

# COMPETENCE AND EXECUTIVE EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN AN SME ENVIRONMENT

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## Introduction

A series of academic research studies and official policy documents has identified the persistent poor performance of the Northern Ireland economy, which has continued despite considerable expenditure on an industrial development programme. This poor performance of the regional economy reflects both generally low levels of productivity in Northern Ireland industry (despite considerable investment in plant and equipment) and a lack of both price and non-price competitiveness (in areas such as product quality, design and training). In turn, this is reflected in the poor export performance of much of the indigenous manufacturing sector (Harris *et al* 1990; Hitchins *et al* 1990).

The competitive weakness of much of Northern Ireland industry is being intensified in light of the increasing internationalisation of business. Northern Ireland firms can no longer depend on the domestic market alone for two reasons. First, the small size of the domestic market imposes a constraint on growth and development, and hence ultimately on efficiency and competitiveness. Second, the increasingly competitive business environment following the completion of the Single European Market and the emergence of a competitive threat from the

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restructuring of East European economies, threatens the position of local firms within the domestic market as well as internationally (Foley and Mulreany, 1990).

Increasingly, however, it is being recognised that a key constraint on the achievement of significant strategic progress in many of these areas, and hence on improving competitiveness, is the poor level and quality of training at all levels of industry in Northern Ireland (Training and Employment Agency 1991): “If local industry is to compete in the international market place, the entire workforce from top management to shop floor operative must have the necessary skills, knowledge and flexibility to produce quality goods and services as profitably as possible” (DED, 1990). In this, the development of competent, skilled, flexible and adaptable executives will play a crucial role in facilitating the process of organisational change which will lead to and underpin improvements in the international competitiveness of Northern Ireland industry and contribute to the process of sustainable regional economic development.

### **The International Directors Programme**

In order to meet this need, the University of Ulster has developed an innovative International Directors Programme in Executive Leadership (Harrison and Leitch, 1993). This programme has been developed in recognition of the need for senior executives to develop their leadership potential and to learn to see their companies in an international context, even if they do not operate outside national boundaries. The key to the programme is the recognition that numerous technological, social, economic and information revolutions are combining to create a degree of flux that often challenges the fundamental assumptions on which organisations and their managers have learned to operate (Morgan, 1988). The need, accordingly, is to develop senior executives who can (Harrison, 1992):

- learn to think differently, in particular by thinking internationally in terms of competitor analysis, marketing, investment or the sourcing of capital, technology, facilities, human resources and raw materials;
- initiate and lead the process of organisational change and adaptation in their companies – for competitive success to be achieved, it is not just the senior executives who will carry the weight of learning and re-learning; although their role is crucial, everyone in the organisation has to reconceptualise;
- make decisions creatively and effectively in the presence of turbulence and uncertainty in the operating environment of the company, and

thereby define the mission, purpose and strategic focus of the organisation;

- engage in contextual thinking – seeing the organisation against the political, social, economic, technological or global background in which it operates;
- cope with what has been called the “grand paradox of management”, by developing their leadership capabilities, for to be a manager in the modern world is to take responsibility for controlling what is less and less controllable.

Effective senior executives in the 1990s will require a range of abilities in addition to up-to-date professional knowledge and management skills, including skills for understanding international business opportunities, skills for setting an organisation’s direction, and for creating vision, mission and purpose, skills for implementing the vision, mission and purpose, and skills for personal understanding and effectiveness.

A major feature, therefore, of the IDP is the personal development of each of the participants. Over the last two decades, Assessment Centre methodology has been increasingly used to provide a developmental focus for participants (Dulcewicz, 1988). With the growth of interest in “managerial competencies”, many organisations have either adopted already established competency models or researched their own listing, and competency based approaches have become more common in management education and development (Boyatzis, 1982; Albanese, 1989; Evans, 1988; Maugham, 1986; Powers, 1987; Schroder, 1989). Assessment Centre approaches have subsequently been built around these competencies to help in the development of their managerial and executive populations (Iles, 1992).

