

**Éva Karcsics\***

# **COMPETENCES FOR CAREER STARTERS 'TO PERFORM WELL'**

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS BASED ON SURVEY CONDUCTED WITH JOB COUNSELLORS**

To explore the main factors of employee competitiveness we requested, among others, representatives of 48 recruitment consultancy companies in the autumn of 2003 and 69 representatives in the spring of 2007 to fill in our questionnaire in the framework of the survey called Human Balance Information conducted at the Budapest College of Management. In our analysis we examined in detail two groups of employers' expectations necessary for getting a job (competency expectations that may be weighed and competency expectations that are more like criteria). In addition, we attempted to explore the competences necessary to "perform" after getting a job. We present the findings of this survey in the present paper.

### **Research method and the main characteristics of the sample**

In both years we sent out our request based on the Book of Lists because this collection contains the main professional data describing the operation of companies (area of operation, total number of placements, turnover), and the fact that the authenticity of these data is openly acknowledged can be taken as a certain kind of guarantee for being professional. We selected from the list in a goal-oriented way, contacting primarily those enterprises that deal with applicants holding a degree in economics. Due to the willingness to respond, we had to broaden the search in both years; this is why the sample does not only include companies listed in the above publication.

In the autumn of 2003 we contacted 65 counselling companies, and 48 of them responded to our interviewers' questions. In that year we managed to have the questionnaire completed in the form of a face-to-face conversation, following a preliminary inquiry and appointment arranged through the telephone. In 2007 we were in a more difficult situation. We contacted 100 companies, and although the willingness to respond was about the same (72 companies completed the questionnaire of which 69 could be evaluated), achieving this result required more investigation and was more time-consuming than before. Out of the 69 companies, we visited 56 in person and received 3 questionnaires via e-mail, 4 by fax, and in 6 cases the questionnaires were returned to our interviewer later after completion.

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\* *Assistant professor, Budapest College of Management; PhD student, Budapest University of Technology and Economics. This is essay is part of a PhD dissertation in progress entitled Human-Balanced Information*

## Competences for performing well

In both years, we asked the counsellors *what explicit or implicit factors they consider most important for a new graduate to perform well after getting a job, based on their own experience and the feedback received from their business partners and clients.*

Even formulating this question was not easy. First, we had to reflect on what “performing well” means. Can we ask the question this way? When selecting the candidates, the counsellor tries to find the right person for a specific job. The applicant s/he will find potentially suitable is the one possessing the necessary skills and competences (including knowledge). Therefore, if an applicant is said to be “suitable”, the counsellors actually predict and presuppose that s/he will perform well. *Performing well is evidence of suitability, meaning that the person is practically suitable: considering the quantity and quality of his/her work, its efficiency, his/her commitment and relationship with colleagues/superiors, self-sufficiency and creativity; that is, in terms of “person-job-fit” (Semmer – Schallberger, 1996) , s/he has actually met the requirements for the job.*

“Performing well” is a consequence of the events and happenings taking place after starting a job. The question may arise here whether counsellors are competent in judging this issue? The counsellor’s job is to look for and select candidates, and the formal relationship ends after the company employs the applicant. The counselling company often undertakes a guarantee for the selected candidate in the search and placement process. If the candidate is not selected for a higher position, the counselling company usually stays in contact with the client with a view to future assignments, and in such a case it is inevitable that they discuss their past experiences. Another argument for the relevance of the counsellor’s responses is that they form their opinion relying not only on what they experience at a single company, but they rely on a wider range of experience.

As a result of the survey conducted in 2003, the names and frequencies of the competences mentioned by counsellors can be identified as follows:

Rank	Name of competence	Number of times it was mentioned	Frequency %
1.	Adaptability	16	0,33
2.	Perseverance	15	0,31
3.	Ability, potential to learn	14	0,29
4.	Flexibility	11	0,23
5.	Attitude to work	9	0,19
6.	Cooperativeness	8	0,17
7.	Ability to cope with workload, pressure	8	0,17
8.	Ability to work hard	7	0,15
9.	Humility, role recognition (is able to accept his/her position in the company hierarchy)	7	0,15
10.	Command of language(s)	6	0,13
11.	Loyalty	5	0,10
12.	Reliability	5	0,10
13.	Motivation	5	0,10
14.	Openness	5	0,10
15.	Personality traits	5	0,10
16.	Accuracy and precision	4	0,08
17.	Consciousness of goalsetting (vision of the future)	4	0,08
18.	Creativity	4	0,08
19.	Adaptation of existing professional know-how and knowledge	4	0,08
20.	Stress resistance	3	0,06
21.	Knowledge	3	0,06
22.	Good communication skills	3	0,06
23.	Good skills for making contact	3	0,06
24.	Ambition	2	0,04
25.	Dynamism	2	0,04
26.	Empathy	2	0,04
27.	Showing interest	2	0,04
28.	Helpfulness	2	0,04
29.	Willpower	2	0,04
30.	Energetic character	2	0,04
31.	Task- and solution-oriented character	2	0,04

