
THE EXPECTED COMPETENCIES OF MANAGEMENT TRAINEES BY BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The mismatch between the competencies of management graduates and the expected competencies by enterprises for entry-level management jobs causes management graduate unemployment. Thus, it is essential to generate up-to-date knowledge of the expected competencies for Management Trainee (MT) jobs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to profile the expected competencies of MTs by business organizations in Sri Lanka. We collected data by using 49 MT job advertisements posted in the Sunday Observer newspaper during 2018 and on the internet during the first five months in 2019. Additionally, we conducted 10 interviews with Human Resource Managers and Recruitment Officers. We employed content analysis to analyze data archived from MT job advertisements and qualitative data analysis techniques to analyze the interview data. We identified the top 10 competencies appeared in MT Advertisements: 1) Education qualification, 2) Excellent communication skills, 3) Interpersonal skills, 4) Language ability specifically in three languages English, Sinhala, and Tamil), 5) Computer skills, 6) Positive attitudes, 7) Decision making and problem-solving skills, 8) Knowledge about the field, 9) Team skills and 10) Leadership skills. We profiled the expected competencies into four categories such as knowledge, skills, attitude and other requirements. The findings of this research are of immense utility to the academic programme developers in Management faculties and management undergraduates who seek to secure MT jobs in the immediate future with a set of essential competencies that they need to develop before they enter the job market.

Keywords: *Attitude, Competency, Knowledge, Management Trainee, Skills, Sri Lanka*

1 INTRODUCTION

Business organizations expect persons who are good fits to the job as well as to the organizations. Through the process of job analysis organizations configure the required competencies for different jobs within organizations. These competencies and other requirements are documented in job specifications and used in the selection of employees. While organizations look for job-person fit as well as organization-person fit in the current competitive environment, from job seekers perspective, finding a suitable job that matches the person's qualification level is a challenge (Bilal & Ummah, 2016).

In Sri Lanka, though the overall unemployment rate is approximately 4%, the GCE (A/L) and above educated personnel's unemployment rate is 8.1% (*Annual Report of Central Bank, 2017*). Apart from this, in different periods, governments have introduced graduate employment schemes to reduce graduate unemployment. In this backdrop, graduates of management and commerce streams are not exceptions. From a preliminary study conducted by us by using 84 graduates of 2012/2013 batch of Faculty of Management Studies through a questionnaire powered by a google form during 10th January to 10th March 2019 (Just after their convocation), it could be identified that only 42% of the respondent were employed while 58% were unemployed. This indicates that the management graduates have to wait a fairly long time after finishing their academic work to be employed.

Sri Lanka with the free education policy invests a huge amount of money to produce employable graduates for the country through government universities. The Management and Commerce academic programmes accounted for the second-largest graduate output (5648) to the labour market in 2016 (*Annual Report of University Grants Commission, 2016/2017, 2017*). In particular, Rs. 1,896.4 and Rs.2,104.4 million have been spent on academic programmes of Commerce and Management in 2016 and 2017 respectively. (*Annual Report of University Grants Commission, 2016/2017, 2017*). Apart from the government expenditure on producing management graduates, a graduate spends at least 04 years of their valuable time within universities. Given the monetary investment of the general public and the time investment of the graduates, the unemployment of management undergraduates is a serious issue to be addressed in Sri Lanka. One of the key reasons for unemployment of management graduates is the mismatch between competencies developed during the university tenure and the competencies expected by the private business organizations (Bilal & Ummah, 2016). Thus, uncovering what competencies are currently expected by Sri Lankan business organizations for MT jobs is the need of the hour.

There are some prior research focused on finding out graduate employability skills (e.g., Ambepitiya, 2016), and the skills of HR Management jobs and entry-

level HR jobs (e.g., Arulrajah & Opatha, 2010; 2012) in Sri Lanka. However, these researches did not specifically focus on profiling the competency requirements of MTs. Thus, the knowledge on the demanded competencies for MT job which is the most visible entry-level job for management graduates (Arulrajah & Opatha, 2012) by business organizations should be uncovered. Therefore, this study aims to identify and profile the expected competencies in terms of knowledge, skills, attitudes and other requirements for Management trainees' jobs by business organizations operates in Sri Lanka. Academically, unlike previous researchers (e.g., Arulrajah & Opatha, 2010; Arulrajah & Opatha, 2012), we use a unique methodology in data collection by triangulating three data sources such as paper advertisements, online advertisements, and managers to collect data and thereby by improve the methodological soundness of the study.

