

Job Competencies for Malaysian Managers in Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the development of core competencies required for managerial positions in higher learning institutions. Two sets of questionnaires (free-choice and forced-choice) based on competency profile that comprised 51 statements were used in this survey study. A total of 265 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents identified on the basis of purposive sampling. Analysis of findings from the survey suggested fourteen elements of core competencies identified as crucial and important for high job performance for managers. For the sake of strategic implementation, these list of competencies were clustered under the following headings: Management and Leadership Skills (4 elements); Personal Effectiveness (5 elements); Expertise and Professional Competence (5 elements). This paper also recommends that effective implementation should be followed with skills acquisition that can be in a variety of methods ranging from formal, such as training, workshops, computer-based learning, coaching and mentoring, to the informal. The informal ones can be acquired through daily job performance, experience, peer or superior mentoring. This study concludes that the practice of these competencies must be continuously reinforced in the day-to-day business process and performance management within the organization.

Key words: human capital, core competencies, Malaysian higher education, managerial job, competency development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Competency development is becoming very important due to the constant demands of global competition, global economic pressures, and the rapid change in technology and customer requirements which form part of any organizational development. Competencies, according to Abraham, Karns, Shaw, & Mena (2001) include a range of characteristics, behaviors and traits necessary for successful job performance. Managerial competencies, according to Boyatzis (1982) are the individual's characteristics that are causally related to the effective and/or superior job performance of managers.

In this context, in this ever competitive global era, organizations today need a more competent, well-trained and effectively high performance workforce. A major survey of global companies conducted by the Economic Intelligence Unit found that 61% of the respondents from the Asia-Pacific area indicated that there was a need to improve job and management competencies (Anand, 2000). Thus, many organizations have begun using competency models to help them identify the

essential skills, knowledge and personal characteristics needed for successful performance in a job to ensure that human resource systems focus on developing them (Lucia and Lepsinger, 1999). In this context, it is therefore essential for organizations, such as higher learning institutions, to develop competency models for their own workforce given the backdrop of challenges that they are now facing. Moreover, having competent people will mean they have the ability and personal attributes for effective job performance and are able to fulfill job roles and expectations.

1.1 The Need for Developing Job Competency for Higher Education Organizations

(1) Clarifying job and work expectation

By having developed a competency model, one can directly address two questions: What skills, knowledge and characteristics are required to do the job? What behaviors have the most direct impact on performance and success in the job? In the context of training and development and appraisal systems, this model of competency provides a list of behaviors and skills that must be developed to maintain satisfactory levels of performance. By clarifying performance expectations, competency models also serve the interests of individuals. Specific job requirements provide a clear understanding of what level is expected of them and this forms a guideline for the level of performance required.

(2) Hiring the right and best person

In this competitive job market, where it is getting harder and costing more to hire the appropriate person, higher learning organizations would want to make sure that human resource money is well spent. In this regard, developing competency models are seen as being a useful tool to make sure that human resource systems facilitate and support the overall corporate strategy and goals. Competency guidelines can be created for every job function. Based on these guidelines, a set of interview questions can be developed to identify whether candidates possess the necessary skills set for effective performance.

(3) Maximizing productivity

It is essential that people have the specific skills, knowledge and characteristics required to be effective and productive. To this end, by identifying relevant skills gaps, competency models help to ensure that training and development money will be spent wisely, for example, on programs that can teach crucial skills and behaviors. At the same time, competency models also allow for the development of appraisal systems that evaluate people on their use of behaviors and practices that directly contribute to competitiveness.

(4) Adapting to change

In this era of rapid change, the nature of people's jobs is often in flux and new skills may increasingly be required to take on the changing roles in an organization. Competency models, therefore, provide a tool for determining exactly what skills are required to meet the different needs of today and probably the needs of the

future.

(5) Aligning behavior with organizational strategies and values

A competency model can be an effective form of communicating to the workforce the values of senior management in the organization and what people should focus on in their own performance. It is the mission of any higher learning organization to achieve the standard of “World Class” status, in which, having a competent workforce becomes a central focus. In this respect, developing competency models is seen as timely and appropriate as an organization moves forward.

