The Impact Of Emotional, Social And Cognitive Competencies On Employee Performance- A Study Conducted Among Executives In Chennai

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ABSTRACT

As organizations become more global and integrated, the motivation to develop flexible human resource strategies based on a common understanding of specific competencies that can assist in the identification, selection, and development of talent has been seen as a source of competitive advantage. The popularity of competency-based human resource applications has continued to grow in India. However, the academic and applied research literature on competencies in the workplace has trailed application. This has left the field open to criticism from some academics and left consultants and HR professionals with limited insight into how best to develop and implement competency-based applications. This is also the case in the emerging area of social and emotional intelligence competencies. The objective of this paper is to discuss the impact of role demands and culture on the manifestation of competencies most predictive of performance. The basic design used is to compare data from outstanding performers against data from typical or average performers in order to determine competencies which predict performance. The data presented here are based on operant assessment of competencies using critical incident interviews, which are then systematically coded using thematic analysis to yield behavioural evidence of specific competencies. The results indicate that, while some competencies such as achievement orientation and team leadership are consistently linked to performance in both studies, the correlation of other specific competencies with performance varies among the samples. Moreover, the relative importance of specific competencies in terms of the amount of variance in performance explained also varies.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, Critical incident technique, Competences, Assessment
Introduction

As organizations become more global and integrated, the motivation to develop flexible human resource strategies based on a common understanding of specific competencies that can assist in the identification, selection, and development of talent has been seen as a source of competitive advantage. The academic and applied research literature on competencies in the workplace has trailed application (Boyatzis, 2008). This has left the field open to criticism from some academics and left consultants and HR professionals with limited insight into how best to develop and implement competency-based applications. This is also the case in the emerging area of social and emotional intelligence competencies. However, research which has been conducted over the past 35 years (Boyatzis, 1982, 2006; McClelland, 1973, 1998; Spencer, 2001; Spencer et al., 2008; Spencer and Spencer, 1993) has highlighted the validity and utility of competencies in predicting workplace performance across a variety of settings. Competencies, in both research and applied practice, have been defined in multiple ways which has led to several competing theories and methods which now exist under the generic title of competency. In this tradition, competencies are defined as “underlying characteristics of the person that lead to or cause effective or superior performance” (Boyatzis, 1982). Competencies are thus framed as abilities related to motive and personality constructs that influence the frequency and intrinsic affective value associated with the execution of specific behaviours and cognitive-affective processes. In this way, competencies not only imply what an individual is capable of doing but what they want to do. Effective prediction of work performance would seem to require that both of these factors be taken into account. In this way, competencies differ significantly from abilities, because motives form a critical element of the theoretical framework. In other words, abilities inform you about what a person can do, while competencies provide insight into what a person can and will do.

Research across hundreds of different companies and roles was synthesized into a generic competency dictionary (Spencer and Spencer, 1993) which gave researchers and practitioners a “guidebook” to the specific behaviours associated with competencies that have consistently predicted performance in previous studies. While open to the possibilities that new competencies might emerge, the Spencer and Spencer framework has provided us with a consistent and validated framework from which to conduct this applied research. While the majority of competencies in this framework can be classified as primarily related to emotional or social intelligence competencies, more cognitive competencies are also included. Competencies such as analytical thinking, conceptual thinking, and expertise, represent important competencies that serve to characterize cognitive and technical abilities that are also key to providing a more comprehensive picture of work
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performance. In this way, the Spencer and Spencer framework serves to integrate social, emotional, and cognitive competencies into a parsimonious framework which provides an excellent starting point for applied competency research.

As research continues to accumulate, what is becoming more clear is that research on traditional aspects of personality and cognitive intelligence leave much of the variance in work performance unexplained (Cherniss, 2001). Moreover, the theoretical orientation of these constructs would seem to frame them as static entities that are relatively stable over time. If this is the case, their applied utility would seem to limit their application to the realm of selection, as development of personality traits like Extraversion or aspects of IQ would seem difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Thus, their suitability as an organizing framework for human resource applications in applied settings would seem limited.

