Are we in sync? How industry practitioners and academics profile managerial competencies: A study of an AACSB-accredited business school in Hong Kong

ABSTRACT

This study draws upon the taxonomy of managerial competencies to assess the alignment of perceptions between industry practitioners and business academics when profiling managerial competencies required for effective performance in workplaces. Findings show that the set of managerial competency profiles, as viewed by practitioners, generally fit well with the perceptions of business academics as represented in the intended learning outcomes specified in the undergraduate business programs. It suggests that the targeted managerial competencies built around business curricula are largely in sync with the expectations of practitioners. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

Keywords
Managerial competencies; managers; graduates; skills; academics

INTRODUCTION

In a business world of complexity and uncertainty, the need for developing managerial competencies is increasingly important. Despite the fact that there has been growing research interest in the study of managerial competencies over the past decades (e.g., Azevedo et al., 2012; Borman & Brush, 1993; Dierdorff & Rubin, 2006; Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Dunnes, 2015; Flannagan, 1951; Jackson, 2009; Levenson, Van der Stede, & Cohen, 2009; Luthans & Lockwood, 1984; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009; Tett et al., 2000; Tornow & Pinto, 1976), scholars have wrestled with a question as to what constitutes managerial competencies required for effective job performance in constantly changing and demanding work environments when organizations today are facing many opportunities and challenges in a global context.

There are a number of complications that make any universal taxonomy of managerial competencies difficult (e.g., Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Jackson, 2010; Jackson & Chapman, 2012). On the one hand, some researchers argue that individuals acquire managerial competencies through their work experiences (Azevedo et al., 2012; Chong, 2013; Day, 2007; Dragoni et al., 2009; McCall et al., 1988; McCauley et al., 1994), suggesting that managerial competencies vary with industries and need to change over time; thus as people learn, they adapt and change. On the other hand, some evidence shows that managerial competencies can be acquired and learned through business education, which is designed, structured, and delivered in a way that is relevant to industry needs (Camba & Krotov, 2015; Dragoo & Barrows, 2016; Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Mendenhall et al., 2013; Varela & Gatlin-Watts, 2014).

In essence, central to the above argument lies in the fact that practicing managers and academics may have different perceptions of what competencies are required to perform a managerial job effectively. In spite of a recent trend of bringing work-integrated learning initiatives and exchange programs into business education, a good understanding of where disparities exist may provide inputs for aligning

business curricula with industry needs. More importantly, this may provide some explanation of why certain graduate skill gaps persist (Jackson & Chapman, 2012), and possibly further heating up the debate over whether business education is relevant and sufficient enough to prepare graduates for today's workplaces (e.g., Andrews & Higson, 2008; Deeter-Schmelz, 2015; Jackson, 2010; Washer, 2007). To this end, it may enhance our insights on where and how individuals identify and develop managerial competencies through business curricula that align with practitioners' expectations, and in doing so, it may potentially close the relevancy and capability gaps.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, considerable efforts have been made to profile the required managerial competencies from different perspectives. Research suggests that business academics in different cultures are similar in profiling managerial competencies required for effective performance in workplaces (Jackson & Chapman, 2012). From the perspective of practitioners, Jackson (2010) identified a number of industry-relevant managerial competencies. But some others examined the relevancy of business curricula in relation to managerial competency requirements (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009).

Managerial competencies are defined as individual characteristics that are causally related to effective and/or superior job performance (Boyatzis, 1982). This overarching concept covers knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes and underlying individual characteristics generally required in performing a managerial job effectively (Azevedo et al., 2012). Although multifaceted in nature, managerial competencies are represented and operationalized in a similar way as shown in below studies.

Dierdorff and Rubin (2006) identified six distinct behavioral competencies for managers: managing decision-making processes; managing human capital; managing strategy and innovation; managing the task environment; managing administration and control; and managing logistics and technology. They added that managing decision-making processes and managing human capital are more salient than other behavioral competencies in fulfilling managerial roles.