The aim of including an Assessment Centre module within the International Directors Programme is, therefore, one of helping participants through feedback and counselling on their performance to gain information about their levels of abilities against a range of competency and skill areas which are deemed to be important for effective executive performance.

Attendance at an Assessment Centre module provides participants with a detailed Development Report which highlights both their strengths and areas for further development. This should act to inform their self-perception and provide a focus for their personal development. In addition to providing a focus for development, the highlighted strengths within the Development Report can help to build confidence in certain areas of a participant’s individual performance.

Furthermore, it can help to identify aspects of expertise that participants can offer as a resource to help in the development of others, either on the International Directors Programme or back at work.

### **Personal Development Groups**

The inclusion of Personal Development Groups in the International Directors Programme will reinforce the view that beyond professional skills and knowledge, personal competencies, qualities and attributes are major contributors to successful executive performance.

Personal Development Groups are consistent with the assumption that such personal competencies can, given the willingness and readiness of the individual to change, be developed. However, they recognise that such development is difficult without skilled facilitation and the challenge and support of others – and others whom they can trust.

The assessment centre on the IDP was specifically designed to provide an assessment and development focus for the participants. It was built around a suite of key competencies identified on the basis of both a review of existing competency models and a research exercise undertaken to enquire into current and future competencies required by senior managers of small and medium sized companies in Northern Ireland, on the grounds that models and typologies developed in one (primarily large organisation) context may not necessarily fit the context of a largely owner-manager small firm economy. The purpose of this research was to identify what competencies were regarded as being of current importance for top manager performance, based on indicators of current and anticipated future critical job activities, and how these might change over the next decade. Building on the results of this research programme, the assessment centre has the aim of helping participants to gain information about their level of current capabilities against a range of competency and skill areas which have been identified as important for effective executive performance on a world scale.

### **Methodology**

Various projects around the world in different companies have produced lists of competencies. However, these lists are different, one from the other, and have been devised primarily from studies in large multi-national companies, often in the United States, and focused on junior to middle management populations. It is,

therefore, necessary to identify a competency list which addresses the most senior organisational levels within the context of a small to medium sized company population. Accordingly, a research process was set up to identify, for the participants on the International Directors Programme, a set of key competencies which have relevance and applicability for senior management performance in Northern Ireland. This research has been run in parallel with a more extensive research project examining executive competencies in Northern Ireland (Lindsay, 1992).

In order to ascertain the competencies of IDP participants, questionnaires were developed and sent to all 14 programme participants and an additional number of senior managers of SME companies. Only one of the 12 replies to the questionnaires came from a non IDP source. The questionnaire was semi-structured with open questions and focused upon identifying the "critical job activities" and "competencies" required for top team members.

At each stage within the questionnaire, respondents were limited in terms of the number of nominations that they could make for critical job activities and the competencies to successfully address them. Through this means, it was hoped to encourage respondents to identify the most important job activities rather than to simply list all that came to mind. The same rationale applied for the identification of competencies.

The questionnaire requested information in the following sequence:

- Current critical job activities
- Anticipated future changes in terms of the importance and the difficulty of each of these job activities
- New critical job activities required in the future
- Competencies required to effectively address critical job activities
- Anticipated future changes in terms of the "importance" of these competencies in the future
- New competencies required in the future

Throughout the study, competencies are defined as those underlying characteristics, attributes and skills which, if possessed and used by a person in the context of a job, result in effective or superior performance.

In total, twelve completed questionnaires were received; eleven from manufacturing organisations and one from the service sector. A considerable range of industrial sectors was represented, including engineering, construction, beverages, foods, printing, electronics and digital information processing. Company

size ranged from 20 to over 800 employees, and eight companies within the sample employed 100 or less. Annual sales ranged from £1.25 to £16.7 million. Three of the companies were subsidiaries of larger organisations while three had subsidiaries themselves.