As a result of the 2007 survey, the names and frequencies of the competences mentioned by the counsellors can be identified as follows:

Rank	Name of competence	Number of times it was mentioned	Frequency %
1.	Ability, desire and actions taken to learn	17	0,25
2.	Adaptability	16	0,23
3.	Perseverance	13	0,19
4.	Attitude to work	13	0,19
5.	Professional knowledge and making use of this knowledge as a skill	8	0,12
6.	Cooperativeness	7	0,10
7.	Knowledge	7	0,10
8.	Openness	6	0,09
9.	Accuracy and precision – should respect deadlines	6	0,09
10.	Can be integrated into the corporation, corporate culture	6	0,09
11.	Ability to work hard	6	0,09
12.	Ability to cope with workload	6	0,09
13.	Good skills to make and maintain contacts	5	0,07
14.	Creativity	5	0,07
15.	Maintaining a high level of motivation, self-motivation	5	0,07
16.	Flexibility	5	0,07
17.	Humility	5	0,07
18.	Personality traits	4	0,06
19.	Firmness	3	0,04
20.	Communication skills	3	0,04
21.	Reliability	3	0,04
22.	Being proactive	3	0,04

Three and a half years passed between the two surveys. All in all we can establish that the important factors necessary for “performing well” were fairly similar in both years, with some – occasionally greater – variance in their rank order. It is instructive that while respondents mentioned altogether 64 factors on the first occasion, this number was as high as 91 in 2007. There were very few new factors in the second case; instead, respondents unfolded the components of earlier categories and competences and defined their experiences in a more accurate way. The reason for a more detailed list may also be that expectations have become more company-specific and the counsellors are better prepared professionally. Since the respondents’ opinion showed considerable variance, frequency by itself does not show precisely how the factors evolve. Therefore, we also monitor rank order in our analysis.

“Adaptability” was in a pre-eminent position in both years. Adaptation is part of socialization at the workplace, in the course of which the individual integrates into the organization. According to Morrison (1993), successful socialization in the workplace has four steps:

1. Receiving training for the job
2. Achieving role clarity
3. Adapting to corporate culture
4. Social and organizational integration

In Feldman’s model of organisational integration, preliminary socialization is followed by adaptation, in the course of which the individual is introduced to the job, s/he establishes his/her formal and informal network of relationships, and his/her own role and the roles of others are clarified.

In the process of organizational socialisation the individual acquires the organizational knowledge necessary for his/her scope of activities, gets to know and identifies with corporate culture (understands and accepts organisational values, norms and beliefs), which then results in a mutual satisfaction of employer and employee.

The first days at work are an especially important and decisive experience for young career starters. If it is their first full-time job, they have to face a twofold problem: on the one hand, they have to experience the process for the first time in the course of which they make themselves accepted in the organisation, and on the other, they have to recognise their role in the organisation, tackle a real professional task, etc. for the first time. Therefore, supporting their integration has to be an important issue among the human resources management activities of the organisation.

The table below shows the factors that had a higher frequency value and/or higher rank in the 2007 list than in the previous survey:

Name of competence	Rank in 2003	Frequency in percents 2003	Rank in 2007	Frequency in percents 2007
Ability, willingness, desire, actions taken to learn	3	29	1	25
Attitude to work	5	19	4	19
Adaptation of existing professional know-how and knowledge and using it as a skill	19	8	5	12
Knowledge	21	6	7	10
Openness	14	10	8	9
Accuracy, precision	16	8	9	9
Ability to work hard	8	15	11	9

Grouping the individual factors was not an easy task. Problematic groups include “learning ability”, “ability to develop” and “determination to learn”, “desire to learn”, “actions taken in order to learn”, “willingness to learn.” Obviously these groups can be divided into several subgroups: on the one hand they contain a skills expectation. By skills we mean meeting the physiological and psychological conditions necessary for accomplishing the intellectual or physical tasks the employee is expected to tackle – in this specific case, this is the ability to develop and learn. On the other hand, however, it has been pointed out that skills themselves are not sufficient, they have to be exploited, made use of; in other words, these skills should become manifest in specific results. “Learning ability” and “ability to develop” can also be associated with “flexibility”, as the employee has to adapt to a changing environment and, as a result, s/he has to revive and develop. This is why we do not consider the decrease in the value of the “flexibility” factor in the second survey as significant. “Learning ability” and “ability to develop” could be put into the category of “willpower”, for what is the value of a skill if the individual does not seek to utilise it? In the end, despite the differences in composition, we have created, in both surveys, one single group for all factors in connection with learning, keeping in mind the importance of the individual and organisational effectiveness achieved.

