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Working life competences that matter for the newly graduated: Views of recruiters in the domain of knowledge work

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Abstract

Working life and the structure of work is undergoing an evolution. Many companies are reporting recruitment problems related to deficits in working life competences. Much of the research into working life competences remains theoretical and prescriptive. Furthermore, different typologies of working life competences tend to abstract the notion of competence to such a degree that it becomes meaningless.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the views of the people in charge of making recruitment decisions by asking what working life competences that are deemed essential when recruiting new higher education institution (HEI) graduates in the domain of knowledge work. We are also aiming to get a better understanding of what meaning recruitment specialists give to important working life competences.

1 Introduction

Working life and the structure of work is undergoing an evolution. Middle-class jobs and middle-wage work are disappearing and being replaced by high-wage and high-skilled jobs along with low-wage and low-skill service sector positions. Many traditional jobs are rapidly disappearing while completely new types of jobs are emerging (OECD, 2013; Palonen, Boshuizen & Lehtinen, 2014).

Many companies are reporting recruitment problems related to a growing shortage of suitable workers (Casner-Lotto and Barrington, 2006; Wagner, 2010; Dobbs, et al., 2012). According to employers, the source of these problems is a deficit in working life competences (CIHE, 2008; CFI, 2011; EDGE, 2011; EU ODP, 2015).

Previous research on working life competence do not clearly specify the type of recruits they are focusing on. Do companies struggle to find new graduates or are they struggling with finding workers with past work experience? This study draws on some seminal studies (Voogt and Roblin, 2010; Rychen and Salganik, 2001; Winterton et al., 2005; Kyndt et al., 2014). While

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the typologies put forth in these seminal studies provide us with insight into the world of contemporary work, it is not clear if the typologies also apply to new graduates.

In his influential book, Robert Reich (1992, 174) divided jobs into three broad categories: symbolic-analytic services, routine production services, and in-person services. The present study will focus on private-sector symbol analysts³, who are commonly referred to as knowledge workers.

Defining competence is a complex endeavour (Hanhinen, 2010; Stevens, 2013), and there are a large number of different definitions. In this paper, a definition by Jackson and Chapman (2012) is used. Recognizing the concerns with the parallel treatment of skills and attributes, Jackson and Chapman (2012) define competence as an overarching capability that encompasses skills and attributes as well as values and abilities. Working life competence, hence, is in this paper understood as a person's ability to function successfully or perform appropriately in workplace scenarios (Jackson and Chapman, 2012). Furthermore, competence refers to a set of cognitive, socio-cognitive, self-management and technical/administrative dispositions of an individual used for a specific purpose (Ellström, 1992; Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Stevens, 2013).

There are several theoretical studies which can be used when identifying key competences relevant for knowledge work. The main results of these studies are summarized in Table 1. Using a study by Jackson & Chapman (2012) as a foundation, the competences in Table 1 have been categorized into four categories: cognitive, social, self-management and technical.

However, these past studies overlooked some issues. Firstly, from the perspective of Reich's (1992) three broad categories of work, it is not completely clear which categories of work previous studies refer to. It is important to distinguish between these categories because different categories of work might require a number of unique working life competences. Secondly, it is not clear from previous research whether a distinction has been made between the newly graduated and employees with work experience. Thirdly, with few exceptions previous research used surveys as data collection method, and almost without exception, these surveys asked respondents to comment on or rate a pre-determined list of competences. There is a clear risk that findings become repetitive, where the only notable differences are the ranking or order of the same competences. Finally, a lot of the research on working life competences is theoretical or conceptual. As a result, many of the universal frameworks tend to abstract the notion of competence to such a degree that it becomes meaningless and hence these frameworks risk losing any practical applicability.

The purpose of this study was to flesh out the types of competence in new graduates which are needed in knowledge work, according to frontline experts: recruitment specialists working in the private sector. Understanding the perceptions of recruitment specialists can provide us with essential information on the critical competences needed to gain employment in knowledge work in the private sector as a new graduate.

The following research questions guided this research:

1. What key competences in private sector knowledge work are recruitment specialists looking for in new graduates in the domain of knowledge work?
2. How do the recruitment specialists describe these key working life competences, in concrete terms?