## SURVEY RESULTS

### Critical Job Activities

In order to gain an insight into the competencies of IDP participants ( $n = 11$ ) they were asked to consider and list their current and anticipated future critical job activities. The results indicated that a significant number of critical job activities which were identified as new, were identified by other respondents as current, indicating the importance of understanding and taking into account differences in the contextual position and development history of individuals and organisations in the sample. In all a total of 22 different critical job activities were identified: however, as a number of these were only identified by one or two of the 11 IDP respondents, we have listed only those identified by at least four of the respondents (see Table 1 below).

**Table 1: Critical Job Activities**

<b>Activities</b>	<b>No. of Responses</b>	<b>%</b>
Planning/Owning Company Strategy	7	64
Marketing and PR	7	64
Pursuit of Quality/TQM	5	45
Productivity Improvements	4	36
Research and Development of Markets and Product	4	36
Monitoring Business Performance	4	36

### Competencies

This paper focuses on the top team competencies required now and for the year 2000. Through respondents' commentary and by linkage to related competencies and particular activities which respondents identified as being important a total of 59 current competencies and 14 future or new competencies were identified. The

analytical method used was content analysis and clustering, and the results outlined below were tested for face validity and item coherence with an independent professional.

**Table 2: Current Top Team Competencies**

Competence	No. of Nominations	(%)
Vision	9	82
Determination	6	54
Innovative Ability/ Ingenuity	6	54
Thoroughness/Systematic Approach	6	54
Persuasive Ability	5	45
Presentation Ability/ Communication	4	36
Flexibilit	4	36
Commitment, Dedication	4	36

Again excluding those competencies identified by only one or two respondents at this stage of the analysis, and concentrating on those cited by at least four respondents, Table 2 indicates that eight competencies were identified and agreed on as being important for the top team.

Respondents were asked to indicate how the importance of these competencies would increase or decrease in the future. With the exception of "flexibility", the importance of which was identified as remaining constant, all other competencies were perceived to become increasingly important in the future.

### **New Competencies**

The fourteen future or new competencies identified by respondents as necessary to cope with present and anticipated critical job activities can be grouped into six clusters (Table 3). These new competencies identified by the respondents provide an insight into the perceived role and characteristics of the top managers of the future (see also Kakabadse, 1991). They will divide their time between a number

of discreet but inter-related sets of activities which draw upon their key competencies. A central role for top managers will be in devising, refining and re-assembling strategic approaches for their companies. Vision, “day dreams”, and “hunchitis” will play a significant role in creating the strategy. So too will the ability to look at, analyse and interpret past patterns to provide earlier trends for the future. Supporting and informing the creation of strategy, top managers of the future will adopt an external focus, assiduously researching a variety of suitable market places including the actions of competitors and potential collaborators. All of the various data inputs will be subject to thorough analysis, balancing “visions” and “market trends” with internal capabilities. These analyses must include an assessment of risk and calculated risk-taking is identified as an essential feature of determining future company strategy.

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**Table 3: New Competencies**

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<i>Competencies</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategies</li> <li>• Vision “Hunchitis” “Day Dreams” Identifying Past Patterns and Future Trends</li> <li>• Marketing Skills Market Place Awareness</li> <li>• Absorbing, Analysing and Understanding Complex Information Risk Taking</li> <li>• Single Minded “Champion” Leadership Persuasive Ability</li> <li>• Team Building Employee Attention</li> </ul>
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Once strategies have been determined top managers of the future will deploy clear, single-minded and persuasive leadership to turn ideas on paper into operational plans and implement actions that produce real gains. Top managers must embrace this role and act as “champions” of the strategy – both internally and externally within the market place.

Top managers will invest much of their effort into the building and maintenance of effective, empowered and committed work teams. This team-oriented approach will embrace the organisation from top to bottom and will cross traditional functional boundaries. In some sense, we may be looking at the notion of the organisation "as a family" to describe this emerging ethos.