Managerial competencies could set a good foundation for an effective performance management program. Competencies required by the job and those possessed by the person performing that job should be matched, therefore, an integrated process can be introduced by linking competencies with the annual performance review program and the determination of an organization’s objectives (Abraham et al, 2001)

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This paper aims to develop a defined set of competencies for managerial jobs that seem to become more complex, as well as the changing job requirements in a higher education setting. Hence, there is a need to develop a competency-based performance that would help create a culture of high performers. Another point is that, management can define exactly what people need to bring to those jobs in order to perform them effectively. Hence, this study focuses on the following:

- (1) To identify the dominant elements of competency required so as to enable individuals to perform their work excellently.
- (2) To determine each individual job description and specification.
- (3) To propose necessary modes of training in accordance with the competency acquisition for the purpose of effective job performance.

2. WHAT IS COMPETENCY AND JOB COMPETENCY?

A simple straightforward definition for the word “competency” is: “an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance on the job” (Klemp, 1980:21). Other definitions of competency include the aptitude necessary to enhance basic abilities and to raise job performance to a higher level (Miyawaki, 1996), and a combination of a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one’s self-image or social role, or a body of relevant knowledge (Boyatzis, 1982). To this end, it can be said that competency is about individual personal characteristics, traits and motives required besides skills and knowledge for outstanding or superior work performance. The elements underlying competency as listed in the following can be depicted as different levels of an iceberg model as shown in Figure 1.

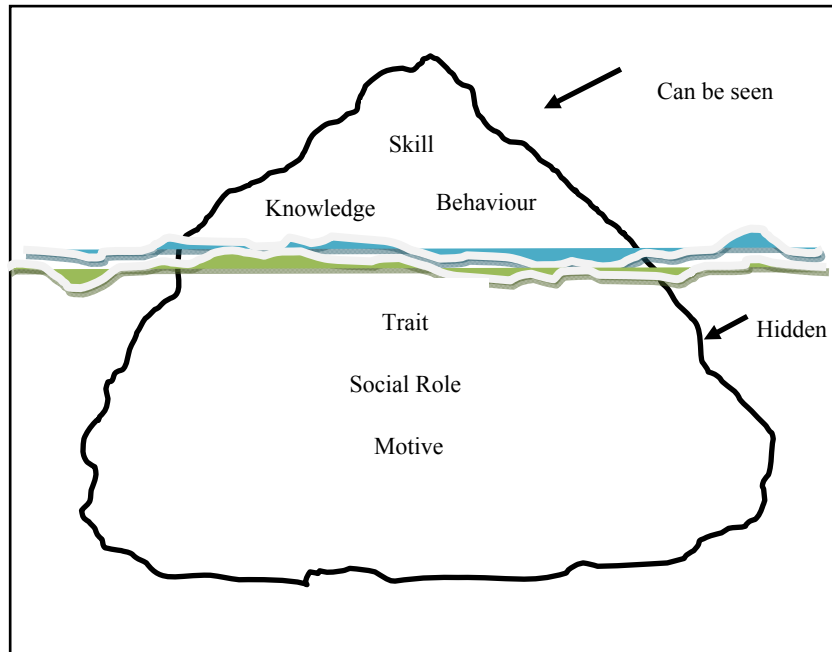


Figure 1. Iceberg Model (adapted from MIT IT Competency Model Draft, 1996)

Skill: Ability to do something well. Examples: typing, negotiation.

Knowledge: Usable information in particular area. Examples: accounting, law, reading instruction or procedures.

Behaviour: One's attitude or way of behaving. Examples: hardworking, lazy.

Social Role: The image an individual projects to others. Examples: viewing oneself as a teacher or coach.

Trait: A typical way of behaving. Examples: being a good listener or communicator.

Motive: Constant thought that can influence behavior. Examples: wanting to continuously achieve and make things better, desire to work and collaborate with others.