The finding of this research will be significant to the academic programme developers in designing appropriate curriculums in Management and Commerce faculties in both Government and Private universities and other higher educational institutes those who offer diplomas and degrees in the stream of Management in Sri Lanka. Also, the identification of expected competencies of MT jobs will be advantageous to undergraduates who seek MT jobs in the market since they can take appropriate interventions to develop those expected competencies within them before they enter the job market.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of competence can be interpreted in several ways. According to Spencer and Spencer, "a competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation" (as cited in Aslan & Pamukcu, 2017). On another note, a competency is a measurable characteristic of a person that is related to effective performance in a specific job, organization, or culture (Haygroup, 2001). Also, competencies can be identified as the capacity or ability of which is required by an individual in conducting a job effectively (Kamaruzzaman, Myeda, Zawawi, & Ramli, 2018). According to Hellriegel et al., (as cited in Mkhize, 2017), competency is a mixture of understanding, abilities, attitudes and behaviors and other features that add to the efficiency of employees. Furthermore, competency is a more concrete concept to include particular knowledge, skills or abilities, and attitudes. Although there is no agreed-upon definition of competency, competency is often associated with knowledge, skills, or attitudes (KSA) that enable one to effectively perform the activities of a given occupation (Fischer & Connell, 2003; Latkovikj & Popovska, 2015; Wilcox, 2012). Thus, knowledge, skills, and attitudes can be used as proxies that reflect competencies.

Knowledge is awareness, information, or understanding about facts rules, principles, concepts, or processes necessary to perform the tasks of a job (Hoge, Tondora, & Marrelli, 2005). Knowledge has been defined as awareness or familiarity gained by experience about a person, fact, or things of information or a theoretical or practical understanding of a subject (Biggam, 2001). Furthermore, knowledge is identified as something multifaceted, changes over time, and varies according to the context (Sharp, 2006). According to Katz, a skill is “an ability which can be developed, not necessarily inborn, and which is manifested in performance, not merely in potential”. Katz divided skills into three categories, i.e. technical skills, human skills and conceptual skills (Bharwani & Talib, 2017). Attitude is defined as an evaluation of an object. Attitude objects comprise anything a person may hold in mind, ranging from the mundane to the abstract, including things, people, groups, and ideas (Bohner & Dickel, 2011). Interestingly, attitudes are generally understood to be formed through a process of individual subjective evaluation, but also influenced by affective and emotional responses and related beliefs (Jowell, 2005). Attitudes help us define how we see situations, as well as define how we behave toward the situation or object (Pickens, n.d.). In addition to competencies represented by KSA, there is a possibility of other factors considered by companies in recruiting and selecting MTs. Table 1 shows the previous Sri Lankan studies conducted to find out competency requirements for management jobs.

According to the Table 1, prior research studies show identified several competencies for the employees in several fields such as human resources (Arulrajah & Opatha, 2010; 2012). Some researchers found similar competencies for any field while others found different field-specific competencies. For example, Arulrajah and Opatha (2010) found the competencies which are expected by the Sri Lankan organizations for human resource management jobs. As shown in Table 1, many researchers found competencies/qualities/requirements. However, the studies focused on MTs are lack. Furthermore, in providing future research directions, Arulrajah and Opatha (2010), urge to carry out similar studies in other fields of business management including marketing, finance, operation, business information technology, etc.

Moreover, there are limitations of prior research in this area since prior researchers used only secondary data to profile the competencies. Thus, it is better to use primary data collection method such as interviews for further investigation of competency requirements for jobs (Ambepitiya, 2016; Arulrajah & Opatha, 2010; 2012).