The notion of the "organisation as a family" is a seductive one as it provides an identity. However, it is also important to note that, within families, there are needs to deal with issues relating to people as individual members as well as part of the collective. By extension, this must also be true for top managers within their companies. They will need to ensure that individual employees feel respected, loved, secure, welcome, important, rewarded. They must also cater for their needs to grow and develop. Effective top managers of the future must pay more attention to employee issues such that they create an environment whereby employees gain greater satisfaction from their involvement while companies maximise the contribution from the workforce effort.

### **Competencies for the Year 2000**

Schroder (1989) defines more than one tier or level of competence. He refers to basic competencies which are those competencies required to do the job at all, and "high performance competencies" which are those competencies that produce significantly superior performance in more complex environments. Boam and Sparrow (1992) take this analysis a little further and identify four different categories of "competency". They cite emerging competency, which will become important although it may not have any or only peripheral importance now; maturing competency, which had importance in the past but is becoming less important now; transitional competency, which is needed for a period of time and has significant importance during that time – often a period of change – before losing its appropriateness; and core competency, which has enduring importance and retains this over considerable periods of time almost irrespective of what strategic or tactical paths are taken by the organisation.

In light of the work of Boam and Sparrow (1992) and Schroder (1989) and our aim to identify competencies for the year 2000, it is possible to determine which categories of competency have been identified within this small-scale sample. Given the format and focus of the questionnaire, it would seem reasonable to suggest that we have been able to identify a range of competencies that include

emerging, transitional and core categories. Those regarded as having being important now and with increasing importance in the future probably represent primarily core competencies. However, as mentioned previously, it is interesting to note that what may be regarded as emerging or transitional competencies by some organisations could be core competencies or even maturing competencies for others. This points to the need to carry out competency analysis for individual companies which may be at different levels of development rather than assuming that a generic list of competencies will fit each and every company in the same ways and at the same time.

In describing the key competencies identified by this research, it is helpful to group them into four categories: intellectual abilities, personal characteristics, social abilities and managerial abilities.

### **Intellectual Abilities**

Within this category four specific competencies can be identified.

#### *Strategic Vision*

This includes the following suggested competencies from the initial list: strategist, vision, innovative, thinking/ingenuity, intellectually open, intellectual flair, “hunchitis”, “day dreams”, forward looking, anticipation, progressive minded. Top managers determine clear and progressive strategic visions for their organisations. Informed and guided by their understanding of their business and the external marketplace, they are prepared to generate and consider a wide range of alternative strategic futures for their companies. They continually try to anticipate what the future might bring and build these factors into the development of their strategies. They prize innovative thinking, and ingenuity in setting strategy and in turning strategy into clear plans for action.

#### *Dispassionate Analysis*

From the initial list the following suggested competencies are included: identify pros and cons, assess risks, analytical thinking, circumspect, dispassionate, analysis of past patterns and future trends, project to consequences, think pragmatically, systematic and thorough analysis. Top Managers subject all of the information and ideas that they gather to rigorous analysis. They can quickly assimilate information and draw sound conclusions from it in relation to their business. They are keen to learn lessons from the past and to thoroughly test ideas for their pragmatism in a logical manner. They do not get carried away in the “heat

of the moment” but analyse things in a dispassionate and balanced manner to ensure that all angles have been thoughtfully considered – risks as well as benefits. They use their analytical abilities to help others to question their own thinking and to explore other aspects. They can quickly respond in a structured and coherent manner to critical enquiry or challenge.

#### *Business Knowledge*

Included in this section are the following suggested competencies: knowledge of business, experience, business education, financial knowledge, market understanding, marketing expertise, market-place awareness, technical expertise, practical ability, technical flair, technical and design ability. Top Managers demonstrate a considerable amount of knowledge relating to their own technical and professional disciplines. In addition, they have gained a significant amount of knowledge and expertise relating to wider business matters which enable them to participate fully in meaningful discussions relating to the strategy and operational requirements of the business. They are keen to extend that knowledge base, to keep abreast of new developments and to ensure their awareness of market trends and competitor action.

