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Competency Development in University Business Students: A Multiperspective Analysis

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March 30-31, 2017



**Appalachian State University
Boone, NC**



**Edited by:
G. David Shows and Pia A. Albinsson
Appalachian State University
Boone, NC**

2017 Appalachian Research in Business Symposium

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It is our pleasure to present the *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Appalachian Research in Business Symposium* from the 2017 conference held March 30-31 hosted by the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University. The Appalachian Research in Business Symposium provides a venue for presenting new research, discovering contemporary ideas, and building connections among scholars at Appalachian State University, Eastern Kentucky University, East Tennessee State University, and Western Carolina University.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 21ST CENTURY “PHARMA TALK”: TAKING SOCIAL MEDIA FROM TALK TO ACTION..... | 8 |
| Vorontsova, Nadja, Western Carolina University | |
| Rader, Scott, Western Carolina University | |
| A GUIDE TO ONLINE TOOLS FOR ENTREPRENEURS..... | 15 |
| Lahm, Jr., Robert J., Western Carolina University | |
| A HOLISTIC EDUCATION APPROACH FOR ASSESSING BUSINESS PROGRAMS..... | 18 |
| Carnes, Lana W., Eastern Kentucky University | |
| Awang, Faridah, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| Xiao, Qian, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| A SYSTEMATIC MAPPING STUDY OF BEEKEEPING | 25 |
| Conner, Joshua, Appalachian State University | |
| Hassler, Edgar, Appalachian State University | |
| Mandarino, Alexander, Appalachian State University | |
| ADD AND THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT: IS ANYONE PAYING ATTENTION?..... | 30 |
| Koen, Clifford M., East Tennessee State University | |
| AN APPROACH TO COMPARING ATTORNEY DISCIPLINE ACROSS REGIONS: SIXTH AND NINTH CIRCUITS..... | 35 |
| Michael M. McKinney, East Tennessee State University | |
| Douglas P. Dotterweich, East Tennessee State University | |
| AN ECONOPHYSICS APPROACH TO UNDERSTAND THE NETWORK STRUCTURES AND STATISTICAL VALIDATION OF STOCK MARKETS..... | 39 |
| Tang, Yong, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China | |
| University of Fribourg | |
| Xiong, Jason (Jie), Appalachian State University | |
| Luo, Yong, Ningbo University of Technology | |
| Zhang, Yi-Cheng, University of Fribourg | |
| BUILDING SALES PEOPLE: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PROFESSIONAL SALES MENTORSHIP PROGRAM..... | 46 |
| Karen Hood Hopkins, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| Christopher D. Hopkins, Clemson University | |

Table of Contents (Cont.)

| | |
|--|-----|
| COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT IN UNIVERSITY BUSINESS STUDENTS: A MULTIPERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS..... | 52 |
| Tanel, Karlee, Student, EKV Honors College Eastern Kentucky University | |
| Roberson, Michael, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| CONSTRUCTING FUTURE BUSINESS LEADERS: EVALUATING A MIXED METHODS APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP EDUCATION IN AN MBA CURRICULUM | 59 |
| Moore, Tom W., East Tennessee State University | |
| Gorman, C. Allen, East Tennessee State University | |
| DISPLAYING CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: HOW ONLINE PLATFORMS AFFECT PERCEPTIONS OF ORGANIZATIONS..... | 67 |
| Nile Latowsky, Appalachian State University | |
| Casher Belinda, Appalachian State University | |
| Nkem Obi-Melekwe, Appalachian State University | |
| Katherine Lesniak, Appalachian State University | |
| Shawn Bergman, Appalachian State University | |
| EVALUATION OF IT ETHICAL SCENARIOS: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS..... | 76 |
| King, Kristen L., Eastern Kentucky University | |
| Graham, Julia C., The University of Alabama in Huntsville | |
| EXPLORING THE UTILITY OF MINDFULNESS AND SELF-REGULATION ASSIGNMENTS FOR BUSINESS STUDENTS..... | 82 |
| Roberson, Michael, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| FACTORS THAT DETERMINE THE DECISION TO MAJOR IN ACCOUNTING: REPORTING FROM A SURVEY OF ACCOUNTING GRADUATES..... | 89 |
| Sam K. Formby, Appalachian State University | |
| B. Dawn Medlin, Appalachian State University | |
| Sandra A. Vannoy, Appalachian State University | |
| IMPLICIT STARTUP SUBSIDIES | 96 |
| Robert Beach, East Tennessee State University | |
| IMPROVING STUDENT EFFORT ON A LEARNING OUTCOME ASSESSMENT: BENCHMARKS, OPTIONS, AND RESULTS..... | 100 |
| Roberson, Michael, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| Erekson, Thomas, Eastern Kentucky University | |