Table 1: Previous Studies and Identified Competencies of each Study

Author/s	Focus	Identified Competencies
(Ambepitiya, 2016)	Undergraduate employability	Updated theoretical knowledge, soft skills, job-specific skills, technical skills and independent variables such as government actions and policies, income and social status, economic growth of the country
(Weerathna & Pintoe, 2016)	HR Managers' Competency	Communication skills, Interpersonal Skills, Computer Literacy, Leadership skills, Negotiation skills
(Arulrajah & Opatha, 2012).	Skills of Entry Level HR Jobs	Top six skills - Communications skills, computer literacy/IT skills, interpersonal skills, analytical skills, human relations skills, and leadership skills.
(Wickramasinghe & Perera, 2010)	Employability Skills	Problem-solving, self-confidence, and teamwork
(Arulrajah & Opatha, 2010)	Skills for Various HRM jobs	Communication and language skills, leadership skills, skills in handling IT/ICT/computer resources or facilities, generalized or specialized skills in HR/HRM, skills in dealing with people, skills in arts and science of management, skills in team working, skills in aligning HRM with specific, business/industry/operation needs, and other general skills.
(Wickramasinghe & Zoyza, 2009)	Managerial competency	Knowledge, Skill and value
(Weligamage & Siengthai, 2003)	Graduate Competencies	Communication skills, leading skills, participating skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, forecasting, and creative thinking

Another fascinating fact is, most of the Sri Lankan studies on competency expectations are conducted 5 to 10 years ago. The latest were done in 2016.(e.g., Ambepitiya, 2016; Weerathna & Pintoe, 2016). Due to dynamic macro-environmental conditions changes which are driven by technology, social, and ecological environments job market conditions also tend to change and the requirement of competencies should be different from the past. Thus, considering the above contextual, methodological and time-related gaps, there is a fresh need for empirical knowledge regarding the expected competencies of MTs by Sri Lankan business organizations at present.

3 METHODOLOGY

We approached to answer the research question of what competencies expected for MT jobs by business organizations in Sri Lanka in a unique way by using inductive reasoning. Unlike previous researchers, we used the triangulation of data sources. We used three data sources: 1) MT advertisements appeared in Sunday Observer, 2) Online job advertisements published in Web portals and, 3) HR managers and recruitment officers. Thus, we used archived data as well as primary data. We applied the following procedure to collect data.

Archival data from Job Advertisements–First, we collected 52 Sunday Observer newspapers for the period from 1/1/2018 to 31/12/2018. Then, we separated the job advertisements for MT jobs. In total, there were 33 job advertisements specifically for the MT job. Second, we downloaded 16 online MT job advertisements which were appeared from 1/1/2019 to 31/05/2019 on the internet. Altogether, we analyzed 49 MT job advertisements. Here, we collected recent job advertisements since we attempt to find the latest expected competencies for MT jobs by business organizations. Next, we listed down the competencies in MT job advertisements in an MS Excel sheet. Thereafter, we counted the frequencies of all competencies appeared in both paper advertisements and online job advertisements.

Interviewing HR Managers and recruitment officers – We used purposive sampling to access HR managers. We interviewed HR managers and recruitment officers since they are the most knowledgeable categories of respondents who can effectively answer the concerned problem. We inquired, in an interview, what are the competencies which are expected from the MTs by respective organizations. Here, we interviewed 07 Human Resource (HR) managers and 03 recruitment officers. We used an interview guide to conduct the interviews and the first author conducted all the interviews. Data analysis was started after conducting the first two interviews. Having conducted and analyzed 7 to 10 interviews, we noticed that there was no further new information generated regarding the competencies of MTs. We conducted 4 face to face interviews and 6 telephone interviews. All the 10 interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees. After that, all the audio recordings were transcribed to the verbatim and prepared transcriptions of interviews in MS word documents. Next, we used coding to figure out the competencies. After finishing the coding process, we got all the codes and identical statements of respondents to a code table for the easiness of further analysis. After developing the code table, we categorized all codes which had a similar type of codes into four categories as skills, knowledge, attitudes and other competencies. Next, we show and discuss the findings of the study.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, initially, we show the findings of MT advertisement analysis and then present the findings of the interview data analysis.