Measuring competencies using the critical incident interview

Central to any construct is the issue of measurement. One of the key tools in competency research has been the critical incident interview. The Critical Incident Interview is a flexible data collection protocol with a well-established research which supports its reliability and validity (see Boyatzis, 1982, 1998; Spencer and Spencer, 1993). As an operant measure of competencies, the critical incident interview allows researchers the ability to code competencies against established frameworks and dictionaries as well as discover and code new competencies. In our own work, this interviewing methodology has consistently shown good concurrent and predictive validity (Spencer, 2001; Spencer et al., 2008). Critical incident interviewing asks interviewees about the most critical situations they have faced on their job: peak high points and peak low points. Probes are very specific but nondirective and attempt to determine specific competencies and how they were deployed as employees faced their most critical situations on the job.

The research

The present study was conducted in a telecom company. The background to the study described below was that the company had conducted a high potential programme (Development Centre) and required that critical incident interviews be conducted with each participant so as to provide input into their individual development plans. A first draft of a competency model was developed based upon opinion of the senior management people. After the program had been running for approximately three years it was decided to evaluate the high potential group’s competency results against another group of managers, for whom critical incident interview data was available but who were not in the high potential programme. This empirical study utilized a criterion sample design and involved the collection and analysis of data using critical incident interviews.
Competencies were also behaviourally scaled with specific behavioural indicators that represent the specific thought process or behavioural indicator that could then be reliably coded. As the level of the competency increases the behavioural complexity also tends to increase. Table I shows how the teamwork and collaboration competency is scaled. Each competency is given a general definition to distinguish it from other competencies. In addition to the definition, specific behavioural indicators are given so that judgements can be made regarding what level of that competency managers have demonstrated by a specific behaviour or series of behaviours. As can be seen, while general cooperation or simple sharing of information are relatively basic behaviours, resolving team conflicts is believed to be a more complex behaviour and thus evidence of a higher level of teamwork and cooperation. The mapping process consisted of taking each statement in the original model and mapping it on to the particular competency and level that it seemed to best fit. This process revealed that 12 competences at work competencies were the most frequently represented in the company’s original model. A benchmark target level was set, based on expert opinion, for each of the 12 competencies that were thought to be appropriate given the nature of the senior manager role in question. As the number of managers passing through the programme increased, benchmarks were also provided for competency frequency based on initial examination of data from managers’ critical incident interviews. These were based on the average of the total cumulative number of managers for whom data was available in the particular year that a manager entered the programme. Ultimately an ideal frequency level (i.e. the number of times a given competency should be demonstrated during the interview) was also set based on the ongoing statistical analyses of data from critical incident interviews that were conducted.

Table I. Example Of A Scaled Competency Which Demonstrates How Increases In Understanding And Behavioural Complexity Related To A Competency Translate Into Higher Levels Of That Competency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Behavioural Description Of Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Cooperates: participates willingly and supports team decisions, is a “good team player,” does his/her share of the work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Shares information: keeps people informed and up-to-date about the group process, shares all relevant or useful information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Expresses positive expectations: expresses positive expectations of others in terms of their abilities, competence, expected contributions or speaks of team members in positive terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Solicits input: genuinely values others’ input and expertise, is willing to learn from others (especially subordinates). Solicits ideas and opinions to help form</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
specific decisions or plans. Invites all members of a group to contribute to the process.

5 Empowers others: publicly credits others who have performed well. Encourages and empowers others, makes them feel strong or important.

6 Builds the team: acts to promote a friendly climate, good morale and cooperation (e.g. holds parties and get-togethers, creates symbols of group identity). Protects/promotes group reputation with outsiders.

7 Resolves conflicts: brings conflict within the team into the open and encourages or facilitates a beneficial resolution of conflicts.