The MAP (Managerial Assessment of Proficiency) instrument was designed to measure twelve managerial competencies grouped into four clusters (Parry, 1992) – administrative cluster: time management and prioritizing, setting goals and standards, and planning and scheduling work; communication cluster: listening and organizing, giving clear information and getting unbiased information; supervisory cluster: training, coaching and delegating, appraising people and performance and disciplining and counseling; and cognitive cluster: identifying and solving problems, making decisions and weighing risks, and thinking clearly and analytically.

The Job Competency Survey is another common assessment tool to measure managerial competencies (Chong, 2013; Fletcher & Dulewicz, 1984). This instrument comprises forty competencies divided into six groups – intellectual-information handling: information collection, problem analysis, numerical interpretation, judgment, creativity, risk taking, decisiveness, business sense, helicopter, organizational awareness and sensitivity, extra-organizational awareness and sensitivity; communication: reading, written communication, perceptive listening, oral expression, oral presentation; management: planning, organizing, delegating, appraisal, development of subordinates, self-management; interpersonal: impact, persuasiveness, sensitivity, flexibility, ascendancy, motivating others; leadership: negotiating, leadership; personal: energy, achievement-orientation, initiative, tolerance for stress, adaptability, independence, integrity, resilience, tenacity, and detail consciousness.

In a more recent study, scholars proposed an industry-driven approach to examine the alignment of undergraduate business education with industry requirements (Azevedo et al., 2012). Their research assessed managerial competencies of business graduates by investigating a cluster of eight key generic

competencies, based on inputs from both employers and graduates: influencing and persuading; teamwork and relationship building; critical/analytical; self and time management; leadership; ability to see the bigger picture; presentation; and communication.

METHODS

Sample

Managerial competencies were obtained from the 2011 survey of the managerial competency profile and management training needs of managers and supervisors in the next three years (VTC, 2011). The survey collected views of the officer/manager/owner on key competencies mostly required by managers in the next three years in Hong Kong. Conducted by the Census and Statistics Department of the Hong Kong government, it covered a sample of 1,008 small and medium-sized enterprises randomly selected from a population of 34,036 establishments in Hong Kong, which employed 10 to 99 employees in eight major business sectors including manufacturing; electricity, gas and water; construction; wholesale, retail and import/export trades; transport, storage, and communication; finance, insurance, real estates and business services; community, social and personal services; and restaurants and hotels. Because managers of these establishments were mostly owner managers and sole proprietors, companies with fewer than 10 employees were excluded. In total, there were 814 responses, representing an effective response rate of 80.8%.

The above-mentioned practitioner-based perceptions of managerial competencies are then compared with those of academics involved in designing, structuring, and delivering undergraduate business degree programs in a university environment, as reflected in their program outcomes. The Faculty of Business (FB) at one of the Hong Kong universities was selected because FB has earned double accreditations: AACSB (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) since 2009, and EQUIS (EFMD Quality Improvement System) since 2007. To be accredited and re-accredited, it requires evidence-based documentation in the quality assurance (QA) processes.

Take AACSB as an example, the Assurance of Learning (AoL) process needs to be well structured and extensive with observable feedback to the curriculum and other practices. Every program is required to have a Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan (LOAP), which explains how each of the program outcomes will be assessed in students and then assured. The LOAP is operationalized through the use of standard Subject Description Forms, which set out how each subject contributes to the achievement of the program goals, subject learning objectives and how the assessment tasks ensure that each subject learning objective is assessed. Every program is subject to an Annual Program Review and every goal is assured every year, in a process which has been embedded in the FB's quality assurance process. AoL involves elements of triangulation which include students' academic achievement in subjects designed to address specific program learning goals; student feedback on subjects; and exit surveys directed onto whether each program goal has been achieved.

Measures

To measure the perceptions of practitioners, the questionnaire listed 44 competencies that covered knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and underlying individual characteristics generally required to perform managerial jobs effectively, by making reference to the Managerial Capability Framework (MDC, 1999) and related surveys of the Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management. These managerial competencies encompass everything from management skills, interpersonal skills for the workplace, language, and information technology skills to world vision, and China-related knowledge.