2.1 Competency Model

A Competency Model is a list of competencies identified as critical for the successful performance of a particular role towards organizational excellence.

Types of Competency

(1) Threshold competency

Threshold competencies are the essential characteristics required for all job

incumbents to perform the job at a minimal level of proficiency or standard. A threshold or baseline competency is the minimum skills, knowledge, abilities and personal behavior required to do a job. A marketing officer, for example, would need marketing knowledge, communication and presentation skills, listening ability, presentable self-image and computer literacy.

(2) Differentiating competency

These are competencies that distinguish superior from average performers. Differentiating competencies are competencies that managers need to perform their jobs excellently. For example, a manager should possess general competencies such as achievement orientation, pro-activity and self-confidence.

(3) Core competency

Core competencies are sometimes called “generic” competencies where they extend to all individuals in the organization. They can be applied to all positions in job functions and levels of responsibility within an organization rather than to a specific position. In other words, these are lists of competencies that belong to a particular group of people in the organization. For instance, top managers require competencies such as strategic planning and conceptual thinking, rather than communication skills and accountability which are more appropriate for middle and line managers.

(4) Professional competency

Professional competencies refer to knowledge, skills and personal attributes which an employee should have regardless of the position he/she is holding. In this context, professional competency refers to specific competencies that an individual needs, when he/she joins an organization. For example, communication skills, leadership, accountability and problem-solving skills.

2.2 Categories of Competency

2.2.1 Metamorphic competency categories

(1) Job-specific competency

Competencies associated with performing a job well. This competency is required by an individual to perform a particular duty/task or responsibility in a particular job. For example, a trainer is expected to be competent in assessing TNA, designing curriculum and delivering lectures.

(2) Relational competency

Competencies that relate to communicating with and through others at work. These are the people-related competencies required when an individual performs his/her job in an organization. Examples of these skills are communication, negotiation, coaching, counseling and collaboration with others.

(3) Personal attributes competency

Competencies intrinsic to an individual and that relate to how people think, feel, learn and develop. These competencies result from the inner drive of an

individual's behavior, motive, trait or social role. For example, integrity/honesty, drive for results, accountability, leadership etc.

The above discussions are based on the following table.

Examples of Key Competencies: The Supply Manager, Thermos King, USA.

Job-Specific	Relational	Personal Attributes
Planning/Organizing	Negotiation	Leadership
Decision-Making	Interpersonal	Professionalism
Analytical	Communication	
Technical Expertise	Teamwork	
Commodity Knowledge		

(Source: Mone and London, 1998)

2.2.2 Managerial competency

A competency model identifies and describes the skills, knowledge and personal attributes required to perform a task in an organization and is used as an HRM tool for selection, training, job appraisal and succession planning. This model also specifies the type of characteristics and behaviours required to do a job that have direct impact on job performance. Competencies enable both management and individual employees to have a clearer understanding of what is expected of them and the targets for enhancing personal development. Managers at different levels need different competencies. Figure 2 illustrates the probable competencies required by management at different levels. As managers at lower levels require basic competencies related to self-competence and interpersonal skills, top management, on the other hand, needs to develop situational as well as highly cognitive competence.

As shown in Figure 2, self-competence depicts the basic competency skills required by junior level managers. Such competency includes professional knowledge and functional skills, time management and communications. As the manager develops in the organization, he/she then begins to acquire more interpersonal competence. This middle management position would require one to possess more managing skills and be able to develop relationships. One would need competencies such as teamworking, leading others, managing conflict and so on.

Situational competence reflects a higher competency level for senior management. This is due to the fact that this category of management deals with uncertainties and the managing of complex situations. Senior management would manage the organization from a 'helicopter view' and would require competency skills such as managing change, strategic thinking, managing uncertainty, etc.

2.2.3 Methodology of study

Two sets of questionnaires based on competency profiles were designed for this survey study. A field study was carried out to collect data from the respondents where each individual had to respond to both sets of questionnaires. The first set of questionnaires (free-choice) consisted of a pre-determined list of competency

elements where an individual respondent had to select and rank them (1-10) in accordance their importance and priority to his/her job performance. The second set of questionnaires (forced-choice) consisted of 51 statements that asked for respondents' opinions regarding competency dimension for effective job performance. A 5-point Likert scale was used where the higher numerals indicated a high level of agreement of need for that particular competency dimension.