³ Scholars have been dealt with elsewhere (e.g., in Zuccala, 2006; Rehl, Palonen, Lehtinen & Gruber, 2014).

Table 1 - comparing research on competences

Theoretical frameworks			
	Cognitive	Social	Self-management
DeSeCo (2001)	Using tools interactively	Interacting in social groups	Acting autonomously
Review of frameworks			
Voogt & Roblin (2012)	Creativity, critical thinking, problem solving,	Collaboration, communication, social / cultural skills	ICT literacy, develop quality products
Winterton et al. (2005)	Cognitive, Meta competence	Social competence	Functional competence
Kyndt et al. (2014)	Problem solving	Empathy, Listening, Cooperation ability, Assertiveness	Professional attitude
Empirical research in selected industries			
Tynjälä et al. (2006)	Adaptive characteristics	Social skills, teamwork, people skills	Motivational characteristics
Empirical research context independent			
EU OPD (2010)	Adapt and act in new situations, analytical, problem solving, decision making	Team work, communication	Planning and organisational
Archer & Davison / CIHE (2008)	Intellectual ability, Analysis & decision-making	Communication skills, Team-working skills	Integrity, Confidence, Planning & organisational
Lowden et al. (2011)	Problem solving, Leadership	Team working Good interpersonal and communication skills	Self-management, initiative, follow instructions, motivation, tenacity
Empirical research in a business school context			
Casner-Lotto & Barrington (2006)	Critical thinking/problem solving, leadership, creativity	Oral communication, teamwork	Professionalism/work ethic, ethical/social responsibility, self-direction
Wellman (2010)	Creative, analytical mind, keen to learn	Interpersonal skills	Attention to detail, responsibility, pro-active, confident, self-motivated
Jackson & Chapman (2012)	Critical thinking, Problem solving, Decision management, Leadership	Political skills, Working with others, Oral communication, Social responsibility	Personal ethics, Confidence, Self-awareness, Self-discipline, Work ethic
			Innovative, commercial awareness
			Written communication, information technology, innovation
			Core business skills, Innovation, Formal communication skills, Public speaking, Professional responsibility
			Computer, reading/writing, numeracy
			Literacy, Numeracy
			Knowledge of the business, Literacy and numeracy relevant to the post, ICT knowledge

2 Methods

This qualitative study was based on thematic interviews with human resources managers and senior managers in charge of recruitment in the domain of knowledge work. This study applied a phenomenological approach with the aim of obtaining concrete descriptions of the recruitment specialists' experiences and inferred meanings. The informants were sampled purposively. All informants were responsible for recruitment in their respective organizations, or had been involved in several recruitment processes.

After eight interviews, it was felt that data collection had reached a saturation point, i.e. no significant new information seemed to appear. To be sure, two additional interviews were conducted, but they did not reveal any new information. Table 2 lists the informants.

Table 2 - list of respondents

Branch or industry	Title	Gender
Insurance (RIN)	HR manager	Female
Banking and finance (RBA)	Office manager	Male
IT solutions (RIT)	HR manager	Male
Business services (RBU)	Division manager	Male
Computer gaming (RCOM)	Owner and operative manager	Male
Consulting (RCO)	Joint owner and team leader	Male
Marketing and branding (RMA)	HR manager	Female
Recruitment and HR solutions (RRE)	Management consultant	Male
Telecom (RTE)	Innovation and business architect	Female
IT solutions (RITS)	HR manager	Male

3 Findings and conclusions

We identified and distinguished between seven different key competences: development competence, learning competence, customer/business competence, interpersonal and communication competence, self-directedness, teamwork and collaborative competence, and flexibility. Most references in the transcribed data relate to self-directedness, which is mentioned by all 10 informants (n=10) and occurs 81 times in the data (frequency f = 81), followed by cooperative and team competence (n=9, f = 65), and social and communicative competence (n=8, f = 51). We do not suggest that occurrences of frequency indicate that one competence is more important than another and we make no attempt to rank the competences. Frequency and occurrence helped us to limit and pinpoint which competences to look at in more detail to learn how recruitment specialists describe them in concrete terms.