4.1 Findings of Advertisement Analysis

Table 2 shows the field wise categorizations of both paper and online advertisements for MT vacancies.

Table 2: Field wise categorization of MT Advertisements

Fields	Paper Advertisements	Online Advertisements	Total
Human Resource	9	4	13
Accounting	3	1	4
Banking	4	1	5
Marketing	4	4	8
Hospitality	2	1	3
No specific field	11	5	16
Total	33	16	49

As given in the Table 2, the highest number of advertisements in both online and offline advertisements are for general MT vacancies. The highest number of field-specific MT advertisements is for HR MT jobs followed by Marketing, Banking, Accounting and Hospitality fields.

Through the job advertisement content analysis, we could identify 22 competencies expected of MTs by organizations. Using frequency analysis technique, we could identify the top 10 competencies appeared in MT Advertisements ordered from 1 to 10 as follows. 1) Education qualification - Education qualification seems to be a threshold requirement in all most in all the MT job advertisements. 2) Excellent communication skill including presentation skills. 3) Interpersonal skills. 4) Language ability specifically in three languages English, Sinhala, and Tamil. 5) Computer skills, 6) Positive attitude, energy and enthusiasm 7) Decision making and problem-solving. 8) Knowledge about the field. 9) Team skills and 10) Leadership skills. As per advertisement analysis, the rest of the competencies expected from MTs include: professional qualifications; analytical skill; ability to adopt diverse work environment; creativity; ability to work independently with minimum supervision; negotiation skill; strong mindset; rational work attitudes; ability to meet challenges; pleasant personality; extra-curricular activities; and valid driving license.

4.1.1 Findings of Interview Analysis

By analyzing the responses of interviewees, initially we developed 46 codes representing various requirements from MTs by organizations. Then, we pooled these 46 competency requirements into four major categories such as Knowledge, skills, attitude and others.

Knowledge–Interview analysis revealed three types of knowledge related expectations and we have indicated some of the original quotes by respondents. First the vacancy specific education qualifications include academic (degree) and professional qualifications. It is clear from the responses that degree is the threshold qualification and professional qualifications are added advantage for MT job placements.

Especially, first of all, we look for education qualification. It means that a degree is needed to be matched with the relevant vacancy and the field. Furthermore, the candidates who have completed professional courses are hired. (Respondent, H)

If she/he has completed professional courses, it may be an added advantage to them, (Respondent, J)

Second, practical knowledge of working within workplaces and the ability to convert theoretical knowledge into practice is expected.

According to my experience, they (graduates) have only theoretical knowledge, not practical knowledge, so they fail to survive within the field. Therefore, in my view, I think practical knowledge is important as much as the theoretical knowledge for a management trainee. (Respondent, H)

Third general knowledge, interestingly, was not visible in job advertisements of MTs.

Furthermore, we consider their general knowledge. (Respondent, E)

General knowledge is also considered when they are doing their tasks. (Respondent, G)

Skills–The respondents mentioned that they expect many skills from MTs. From the responses of interviewees, we could figure out 09 key skills such as ICT skills, leadership skills, communication skills, adaptability, decision making, learning skills, planning and organizing skills, analytical skills and identifying the opportunities. Some of the original statements of respondents are given below.

We give some tests for the IT applications that we use day to day life such as word, power point, excel, etc. and measure the candidate's compatibility for that. (Respondent, J)

Another special thing is leadership. That is very necessary. (Respondent, F)

We consider who are the persons who have done teamwork well because we work as a team.(Respondent, A)

Absolutely, we seek communication skills. How far, can he/she handle that? Because it is the base. Because, if there is no proper communication skill, if communication skill is weak, definitely, she/he will meet difficulties. (Respondent, I)

Language is checked because it is more important when we work with an organization, English literacy is the compulsory thing now a day. (Respondent, D)

How he/ she work by thinking logically and how he/she apply things logically and practically is needed. (Respondent, A)

Also, he/she need to be a fast learner. We expect that she/he will learn quickly. (Respondent, H)

She/he need to have some analytical skills. It should be with them compulsorily. (Respondent, D)

Attitudes-We could recognize that the many respondents mentioned that they expect MTs who have a good attitude in terms of commitment, positive thinking, and discipline. The following comments of respondents provide pieces of evidence of these.