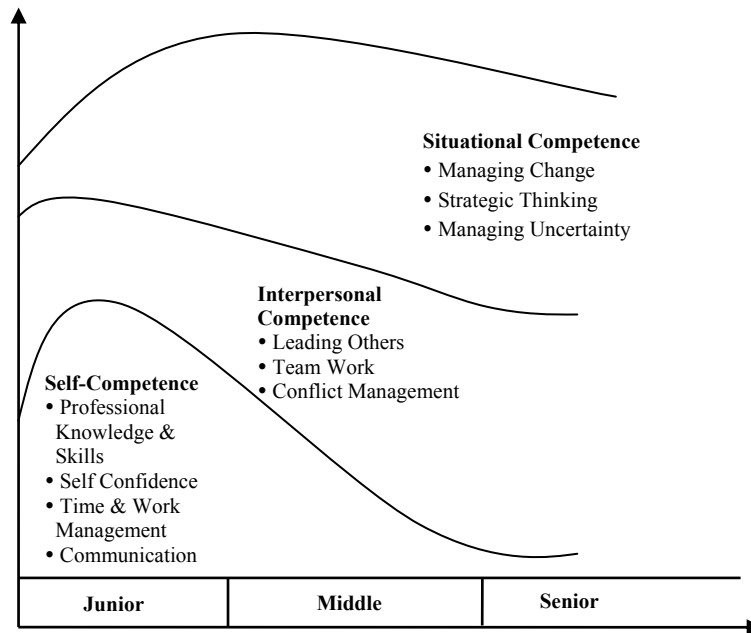


Figure 2. *Development of An Individual's Core Competencies Essential for Upward Progression.* (Adapted from Tap, Mohd & George, 2002)

3. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The development of a job competency model for professional staff in the studied higher education organization involved examining their job requirements, which were later decided based on a pre-determined job competency profile. A total of 265 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents who were identified on the basis of purposive sampling. These respondents were categorized as professional staff in the organization working in almost all units available. Individual respondents then had to select the most important competency required to carry out his/her job excellently. Based on his/her opinion, each respondent then selected the ten most important competencies (from a list of fifty-one) and ranked them accordingly. The model of competency identified for the particular

organization's professional staff is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Competency Model For Managers of Higher Education*

Category Label	Percent (%) of Responses
Time Management Ability to plan, prioritise and implement on schedule.	43.3
Communication Ability to communicate effectively, both written and oral .	42.5
Computer Knowledge Possess excellent computer knowledge to perform job function.	40.0
Teamworking Optimum use of skills and resources within the team.	39.2
Work scheduling Ability to schedule and prioritise work.	35.8
Drive for Results Reflect an individual's willingness to set ambitious goals for themselves and to make every effort to achieve them.	34.2
Planning & Organizing Able to conduct both short and long-term planning and allocate resources effectively.	33.3
Decision Making Takes action and makes decisions within his/her scope of job responsibility.	32.5
Integrity/ Honesty Ability to act firmly, honestly and "walks the talk".	31.7
High Discipline Ability to ensure job performance through effective discipline.	30.8
Customer Oriented Ability to anticipate and meet customer needs and trends.	29.2
Problem Solving Ability to analyze and utilizes information to reason through and solve problems.	29.2
Creative Thinking Ability to create and exploit opportunities for competitive advantage.	27.5
Analysis & Data Interpretation Ability to interpret and analyse data into useful information using statistical tools.	26.7