Respondents were asked to choose 10 out of 44 competencies that they considered the most important. Managerial competencies were then ranked and presented in tabular form in accordance with the percentage scored in descending order (see Table 1).

We measure the perceptions of business academics by examining the undergraduate business program outcomes of FB; in doing so, the managerial competencies could be identified. During the accreditation and QA processes, the alignment exercise enables FB to continuously put emphasis on the generic outcomes, and business and management-specific outcomes in their programs encompassing 'relevant and sufficient' knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and underlying individual characteristics required for effective managerial performance in the workplaces. For example, EQUIS attaches particular importance to the creation of an effective learning environment that favors the development of students' managerial and entrepreneurial skills, and fosters their sense of global responsibility. It also looks for innovation in all aspects, including program design and pedagogy.

The measurement approach of the current study offers several advantages. First, if the primary intent of FB's undergraduate programs is to develop future managers, then the BBA program outcomes should represent FB's utmost effort in capturing the key competencies relevant to managerial work. Second, the Assurance of Learning (AoL) process requires every program to have a Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan (LOAP), which explains how each of the program outcomes will be assessed in students and then assured. As such, the program outcomes stand to reason which competencies are viewed by academics of FB as critical for developing future managers. Third, assessing the alignment of perceptions between industry practitioners and business academics based on these program outcomes represents a systematic and handy tool for comparisons across different undergraduate business programs around the world. As such, this approach supplements the work of Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) by examining the alignment between program outcomes and managerial competencies.

FINDINGS

Key Managerial Competencies

Table 1 presents the key managerial competencies required for effective performance in the next three years. Communication (51.2%), Chinese and English languages (50.1% & 48.4%), interpersonal skills (49.9%), and teamwork and team building (48.6%) are the top 5 competencies as viewed by practitioners.

Table 1. Key managerial competencies in next 3 years

Rank	Competencies	%
1	Communication skills[b]	51.2
2	Chinese (Putonghua and business writing skills)[c]	50.1
3	Interpersonal skills[b]	49.9
4	Teamwork and team building[b]	48.6
5	English (spoken and written)[c]	48.4
6	Crisis management[a]	47.5
7	Sense of accountability[a]	46.6
8	Analytical in approach to people and problems[a]	43.3
9	Coaching and counseling[b]	41.4
10	Problem solving and decision making[a]	37.7

11	Planning and organizing skills[a]	37.5
12	Dealing with conflicts[a]	33.7
13	Customer concern[e]	31.2
14	Business acumen[a]	30.8
15	Quality consciousness / quality minded[a]	26.6
16	Self-management[e]	26.3
17	Risk management[a]	24.7
18	Business ethics[e]	21.9
19	Stress management[e]	21.3
20	Strategic thinking[a]	19.4
21	Creativity and innovation[a]	19.3
22	Emotional intelligence[e]	19.3
23	Change management[a]	17.6
24	Integrity and trust[e]	17.2
25	Negotiation skills[b]	15.0
26	IT knowledge and application[c]	14.9
27	Instructional, training and presentation skills[e]	14.8
28	International exposure and knowledge[d]	13.3
29	Motivating others[b]	13.0
30	Adversity quotient[e]	12.9
31	Influencing skills[b]	12.5
32	Delegation[a]	12.5
33	Understanding of others / empathy[b]	11.2
34	Self-improvement[e]	11.2
35	Laws and regulatory restrictions in China[d]	10.8
36	Trade practices in China[d]	10.5
37	Cross-cultural awareness / managing diversity[d]	8.7
38	Internet marketing[c]	8.4
39	Zealous in developing talents[b]	7.3
40	Awareness of local HR related laws[e]	3.9
41	Other languages[c]	1.9
42	Japanese (spoken and written)[c]	1.4
43	French (spoken and written)[c]	0.6
44	Spanish (spoken and written)[c]	0.6

Source: VTC, 2011; n = 814 samples; [a]Management skills, [b]Interpersonal skills for the workplace, [c]Language and IT skills, [d]World vision and China-related knowledge, and [e]Other competencies.