The main findings of the research are summarized in Table 3, which presents the main working life competences that were emphasized by the informants and demonstrates how each of the competences manifests itself in the workplace.

Table 3: Summary of key competences

Key working life competences (Research question 1)	Number of respondents (n)	Frequency (f)	Meanings ascribed to a competence, competence in practical terms (Research question 2)
Self-directedness	10	81	- self leadership
			- ability to make one's own decisions
			- ability to question
			- working without detailed instructions
			- taking initiative for one's own competence development
			- to come up with ideas and move the ideas forward
Cooperative and team competence	9	65	- ability to share knowledge and experiences
			- contributing to others' success
			- ability for dialogue and interaction
			- creating and following collective objectives
			- flexibility and support for each other
			- sharing responsibility
			- making others "look good"
Social and communicative competence	8	51	- creating contacts to other people
			- not being afraid of social situations
			- getting along with others in for instance the team, working with people with different backgrounds
			- interpreting and understanding another person and his/her situation
			- communicating in all directions
Learning competence	7	37	- ability to identify one's own skills and competences
			- ability to follow-up of one's own skills/competences
			- ability to listen in order to increase understanding
			- ability to be motivated to change
			- openness to the new
			- a willingness, interest in and even passion for learning
			- ability to change one's own habits
			- ability to take on completely new tasks

			- setting goals and targets for own development
Customer / business competence	7	29	- ability to grow together with customers
			- identifying solutions and help customers
			- an understanding of one's own and customer business models
			- a knowledge of customers and customer care
			- understanding of how customers use the company's products or services
Development competence	7	21	- one's own growth
			- ability to define goals, setting targets
			- tolerating failures
			- a willingness to take part in development processes
			- ability to be humble to new knowledge
			- ability take risks
			- courage
Flexibility	8	19	- dealing with unexpected situations
			- adapting to changed circumstances
			- ability to quickly make changes
			- dealing with chaotic processes

Self-directedness was deemed the most important working life competence in knowledge work in the private sector. When relating this finding to previous research (see Table 1), it is interesting to note that self-directedness was not directly identified in any of the six reviews or empirical studies reviewed in this article. In the review by Voogt and Roblin, self-direction was found in only two of the frameworks: P21 and En Gauge.

This study confirms the findings of previous studies regarding the importance of cooperative and team competence. It is worth noting that all of the companies representing IT, telecoms and gaming rated social and communicative competences highly. Work in these industries is conducted primarily in teams and there is a need to learn from each other and teach others.

Perhaps one of the most interesting findings of this study concerns one competence that is hardly mentioned by any of the informants: ICT competence. This is interesting because authorities are currently emphasizing ICT competence as a key competence for future working life. One way of interpreting this finding is that the informants may take it for granted that their job applicants are proficient in the use of ICT.

When analyzing the empirical data, there are two themes that link the different competences that emerged from the research, namely *change* and *complexity*. Today's business and working life is characterized by an *unprecedented rate of change*. Changes in the market place has forced businesses to make dramatic changes in their work practices. Globalization leads to people working across different time zones, borders and cultures. New roles and tasks are emerging at an ever-increasing pace.

As products and product design processes become *more complex*, they involve more areas of knowledge, meaning that employees need to have both a very specific knowledge of certain areas and a general knowledge of the many different aspects of the product at the same time. Therefore an employee needs to be both a generalist and a specialist.

Tying into the discussion on whether education, and especially higher education, is focusing too much on factual knowledge at the expense of promoting individual growth (c.f. Ruberg, Calinger & Howard, 2010; Lambert, 2012) the data does not support a conclusion that domain-specific knowledge is of lesser importance than other competences. However, there are strong indications that generic working life competences have a significant impact on hiring decisions. Therefore there is an apparent need to develop and to evaluate higher education curricula. These efforts should be geared towards self-directedness and social competences in addition to domain specific knowledge and skills, recognising that generic working life competences do not exclude the importance of either domain specific knowledge and skills or formal education.

As pointed out by Rotherham and Willingham (2009), many of the key competences identified in the different studies are not new or unique to work in the third millennium. What is new is that collective and individual success depend on having such skills. What used to be “nice to have” competences are rapidly becoming “must have” competences in order to succeed in working life.

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