Overall, the analysis of findings from all respondents throughout the studied organizations agreed that the following list of competencies profile (*from 51 competency elements*) were seen as important to their job performance. A total of 43.4% of the respondents perceived that time management is the most crucial element for successful job performance (*see Table 1*). This is followed closely by the element of communications (42.5%), in both the verbal and written forms. People need to be communicated with and kept up to date about important information, whether daily activities or crises of work progress. The ability to communicate effectively could improve the productivity of an organization. Computer knowledge was seen as the third most important competency for their jobs (40.0%). Other dimensions of competencies were seen as moderately important to their jobs and the rankings were as follows: Teamworking (39.2%); Work scheduling (35.8%); Drive for result (34.2%); Planning and Organizing (33.3%); Decision making (32.5%); Integrity/Honesty (31.7%); High discipline (30.8%); Customer orientation (29.2%); Problem solving (29.2%); Creative thinking (27.5%) and finally Analysis & Data interpretation (26.7%). These identified key competency elements were considered as having a 'very high' impact on the performance of the professional staff in the particular organization.

Six of these competency elements, namely ‘Communication’, ‘Planning and Organizing’, ‘Customer Oriented’, ‘Drive for Results’, ‘Creative Thinking’ and ‘Teamworking’ were found to be in tandem with a survey conducted in a group of UK organizations that classified them as the 12 Most Common Competencies (Wood & Payne, 1998). Whilst the remaining eight elements identified in this study actually reflect competencies that are biased to public sector organizations.

As indicated earlier, the most important competency element in this studied organization is managing time effectively. The majority of respondents perceived that any task to be undertaken should be well-planned and prioritized. In this way, work given can be completed and scheduled. Communication is seen as the next most important competency as most of the management time (about 80%) involves communication, both written and oral. The next competency element seen as crucial is computer knowledge. As the pace of technological change is very rapid, all managerial level staff need to be equipped and updated with new skills and knowledge.

The elements of ‘Problem Solving’, ‘Creative Thinking’, and ‘Analysis and Data Interpretation’ showed a lower rank of importance by the respondents towards their job performance. These management competencies were later clustered under three sub-headings: Management and Leadership Skills, Personal Effectiveness, Expertise and Professional Competence.

Table 2. Cluster and Management Competencies for Higher Education Organization

Category Label	Percent of Responses (%)
MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS	
Time Management	43.3
Ability to plan, prioritise and implement on schedule.	
Teamworking	39.2
Optimum use of skills and resources within the team.	
Work scheduling	35.8
Ability to schedule and prioritise work.	
Planning & Organizing	33.3
Able to conduct both short and long-term planning and allocate resources effectively.	
PERSONAL EFFECTIVENESS	
Communication	42.5
Ability to communicate both written and oral effectively.	
Drive for Results	34.2
Reflect individual’s willingness to set ambitious goals for themselves and make every effort to achieve them.	
Integrity/ Honesty	31.7
Ability to act firmly, honestly and “walks the talk”.	
High Discipline	30.8
Ability to ensure job performance through effective discipline.	
Creative Thinking	27.5
Ability to create and exploit opportunities for competitive advantage.	
EXPERTISE AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE	
Computer Knowledge	40.0
Possess excellent computer knowledge to perform job function.	
Decision Making	32.5
Takes action and makes decision within his/her scope of job responsibility.	
Customer Oriented	29.2
Ability to anticipate and meet customer needs and trends.	
Problem Solving	29.2
Ability to analyze and utilizes information to reason through and solve problems.	
Analysis & Data Interpretation	26.7
Ability to interpret and analyse data into useful information using statistical tools.	

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Overall, three distinct clusters emerged as being most important:

Cluster 1. Management and Leadership Skills

Time Management appears as the most important (ranked) competency and is an acquirable skill. It involves the ability to scan, recognize, accept and prioritize goals. *Teamworking* is an interpersonal task-sensitive skill that can be learned. *Work scheduling* is a task-sensitive skill that can be enabled by automation and on-line job-aids. *Planning and Organizing* are task-sensitive skills which require coordinating multiple projects and staff.

Cluster 2. Personal Effectiveness

Personal Effectiveness can be developed through coaching and mentoring at all departmental levels. The results indicate a cluster of made up traits, higher-level cognitive abilities and attitudes. They are personal attributes. *Integrity/ Honesty* is a trait which endures high ethical and moral values. *Drive for Results and High Discipline* can be both trait as well as being attitudinal. *Communications and Creative Thinking* are higher level cognitive abilities that can be learned and developed.