Undergraduate Business Programs

The FB provides seven government-funded full-time 4-year undergraduate programs, which share a common structure in the BBA scheme built around the outcome-based approach to education. The over-arching aim of the BBA is: To equip the young people who enter the BBA program with the professional knowledge and personal skills they need to make an effective contribution to the economy and society of Hong Kong and of China, Asia and beyond.

There are two types of intended learning outcomes defined in the BBA program outcomes: generic outcomes and business and management-specific outcomes. In the BBA Definitive Program Document, they are specified as follows: On graduating from the BBA program all students will be able to:

Generic Outcomes

1. Communicate effectively in English, Putonghua and written Chinese, at a level appropriate for business purposes and general conversation;

2. Demonstrate a global outlook and understand cultural diversity, globalization and their implications for business;

3. Apply creative thinking in the business setting;

4. Identify and respond appropriately to ethical issues as they arise generally and in the business setting;

5. Adopt an entrepreneurial perspective, identifying and evaluating business opportunities as they arise.

Business and Management–Specific Outcomes

6. Understand the applications of information systems in business and evaluate their effectiveness and managerial implications;

7. Apply basic financial theories, analyze financial reports and understand the operation of financial markets;

8. Identify and analyze the means by which value is created in goods and services and delivered to users;

9. Evaluate the processes and structures through which organizations plan, decide, motivate and control their activities;

10. Identify and analyze those aspects of the domestic and global business environment that set the 'parameters of choice' within which business organizations set objectives and take actions.

DISCUSSION

The set of practitioner-based perceptions of managerial competency profiles generally fit well with the intended learning outcomes specified in the FB's undergraduate business programs. For practitioners, communication and language skills are deemed the most important competencies for managers, which is consistent with the first learning outcome indicated in the FB's BBA Definitive Program Document. In a globalized business world, communicating one's ideas clearly and effectively in English, Putonghua and written Chinese, at a level appropriate for business purposes and general conversation is considered vital from the perspectives of both business practitioners and academics in Hong Kong.

Other important managerial competencies, for example, sense of accountability, analytical in approach to people and problems, problem solving and decision making, planning and organizing skills, dealing with conflicts, business acumen, risk management, business ethics, and strategic thinking, are appropriately addressed in learning outcomes 4, 9 and 10 in that FB expects business students / graduates to identify and respond appropriately to ethical issues as they arise generally and in the business setting; to evaluate the processes and structures through which organizations plan, decide, motivate and control their activities; and to identify and analyze those aspects of the domestic and global business environment that set the 'parameters of choice' within which business organizations set objectives and take actions.

Customer concern, business acumen, quality consciousness / quality minded, self-management, risk management, stress management, strategic thinking, creativity and innovation, change management, integrity and trust, negotiation skills, instructional, training and presentation skills, international exposure and knowledge, motivating others, adversity quotient, influencing skills, delegation, understanding of others/ empathy, self-improvement, cross-cultural awareness / managing diversity, Internet marketing, zealous in developing talents, and awareness of local HR-related laws appear to align well with learning outcomes 3, 5, 7, 8 and 9 in that students or graduates are expected to apply creative thinking in the business setting; to adopt an entrepreneurial perspective, identifying and evaluating business opportunities as they arise; to apply basic financial theories, analyze financial reports and understand the operation of financial markets; to identify and analyze the means by which value is created in goods and services and delivered to users; and to evaluate the processes and structures through which organizations plan, decide, motivate and control their activities.

Information technology knowledge and applications generally fit well with learning outcome 6 in that understanding the applications of information systems in business and evaluating their effectiveness and managerial implications fall into this targeted competency. International exposure and knowledge, laws and regulatory restrictions and trade practices in China, cross-cultural awareness / managing diversity, Internet marketing, and zealous in developing talents generally fit well the intended learning outcomes 2 and 10. That means students in the FB's undergraduate business programs are expected to demonstrate a global outlook and understand cultural diversity, globalization and their implications for business; and to identify and analyze those aspects of the domestic and global business environment that set the 'parameters of choice' within which business organizations set objectives and take actions.