Table of Contents (Cont.)

| | |
|--|-----|
| LOOKING BACK – LOOKING FORWARD STOCK MARKET VALUATIONS AND COMPARISONS..... | 106 |
| Faidley, Joel K., East Tennessee State University | |
| MOBILE DISTRACTIONS: A RISKY DRIVING BEHAVIOR..... | 114 |
| Medlin, B. Dawn, Appalachian State University | |
| Choi, Hoon S., Appalachian State University | |
| Xiong, Jason (Jie), Appalachian State University | |
| Houlik, Zach, Appalachian State University | |
| NON-OWNERHIP: A CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE OF CLOTHING LIBRARIES..... | 119 |
| Pia A. Albinsson, Appalachian State University | |
| B. Yasanthi Perera, Brock University | |
| ONLINE STUDENTS DEMOGRAPHICS AND MOTIVATIONS TO ENROLL IN CLASS..... | 124 |
| Billings, Viviane, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| Zhuang, Weiling, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICT NAVIGATION: BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT COURSE..... | 128 |
| Polin, Beth, Eastern Kentucky University | |
| QR CODE UTILIZATION: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD..... | 134 |
| Medlin, B. Dawn, Appalachian State University | |
| Vannoy, A. Sandra, Appalachian State University | |
| THE DEBATE ABOUT USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO SCREEN JOB APPLICANTS..... | 140 |
| Robles, Marcel M., Eastern Kentucky University | |
| THE EFFECT OF EVERGREEN LOSS ON PROPERTY VALUES IN WATAUGA COUNTY, NC | 146 |
| Benjamin J. Sullivan, Appalachian State University | |
| John C. Whitehead, Appalachian State University | |
| THE EFFECTS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING ON PROJECT SUCCESS AS MODERATED BY VIRTUAL AND TRADITIONAL TEAM DYNAMICS..... | 154 |
| Creasy, Todd, Western Carolina University | |
| Carnes, Andrew M., Western Carolina University | |
| THE HIDDEN IMPACT OF INFORMATION SYSTEMS ON FIRM PERFORMANCE..... | 164 |
| Vannoy, Sandra A., Appalachian State University | |

Table of Contents (Cont.)

| | |
|--|-----|
| VALIDATING A FRAMEWORK FOR OBSERVATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF BEEHIVE HEALTH: TESTING THE BAYER MODEL..... | 171 |
| Volstad, Samuel, Appalachian State University | |
| Qiu, Xing, Appalachian State University | |
| Cazier, Joseph A., Appalachian State University | |

COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT IN UNIVERSITY BUSINESS STUDENTS: A MULTIPERSPECTIVE ANALYSIS

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Key words: competencies, importance, trainability, development, success

Introduction

University business schools work to produce graduates who are knowledgeable in each of the business disciplines (e.g., accounting, management) as well as subject matter related to their chosen major or concentration area. B-schools also seek to develop some of the key professional competencies that are needed by individuals working in business. There are other competencies that may be important in business but are either impossible or impractical to develop in a university environment, and graduates must develop those competencies after beginning their business careers.

We investigated three research questions relating to the importance, trainability, and development of 22 professional competencies in business school students.

1. Do students, faculty members, and HR professionals agree on the relative *importance* of the competencies?
2. To what degree do faculty members and HR professionals believe each of the competencies is *trainable* in a college setting?
3. To what extent do students and faculty members believe that students currently receive *learning, practice, and feedback* to develop the competencies while in college?

Literature Overview

The earliest work to understand the qualities needed for professional success was by Katz (1955) whose classic article in the *Harvard Business Review* articulated three categories of “skills” needed by managers: human, conceptual, and technical skills. Since that time, there have been countless efforts to define, measure, and develop professional competencies (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982; Hackett, Betz, & Doty, 1985; Boam & Sparrow, 1992; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Mullen, 1997; Cripe, 2002; Rainsbury, Hodges, & Burchell, 2002; Hodges & Burchell, 2003; Tulgan, 2015).