Cluster 3. Expertise and Professional Competence

The results indicate a cluster of higher-level cognitive abilities, functional knowledge and attitudes. *Computer Knowledge* which received the highest score is functional. In fact, competencies in using current Information Technology and the ability to adapt to techno-change are necessary for organizational survival (Harison and Boonstra, 2009). *Decision-making* is higher level cognitive and *Customer Orientation* are attitudes. *Problem-solving, Analysis & Data Interpretation* are higher-level cognitive abilities. Expertise and Professional Competencies can be delivered as workshops organization-wide for all senior management.

A second study that required respondents to rate the importance of the same competencies clustered *a priori*, showed an 80% match with the first study summarized in Table 2. Note that this study involved a 'forced-choice' format where respondents in each department rated the importance of the clusters of competency on a 5 point Likert scale. Results indicated an 80% match with the free choice ranking study. The main finding is that when respondents were asked to rank overall which were the most important competencies there was a convergence, as with the forced-choice format, which involved competitive rating. What emerged from the study indicated that the 14 competencies are soft-skills division rather than hard-skills in nature. These findings compel different intervention strategies for different learning outcomes based upon best principles and practice on two fronts. First, the acquisition stage upgrading for the soft-skills require different learning strategies than for the functional skills which are domain specific e.g. computer knowledge. To facilitate the acquisition of these skills, research (Salomon & Perkins, 1989) and best practice suggest that cognitive strategies and effective strategies be utilized as soft-skills which carry large components of these dimensions. Cognitive strategies require higher level thinking skills and affective strategies require feeling and people skills. Second, the firm establishment of these competencies requires different modes of instruction, learning and media.

Examples are workshops, coaching and mentoring, on-line learning, computer-based learning, and job-aids. In addition, the practice of these competencies must be continuously reinforced in the day-to-day business process and performance management in higher education organizations. In the next section, the degree of structure, scope of competency impacts and acquisition paths are mapped for the main groups of competencies. Management & Leadership Skills and Expertise and Professional Effectiveness are trait-based and are best developed through coaching and mentoring.

4.1 Management & Leadership Skills

Management competencies are essentially coordinative. The ability to attend to multiple tasks, time frames and multiple priorities across different stakeholders is essential. Core Management competencies can be identified and developed independent of the functional departments. Such common core areas can be said to be ‘domain-free’. For each of the management competencies below (Table 3), the domain free core is identified with its component weights. The acquisition path is short term and / or long term by establishment of the competency as robust in the individual. Establishment of the competency requires infusing appropriate reinforcement structures (reward and recognition) in both the organizational process within the organization and in each department, and yet also requires alignment across the whole university to ensure equitable standards and the perception of a unified culture. A functional complementary would be based upon each department’s own priorities, objectives, procedures and forms (paper or electronic).

Table 3. *Competencies and Relative Weight*

	Weights			Acquisition Path	
	Procedural	Conceptual	Affective (feeling)	Short-term	Establishment
Time Management	Major	Moderate	Minor	Workshops	Job-aids via functional procedures
Teamwork	Minor	Moderate	Major	Workshops	Performance Management
Work Scheduling	Major			Workshops	Job-aids via functional procedures
Planning & Organizing	Major	Moderate	Minor	Workshops	Job-aids via functional procedures

Workshops could be one-off or as many as desired to instruct core concepts, methods and engender positive attitudes. They should be interactive and facilitated with activities. The acquisition path may be experienced as rapid, but we should realize that learning effects, and outcomes, may dissipate over time unless active

establishment mechanisms are initiated. The establishment of time management, work scheduling, planning and organizing can be enabled by job-aids such as electronic performance support systems which can be purchased or developed within the organization. Often these systems are IT-enabled solutions (ITES) and are part and parcel of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solutions. Procedural content can be available on-line through user-friendly 'prompts'. Key inputs in data fields are captured across the department, or even the entire organizational business process, to facilitate cross-functional planning across departments, and to reinforce the appreciation of the entire organization's administrative process as part of a unified culture. The added advantage of e-learning and performance support as job-aids is that they are available on a 24/7 cycle and, being web-enabled, they are available on demand and from any location. The establishment of teamwork through performance management is a gradual process and must require active performance management procedures. Reward and recognition must be in place in the performance appraisal process. The development and assignment of a coaching and mentoring process must also be in place.