While the above apparent alignments between perceptions of practitioners and business academics exist, there is little or no clear mention of interpersonal skills, teamwork and teambuilding, crisis management, coaching and counseling, and emotional intelligence in the intended learning outcomes. To this end, a compulsory peer evaluation practice should be in place as a means to measure students' performance in those areas based on their peers' rating. Although subjective in nature, peer evaluation mechanism enables FB to identify which areas the students may need to strengthen, and more importantly, to meet the expectations of practitioners. Training workshops may need to follow up on any deficiencies identified. These soft skills can further be specified in the FB's intended learning outcomes.

Mastery of Japanese, French, Spanish and other languages is rated as least important. This further corroborates our findings in that these language skills are not embedded in the FB's intended learning outcomes. Only those firms with business dealings with some specific countries or markets may require these skills. In this regard, company-sponsored language courses and on-the-job trainings could help develop these language skills among staff. In FB, interested students may be encouraged to enroll on these language classes and/or go on exchange in overseas universities. Because Japanese, French, and Spanish are not the mainstream languages in Hong Kong business environment, it is understandable why FB does not consider encompassing them in the intended learning outcomes.

Although cultural contexts and work environments differ, the set of practitioner-based perceptions of managerial competency shown in our study is broadly consistent with those competencies found in Singaporean and British managers (Chong, 2013), which includes management skills, interpersonal skills for the workplace, language, information technology skills, and world vision. Certainly some small differences exist (e.g., competencies related to awareness of local HR related laws, regulatory restrictions and trade practices in China, Internet marketing, and mastery of Japanese, French, Spanish and other languages), but by and large, the salient competencies needed to fulfilling managerial roles are similar. These similarities support the view that there are common values within different cultures

(Hofstede, 1991; House et al., 2002; Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990), and suggest that modern managerial practices, and the competencies associated with them, largely apply across cultures (Chong, 2013).

CONCLUSION

This study redirects our attention back to the alignment of perceptions between industry practitioners and business academics when profiling managerial competencies required for effective performance in workplaces. Findings show that the set of managerial competency profiles, as viewed by practitioners, generally fit well with the intended learning outcomes specified in the FB's undergraduate business programs, suggesting that the targeted managerial competencies built around FB's business curricula are largely in sync with the expectations of practitioners.

It is however noteworthy that the apparent good fit may not necessarily translate into effective managerial performance. All this depends on the applicability of required managerial competencies in different work contexts with individual variations that may impact the outcomes (Jackson & Chapman, 2012). In addition, we do not rule out the possibility that business graduates may need to continually learn, earn new qualifications, gain work experiences, and widen their exposure that make their managerial competencies stay relevant to the changing world.

Limitations of Study

This study was mainly based on secondary data and a single university in Hong Kong for comparisons between industry practitioners and business academics in profiling the required managerial competencies, which may cause some concerns over representativeness, generalizability and timeliness.

Suggestions for Future Research

This research points to several possible avenues for future research. A primary research with a larger and representative sample size using a mix of managerial competency instruments is recommended. In addition, an assessment of graduates' managerial competencies may be worth for further study with reference to the perceptions of both practitioners and academics in profiling managerial competencies. In so doing, any skill gaps can be identified, and such data can feed back to the pedagogical design and curriculum development. Research on the involvement of students in such activities as leadership programs, competitions, exchange programs, internship, and whole person development programs would also be helpful to understand how undergraduate business students translate their knowledge into practice. Last but not least, at the policy level, the role of government in influencing the education policy as to what skills are required for economic development, and their political and economic governance may necessitate different sets of managerial competencies (Hammond, 2016). To this end, a cross-country research may be conducted to assess the alignment between industry practitioners and business academics in profiling managerial competencies when our globalized world is presumably looking for people of higher caliber with global outlook, ethics and creativity.

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