What is a competency? Boyatzis (1982) defines a competency as, “an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance in a job” (p. 21). Is there one commonly accepted list of competencies associated with business success? Le Deist & Winterton (2005) argue that despite the importance of competencies in business, no single definition of competencies has emerged in the literature.

Do business schools actively work to develop the most important business competencies? Brink & Costigan (2015) studied the degree to which business school curricula meet the competency-development needs of students in one content area – communication skills. They found that AACSB-accredited business programs were not well aligned with the needs of business people in that they overemphasized presentation skills while paying too little attention to the more important topics of listening and conversing in a business context.

Key questions regarding business competency development in B-schools have been only partially answered. What competencies are most essential to success for business professionals during the first years of their careers? Which of those competencies is it possible to develop in a college environment, and which ones by their nature must be developed on the job after college? Are there opportunities for B-school educators to introduce additional, valuable competency-development activities into their courses and curricula that will add to the skill set with which their graduates enter the workforce?

Methodology

Identification of professional competencies. A variety of sources (Katz, 1955; Boyatzis, 1982; Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996; Cripe, 2002; Tulgan, 2015) was used to define a set of professional competencies used in this study. The criteria that guided our selection/definition of competencies for our study were as follows: 1) each competency should be potentially important to success in business, 2) competencies should be articulated such that they can be clearly understood by the three types of participants in our study (i.e., students, faculty, and HR professionals), 3) the total number of competencies should be reasonable and manageable, and 4) the set of competencies, as a group, should encompass the most essential capabilities for success in business professions. The purpose in developing this set of competencies was not to propose a definitive set for use by others. Instead, effort was made to articulate a sound set of competencies based on previous research that would permit comparisons and analysis among the three groups included in this study to answer our research questions.

Participants. Information was collected from three types of participants from a single university: students, faculty, and a panel of HR professionals. Student participants were recruited from 15 senior-level classes spanning each of the business majors, and a total of 242 completed

questionnaires were received for a response rate of 83.4 percent. Student participants' mean age was 23.6 years, 63.6 percent were male, and they work for pay an average of 19.5 hours per week.

Faculty participants included 19 members of the business faculty who represented a cross-section of all of the business specialties within the college. HR panel members were selected based on their extensive knowledge and expertise in HR, particularly in the areas of talent identification and development. Of the 30 HR professionals invited to participate, 22 did so for a response rate of 73.3%, and respondents averaged 16.6 years of HR experience. HR panel respondents possess high level subject-matter knowledge about workplace competencies, they are trained and experienced in evaluating competency-based qualifications, and they play a prominent role in hiring decisions for positions such as those sought by many business school graduates.

Measures. Online questionnaires were administered to the three groups using Qualtrics and addressed three topics related to the 22 competencies in this study. Students, faculty, and HR professionals were asked to evaluate the *importance* of each competency to students' professional success after college. Faculty members and HR professionals were asked to judge the *trainability* of each competency in a university setting, while students and faculty members reported the extent to which students receive *learning, practice, and feedback* to develop the competencies while in college.

Results and Implications

Importance of 22 professional competencies. Students, faculty members, and HR professionals evaluated the importance of the 22 competencies on a five-point scale (not necessary, somewhat important, quite important, extremely important, essential). Correlations among mean importance ratings are shown in Table 1, and there was strong, overall agreement among the three groups.

| | Faculty Ratings | HR Panel Ratings |
|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Student Ratings | 0.875 * | 0.868 * |
| Faculty Ratings | | 0.752 * |

Note. * $p < .001$

Table 1. Correlations among Importance Ratings

Mean ratings for each of the individual competencies across the three groups was analyzed, and a summary of that analysis is shown in Table 2. Means of 4.5 to 5.0 were considered "Essential" and labeled with an "A." Lower importance ratings were marked B, C, and D (see the table note for details). The items are displayed in three tiers, based on the importance assigned by the HR panel.