4.2 Personal Effectiveness Skills

Personal Effectiveness skills cover human soft-skills, which are essential when dealing with others. They complement other skills but sometimes personal effectiveness skills can assist managerial performance in achieving a task effectively and efficiently. They include integrity/ honesty, drive for result and discipline and customer orientation.

Table 4. *Competencies and Relative Weight*

	Weights			Acquisition Path	
	Procedural	Conceptual	Affective (feeling)	Short-term	Establishment
Integrity/Honesty	Minor	Moderate	Major	Coaching/ Mentoring	Performance Management
Drive for result and discipline	Major	Moderate	Major	Coaching/ Mentoring	Performance Management
Customer-orientation	Major	Major	Major	Workshops	Performance Management

4.3 Expertise and Professional Skills

Expertise and professional skills are competencies that are essentially functional, attitudinal and cognitive. The ability to interpret data, apply models, evaluate and synthesize draws upon functional knowledge and requires judgment with accountability.

Functional departments carry their own methods and procedures (routine thinking or skills). Such competencies within these departments are said to be 'domain-based'. For each of the Expertise and Professional competencies in Table 4, the competency is identified with its components weights. The acquisition path is

usually short because of the nature of the procedural skills involved. The functional complementary would be based upon each department's own priorities, objectives and procedures.

Table 5. *Competencies and Relative Weight*

	Weights			Acquisition Path	
	Procedural	Conceptual	Affective (feeling)	Short-term	Establishment
Computer Knowledge	Major	Moderate	Minor	Workshops	Job-aids via functional procedures
Decision-making	Moderate	Major	Minor	Workshops	Performance Management
Customer-orientation	Major	Major	Major	Workshops	Job-aids via functional procedures
Analysis & Data interpretation	Major	Major	Minor	Workshops	Job-aids via functional procedures

Workshops could-be one-off or as many as desired to acquire mastery level performance. Since most of these competencies are procedural, drills are recommended for the initial levels of mastery of basic procedures, followed by distributed practice of methods over time and on the job. Distributed practice may be in the form of actual on the job-training and practice on demand by the learner while performing the daily task. This method of training can also be undertaken by CD-ROM and on-line e-learning formats. The acquisition path may be experienced as rapid but we should realize the need for skill upgrading over time with new applications, methods and the provision of active mechanisms such as electronic job-aids.

The establishment of expertise and professional skills is readily enabled by job-aids such as electronic performance support systems which can be purchased and developed within the organization. Often these systems are IT-enabled solutions (ITES) and are part and parcel of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) solutions. Procedural content can be available on-line through user-friendly 'prompts'. Key inputs in data fields are captured across the department or even the entire organization's business process to facilitate cross functional planning across departments, and to reinforce the appreciation of the entire organization's administrative process as part of a unified culture. The added advantage of e-learning and performance support as job-aids is that they are available on a 24/7 cycle and, being web-enabled, they are available on demand and from any location, as well as being content-upgradable.

The development of customer-orientation through performance management is a gradual process and must require active performance management procedures as in the other 'soft skills' discussed in the above topic of management and leadership. Reward and recognition must be in place in the performance appraisal process. The development and assignment of coaching and mentoring process must

also be in place.

The results of this study suggest that identifying and harnessing managerial competencies are essential to develop successful managers. Global changes affecting Universities call for managers to cope effectively both in virtual and corresponding environments. To be a high-performance organization, the managerial competencies are the most critical, not only to insure that the organization achieves the intended goals, but also in assisting others to cope with educative changes.

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