“Perseverance” is the will power of a person’s character, “that expresses the hardness necessary for accomplishing activities.”<sup>2</sup> Despite its decreasing frequency of mention and its lower rank in the list, it is still deemed as one of the most important factors of performing well at a workplace; it proved to be a key factor in both surveys.

Although the frequency value of “attitude to work” is lower in 2007 than in 2003, it has a higher rank in the list of the total number of references to it. We have to add here that in 2007 counsellors formulated this expectation in a more detailed way: s/he should “want to work”, “like to work” and “be at his / her workplace”. We think that some of these references are related to the appearance of volitional factors already indicated in connection with the ability to learn that was analysed above.

When studying the list of the factors which “shoot ahead”, we can conclude that general and professional knowledge, the ability to make use of one’s knowledge as a skill, and accurate, precise work constantly become more and more appreciated. The importance of the need for effective and high-quality work is emphasized by the following “isolated” responses, which were given in 2007: “intelligence”, “rapid thinking”, “logical thinking”, “good comprehension” and “structured thinking”.

The elements with the same content in both years but with decreasing frequency, a lower rank is put into a separate group:

Name of competence	Rank in 2003	Frequency in percents 2003	Rank in 2007	Frequency in percents 2007
Ability to cope with workload	7	17	12	7
Flexibility	4	23	16	7
Personality traits	15	10	18	4
Humility, role recognition	9	15	17	6
Loyalty	11	10	33	1
Reliability	12	10	21	4
Command of language(s)	10	13	81	1

<sup>2</sup> Definition of the Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ)

The decreasing significance of some of these competences might be due to a greater difficulty in finding a job, and understanding the consequences of this difficulty that derives from increasingly stronger marketing and communication in the labour market may perhaps assist career starters to better position themselves in the job market and appreciate their workplace more highly. The factor of language knowledge was mentioned in 2007 by one respondent, saying “s/he should really speak a foreign language”. Three and a half years elapsed between the two surveys, and a new generation of high school students graduated in between, which is enough time for counsellors to be able to pick from a sufficient number of young people speaking foreign languages well, without having to make a compromise when it comes to the knowledge of languages. I believe it is quite likely that counsellors now pay much more attention and check this criterion more thoroughly during the selection process.

We did not put further items into the category of “character traits” in either survey, even though we could have. Therefore, the decreasing tendency is just a semblance in this case; in fact, certain personality traits become separated from this general category and begin a life of their own.

The need for the “cooperation skills” is still important, but respondents did not give as clear-cut answers in 2007 as in 2003: they unfolded the various dimensions of cooperation and mentioned the following factors in their answers: “appropriate cooperation with his/her superior”, “ability to work in teams”, “paying attention to colleagues”.

The importance of “motivation” slightly decreased (from 10 percent to 7 percent), but there was emphasis on a different aspect of its definition. Employees may also be motivated by external factors (incentives); the change of emphasis shows a growing need for internal motivation, in 2007 there were several respondents emphasising the importance of employees’ self-motivation.

“Being proactive”, “being innovative”, “having the courage to ask”, “being able to express an opinion in a sophisticated manner” first appeared in the responses in 2007 and refer to the importance of the individual’s activity within the corporation (the first two appeared in the 2003 survey in the summary of competences necessary to get a job).

“Integration into the organisation” was not among the 2003 factors, but in 2007 it was already one of the six most important factors. It seems almost unbelievable that a few years ago this factor was not on the list, although, if nothing else, the current trends in corporate culture should have made it important. It would perhaps be an exaggeration to say that while earlier counsellors regarded the candidate as an individual and concentrated “only” on “performing the tasks within his/her scope of activities”, today they position candidates in a system of relationships and examine them in their potential new workplace (person-organization-fit). (Semmer – Schallberger, 1996). In any case, this possible statement is strengthened by the fact that in 2003 there was no answer like this given to in the questionnaire when asking about the factors necessary for getting a job.

## Summary

As a result of a detailed analysis of the counsellors’ answers it can be established that adaptability, the ability and willingness to learn are absolutely necessary for the individual to perform well at his/her workplace. The factors defining the efficiency and quality of work become increasingly important among the factors that help perform well. The factors of personality traits related to willpower and characteristics that express and accomplish the utilisation of skills become more and more appreciated.

The survey also showed that nowadays individuals are increasingly less able to achieve success on their own; therefore, when examining candidates, integration into the organisation has to be checked, in addition to monitoring how they would perform within their scope of activities.

All organisations wish to have dedicated, productive employees. The first step towards achieving this goal is to consciously plan programmes that assist the integration of employees into the organisation, and organisations have to attach special importance to dealing with career starters in this process.

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