Three of the competencies – respect for diversity, approachability, and understanding others – were rated much more important by the HR panel and students than by the faculty. The largest difference was seen in the respect for diversity competency where analysis of variance was significant, $F(2,279) = 9.27, p < .001$. Post hoc Scheffe' tests revealed that both the HR panel ($M=4.23$) and students ($M=4.10$) rated respect for diversity as significantly more important ($p < .002$ and $p < .001$ respectively) than did the faculty ($M=3.16$).

| | HR Panel | Faculty | Students |
|---|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Tier 1 | | | |
| Integrity and trust | A | B | B |
| Drive and work ethic | A | B | A |
| Understanding others | A | C | B |
| Tier 2 | | | |
| Analysis and problem solving | B | A | B |
| Respect for diversity | B | D | B |
| Decision making | B | A | B |
| Personal organization/time management | B | B | B |
| Teamwork | B | C | B |
| Written communication | B | B | B |
| Personal impact/presence | B | C | B |
| Tier 3 | | | |
| Oral communication | C | B | B |
| Building work relationships | C | D | B |
| Planning | C | B | B |
| Conflict management | C | D | C |
| Self-awareness and personal development | C | C | B |
| Approachability | C | E | C |
| Leading/motivating others | C | D | C |
| Note: | A = 4.50 – 5.00 | B = 4.00 – 4.49 | C = 3.50 – 3.99 |
| | D = 3.00 – 3.49 | E = 2.50 – 2.99 | |

Table 2. Importance of 22 Professional Competencies

Trainability of the competencies. Faculty members and HR professionals considered the degree to which each of the 22 competencies is trainable in a college setting, using a four-point scale (not at all trainable, somewhat trainable, quite trainable, highly trainable), and their mean ratings were highly correlated ($r = 0.907, p < .001$). Complete results are shown in Table 3. Of the most important competencies, only “understanding others” was judged to be relatively trainable. The top two competencies (integrity and trust, drive and work ethic) were rated as not easily trainable in a university setting by both faculty and HR professionals and therefore may involve individual differences that organizations must seek to through their employee selection process instead of through development of the competency.

Current development of the competencies. Faculty members and students evaluated the degree to which students currently receive development and practice for each of the competencies, and those results are also shown in Table 3. There was strong agreement between the two groups’

mean ratings ($r = 0.922, p < .001$). Faculty members identified nine competencies that are currently developed through college coursework – all nine judged to receive only a moderate level of development. Students believed they are receiving development opportunities in 17 of the 22 competencies, including three at the highest level (i.e., analysis and problem solving, written communication, oral communication).

| | Trainability | | Development | |
|---|--------------|----------|-------------|----------|
| | Faculty | HR Panel | Faculty | Students |
| Tier 1 | | | | |
| Integrity and trust | | | | d |
| Drive and work ethic | | | | d |
| Understanding others | t | t | | d |
| Tier 2 | | | | |
| Analysis and problem solving | T | t | d | D |
| Respect for diversity | t | t | d | d |
| Decision making | T | t | d | d |
| Personal organization/time management | t | t | d | d |
| Teamwork | t | t | d | d |
| Written communication | T | T | d | D |
| Personal impact/presence | t | t | | d |
| Tier 3 | | | | |
| Oral communication | T | T | d | D |
| Building work relationships | | t | | d |
| Planning | T | t | d | d |
| Conflict management | t | t | | d |
| Self-awareness and personal development | t | t | d | d |
| Approachability | | | | d |
| Leading/motivating others | t | t | | d |

Note: Trainability T = 3.50 – 4.00 t = 2.50 – 3.49
 Development D = 3.50 – 4.00 d = 2.50 – 3.49

Table 3. Trainability and Development of Competencies by Tier of Importance

Conclusions

There was strong agreement among students, faculty members, and HR professionals regarding the importance of 22 professional competencies. However, there were some interesting differences of opinion for specific competencies, and surprisingly, student perceptions of importance seemed to match the HR panel better than do those of the faculty.

Both the faculty and HR panel agreed that many of the 22 competencies are trainable in a college setting. Students and faculty reported that students are currently receiving opportunities for development of some of the competencies, but other competencies judged as trainable are either not being currently developed or are receiving minimal development. These results suggest that there may be additional opportunities for competency development in the college setting, and faculty members are urged to seek new opportunities to do so, both within and across courses and curriculum.

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