Not expect more qualifications. Basically, a better attitude is required. (Respondent, A)

Also, you need to have the sense of yes, "I can do".(Respondent, E)

He/ she need to have awareness about wastages like unnecessary usage of light bulbs, misuse in water taps, and misuse in printings. It means that he/ she must give 100% commitment to the organization. (Respondent, H)

Other requirements- Finally, we could recognize other requirements that are not included into the skills, knowledge and attitudes categorization. Those are appearance, confidence, quick response, personal background, and age.

By content analysis of MT advertisement, we could identify 22 competencies and we listed the top 10 competencies for MT jobs. These findings were complemented and expanded by the findings from interview data via qualitative analysis. Moreover, we could recognize some additional competency requirements from the interviews such as the general knowledge, planning and coordinating skills, ability to sense opportunities, appearance, learning ability, quick responsiveness which could not be noticeable in advertisements. Organizations highly concern about educational qualifications for MT positions and a degree from a recognized university is a basic requirement for the majority of MT vacancies. Thus, it reiterates that the MT job is highly relevant to management graduates. At the same time, MTs should be below 30 years old and preferably around 25 years of age or less. It could be noticed from the advertisements and the interviews that gender preferences for MT jobs are hard to notice. Generally, the person's competency supersedes the gender of the candidate as a requirement for MT jobs in Sri Lanka. Also,

some managers emphasized that they need an all-rounder. The competencies such as communication skills, IT skills, Leadership skills, team skills found in our study go hand in hand with some other previous studies done in Sri Lanka for management jobs (E.g., Arulrajah & Opatha, 2010; Arulrajah & Opatha, 2012).

5 CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to profile the competencies expected from the MTs by business organizations in Sri Lanka. We identified 22 competencies from the analysis of both paper and online job advertisements. We categorized competencies of MTs into four clusters such as Knowledge, Skills, Attitude and other requirements as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Expected Competencies and other Requirements of MTs

Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes	Others
Educational qualifications	Communication	Positive thinking	Energy and Enthusiasm
Practical knowledge about the field	Interpersonal Language	Strong mindset	Appearance
General knowledge	ICT	Rational work attitude	Pleasant personality
	Decision making	Commitment	Quick responses
	Team	Discipline	Confidence in taking challenges
	Leadership		Personal Background
	Adaptability		Extracurricular activities
	Independent working		Age
	Learning		
	Planning and organizing		
	Analytical		
	Opportunity		
	Sensing		
	Coordination		
	Negotiation		
	Creativity		

Further, we listed the top 10 competency requirements of MTs: 1) Education qualification - Education qualification seems to be a threshold requirement in all most in all the MT job advertisements. 2) Excellent communication skill including presentation skills. 3) Interpersonal skills. 4) Language ability specifically in three languages English, Sinhala, and Tamil. 5) Information Communication Technology skills, 6) Positive attitude, energy and enthusiasm 7) Decision making and problem-solving. 8) Knowledge about the field. 9) Team player. 10) Leadership skills.

The study findings imply that university degree still has the recognition as the base requirement for MT jobs. Also, university degree coordinators need to take steps to embed as much as practical knowledge in a specific field of studies and general knowledge during the undergraduate studies. It requires focus on soft skills development and multi-linguistic skill development in management curriculums since multiple skills are expected for MT jobs.

Interestingly, the combination of the interview method and advertisement analysis seems to be more effective than just relying on advertisement analysis since the triangulation of methods reveals a more comprehensive competency requirement mapping. Therefore, future studies can effectively profile competency requirements by using source and method triangulations beyond the methods of the current study. A study that triangulates recruitment message analysis, interviews and focus group discussions would serve the purpose. To improve the profiling of MT jobs in Sri Lanka, future researchers can profile MT competency requirements industry-wise and field wise to capture the variations in different industries and fields. Also, it is prudent to conduct a standard survey over some time with time lags at a national scale to provide a solid database for universities, students, and researchers.

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