another 18.5% stated that they had a perfect understanding of the business, and 24.1% evaluated themselves at either 1 or 2. More than 80% indicated a 4 or 5 level of expertise in delivering HR services with similar results for managing change.

Only 6.5% of the respondents felt that they had an extremely high level of expertise in strategic contribution whereas a majority of the respondents (74.8%) indicated an average level of expertise in this area. More than 80% indicated a relatively low level of expertise in measuring HR's efforts and showing how HR contributes to the overall bottom-line of the organization.

As shown in Table 4, participants identified their ability to deliver HR services, their technical competencies in HR, ability to manage change, self-assessment of knowledge of the business, and ability to manage an organization's culture as the highest ranked competencies. In contrast, HR professionals did not have a high expertise in accounting concepts, marketing strategies, strategic contribution, and HR metrics, and did not spend a lot of time reading journals and staying abreast with recent HR research findings.

One of the encouraging results of the study is that even though HR directors, managers, generalists, and specialists may not possess all of the competencies within one particular classification, as an HR function, the core competencies are all viewed as important and as a function HR professionals possess the competencies identified by the literature to enhance firm performance. Many have cited the new demands being placed on the HR profession (Csoka, 1995; Mohrman, Lawler, & McMahan, 1996; SHRM-Foundation, 1998).

Table 4
HR professionals ratings of their own competency levels

Competency	N	Mean	SD
Delivering HR	108	4.18	.80
Technical competence	108	4.13	.82
Managing change	108	3.95	.88
Understanding the business	108	3.87	.80
Managing the organizational culture	108	3.59	.75
Organizational development skills	108	3.39	.93
Strategic contributions	108	3.20	.96
Metrics	108	3.11	.99
Marketing	108	2.70	.91
Accounting	108	2.65	.89

The results showed that 6.5% of the sample indicated a 5-level of expertise on how to do strategic planning. Given that HR professionals are viewed or would like to be viewed in such manner, it is clear that much more emphasis has to be paid on developing this competency. Another 32% indicated a 4-level of expertise in strategic contribution. So, one possible explanation for not spending more efforts on strategic contribution might be the lack of expertise to perform this core task in organizations.

Relationship Between Specific Competencies and Success in the HR Profession

It is relatively safe to assume that the more successful one is in one's position, the higher is one's compensation. The exception would be in a union environment where pay is typically based in part on longevity and not solely on performance. As such, one of the dependent variables used in this study is annual base compensation as a measure of success in one's position. The average annual salary for HR directors was \$95,395, HR generalists had an average of \$74,075, HR specialists averaged \$55,178, and VPs of HR averaged significantly \$162,857.

As shown in Table 5, salary was significantly related to years of HR experience as well as to self-rated competency in six of the competency areas. Though the correlation between education and salary was not statistically significant, a regression analysis indicated that education was significantly related to salary after accounting for years of HR experience. Interestingly, although experience was related to self-ratings of competence in six areas, education was not related to any of the self-ratings of competence.

Discussion

Lawler and Mohrman (2003) have argued that HR professionals need to become more effective strategic business partners. Ulrich and Beaty (2001) argue further that HR professionals must transition from being strategic business partners to becoming contributors in organizations. Given that numerous studies have shown a positive relationship between strategic HRM practices and firm performance, this study sought to identify the competencies needed for HR professionals to become effective business partners and contributor in organizations.

Table 5
Correlations between experience, education, and salary and self-ratings of HR competencies

Competency	Demographic Information		
	HR Experience	Education	Salary
Delivering HR	.44	- .08	.24
Technical competence	.35	- .10	.09
Managing change	.34	- .09	.46
Understanding the business	.31	- .06	.33
Managing the organizational culture	.17	- .06	.14
Organizational development skills	-.06	.12	.09
Strategic contributions	.30	.06	.44
Metrics	.15	- .04	.13
Marketing	.19	.08	.52
Accounting	.25	- .13	.22
Demographic			
HR experience		- .06	.49
Education			.15
Salary			

Note: Correlations greater than .19 are significant at the .05 level and correlations greater than .24 are significant at the .01 level

In today's global economy, HR professionals are continuously searching for ways to be effective in creating value. Much emphasis is placed on the competencies necessary for HR to be successful in helping to create sustainable competitive advantages. Over time, many professionals have communicated the importance for HR to spend their time on issues that add value and less time on the transactional activities that are not very value-added. The results of this study have shown that there is still a significant amount of time being invested in the traditional transactional activities rather than the transformational HR activities that have been proven to be more value-added to the bottom-line of the organization.

With companies trying to be more efficient and productive, the quest for strategies, and hence competencies to execute the strategies, is of pivotal importance in creating sustainable competitive advantages. As Brockbank et al. (1997) have shown, strategic contribution, personal credibility, HR delivery, business knowledge, and HR technology are all pivotal to HR being effective business partners and players. This study enabled readers to determine the various relationships existing among the core HR strategies, factors leading to improvement in the competencies, impact of education and the competencies on compensation, and the relationship between education and the respective competencies.

The results provide a reminder to HR professionals of the value of graduate degrees and other means of developing higher levels of HR technical competence, understanding the benefits of accounting, marketing, and other different functional areas in effectively developing and implementing HR strategies. By understanding the impact of the competencies on the various organizational practices, there could be a more directed strategy in developing expertise among HR professionals, hence, a more credible and effective function.

With a growing emphasis on HR metrics, the results clearly show a lack of time and expertise on this strategy. There is clearly a need for more emphasis on measuring HR's contribution to the business strategy and the effectiveness of the respective HR strategies. The findings of this study support notions of Ramlall (2003) and Becket et al. (2001) who emphatically stated the need for metrics as a core component of the HR strategy.

Although there are many positive results for the HR profession in general from this study, there are clearly many areas that are lacking. To be a true strategic partner and player, HR professionals and other executives of organizations must focus on developing the critical competencies necessary to enhance HR effectiveness and hence maximization of shareholder value.

Implications for Practice

Given that there is a growing need for HR professionals to provide significant input into the firm's strategy, the core competency of being able to contribute strategically is lacking. Ulrich (1998) reiterated that strategic contribution accounts for a significant portion of the total impact of HR on the business performance. With a self-identified expertise mean of 3.2 for strategic contribution, HR professionals are clearly lacking in this area.

From the results, such business subject matters as accounting and marketing have proven to be key contributors to strategic contribution. A high level of HR technical competence is evident in higher levels of strategic contribution. This can frequently be obtained through formal HR education, on the job training, or through professional organizations. Regardless of the source, the data show a relatively strong correlation between HR technical competence and strategic contribution. The implication would be for HR professionals without the relevant technical competence to develop the appropriate expertise to ensure HR's contribution to business success.

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