Sample

The sample comprised a group of managers (n = 14) who had been nominated by the organization to participate in their high potentials programme. The comparison group (n = 21) comprised those managers who had participated in other programmes but were not in the high potential programme. Individual critical incident interview data was available for each of these groups. Managers were asked to describe in detail three to four success stories. The study compared the two groups to see which competencies differentiated them. Comparisons using t-tests were made on the basis of average level of competencies, frequency of occurrence as recorded in the critical incident interviews, and a measure called value which was computed by multiplying average level by frequency. For example, a manager whose interview was coded for initiative 2 times at level 2, one time at level 4, and 2 times at level 5 would have a value score of 18 for Initiative.

Results

T-tests were conducted comparing average level, frequency and value of the top 12 competencies assessed through the use of the critical incident interview for the high potential group n = 14 and a comparison group of managers n = 21 for whom critical incident interview data was available from other programmes in which they had participated. However, these managers were not in the high potential group. The results of this study are shown in Table II.

Table II: Competencies Which Differentiate High Potential Managers (N = 14) From Typical Managers (N=21)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Age Level</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Orientation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern for Order</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Seeking</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>XX</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact and Influence</td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>X</th>
<th>XX</th>
<th>XXX</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing Others</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directiveness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>XX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team work and cooperation</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team Leadership</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical Thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Thinking</td>
<td></td>
<td>XXX</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** X – significant at 0.10  XX - Significant at 0.06  XXX – Significant at 0.01

Of the top 12 competencies in the initial model, nine were found to differentiate the high potential group from other managers on two or more of the three calculations made on the critical incident interview data. In addition, it was found that two other competencies also differentiated the two groups. The competencies directiveness and conceptual thinking had not been included in the original model. The analysis shows that achievement orientation, initiative, teamwork and cooperation, and team leadership best differentiated the two groups on all three measures. This seems reasonable given that the organization was attempting to grow and expand its penetration of its markets that called for goal setting and opportunity identification. Additionally, the fact that most operational groups were comprised of both expatriates and local staff who were less experienced could help explain the need for direction setting and team building behaviours.

**Discussion of applications of competencies within the organization**

The main objective of this study is to determine which competencies would best predict membership in a group identified by the organization as proven “star” performers, i.e. their managerial job performance had been consistently rated as being superior over a number of years. Information provided by this study would help the organization with decisions regarding future promotions. At a later point in the programme, the organization provided information regarding a sample of those managers (n = 9) in a particular senior job grade that they considered to be star performers, six of these managers had been through the high potential programme designed around the firm’s competency model. All managers in the “star” group were male. This group of star performers was to be compared to another group of managers (n = 17) in the same senior job grade, but who were not considered “star” performers, so as to determine which competencies best differentiated star performers in order to plan for the future. The comparison group was made up of 12 males and five females.
Analysis

A structural equation model was produced using the value statistic (competency level X frequency demonstrated during the critical incident interview) for the competencies as the independent variable. This analysis, as displayed in Figure 1, showed that a combination of six competencies could explain 35 percent of the variance in the dependent variable, which in this case was star performer rating. Five of these six competencies had also been found to differentiate high potentials from other managers within the company as described in the previous study. This provided further support for the model as being an appropriate framework upon which to evaluate promotion and selection decisions.

Additionally, this analysis also demonstrates that competencies from all major competency domains, i.e. emotional and social intelligence competencies as well as more cognitive and technical competencies, can potentially contribute to our understanding of workplace performance. In this sense, it is important to ensure that research methodologies and data collection procedures used in competency research are capable of capturing the full range of competencies.
Conclusions

The analyses confirmed much of the original models’ capacity to differentiate superior performers from others as well as explaining a meaningful amount of the variance in their future performance. As such, the study hopefully show how even when under commercial pressure to develop competency models quickly, it is still possible to apply statistical analyses/techniques to validate and refine competency models retrospectively.

The study also serve to strengthen our confidence in the ability of emotional, social and cognitive competencies to be meaningfully applied and validated using empirical methods and those methods have a fair degree of cross-cultural validity. These studies also serve to highlight the need to employ applied research methodologies capable of capturing a wide range of potential factors, while at the same time being flexible enough to capture the nuance of how emotional, social and cognitive competencies relate to specific tasks.

References


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