#### *Business Judgement*

Under this section the following suggested competencies are included: think pragmatically, priority setting, value for money, consistency, risk taking, weigh up pro's and con's. Top Managers make sound decisions that demonstrate sound commercial judgement. They quickly determine priorities and employ a pragmatic perspective to determine what is achievable and should be pursued and what should not. They can weigh up risks quickly and balance that with potential long and short term gains for the organisation. They are concerned to maintain a consistency of approach within established principles. They are prepared to take calculated risks for long term business development as long as absolute bottom line requirements are not sacrificed.

### **Personal Characteristics**

Within this area, three specific competencies can be identified.

#### *Entrepreneurial Approach*

This includes the following suggested competencies from the initial list: entrepreneurial, opportunity seeking, flexible, awareness, confidence to act without all of the information, ambitious for the company, competitive. Top Managers

deploy an entrepreneurial approach to the business. They are ambitious for its success and seek out every opportunity to enhance its performance and extend its potential. They adopt a flexible approach to ensure that they are always ready to respond. They are confident to act without all of the information to address situations if they can see potential benefits or avoid problems. Their competitiveness helps to keep them continually alert for changes (technology, markets, environment, et cetera) which might provide opportunity.

#### *Achievement Orientation*

Included under this heading is the following: achievement oriented, challenge, uncompromising on quality, concerned, commitment and dedication, determination, dynamic, single-mindedness, self-discipline. Top Managers are strongly motivated to achieve concrete results. They are determined and single-minded in pursuit of their goals – both individual and collective. They typically set high but achievable goals and are uncompromising on the quality of achievement and dedication to their goals. They seek new challenges and willingly accept responsibility. In the face of ambiguous or difficult issues, they establish clear goals. They will readily offer their services to help others achieve.

#### *Personal Resilience*

The following suggested competencies are included: personal resilience, flexibility, openness, honesty, self-confidence, perseverance. Top Managers display a great deal of resilience in the face of obstacles or set-backs. They are confident in their own abilities and express their own views openly and honestly. They are prepared to voice unpopular views and suggestions even though this may result in conflict. They are receptive to criticism from others and respond positively when it is voiced. Top Managers exhibit a personal flexibility and robustness that allows them to persevere even when beset by difficulties and changes which need to be incorporated into their plans. They maintain positive and open attitudes even when there are set-backs.

### **Social Abilities**

Within this category two competencies can be identified.

#### *Persuasive Communication*

This includes the following suggested competencies from the initial list: effective presentation and communication ability, persuasive ability. Top Managers are able to communicate effectively in both written and oral forms. They are sensitive

of the need to communicate effectively and frequently in order to provide and gain the information required. They have strong presentation skills and can use these to promote their business internally and externally. They can adapt their style of communication and message to suit the needs of their audience, and can construct and deliver arguments in such a manner as to persuade others effectively.

#### *Interpersonal Sensitivity*

Under this section the following competencies are included: interpersonal skills, honesty and integrity, compassion and sensitivity, concern for others, belief in people. Top Managers have highly developed interpersonal skills which they use to great effect in their dealings with others both within and external to the organisation. They treat others with respect and honesty. They exhibit concern for the views and feelings of others and deal with these sensitively even when there is conflict. They exhibit a positive belief in people by their actions towards them – involving them, encouraging them, giving praise, listening to them, asking for their opinions, etcetera. When there are tough messages to be delivered, Top Managers use their interpersonal skills to handle matters with sensitivity and compassion while ensuring that they have been heard and understood. They will always act to preserve their own integrity and the integrity/self-worth of others in interpersonal situations.

### **Managerial Abilities**

In the last category, Managerial Abilities, two competencies can be identified.

#### *Positive Leadership*

This includes the following suggested competencies from the initial list: leadership, pace-setting, “champion”, motivational ability, team spirit, team building. Top Managers exhibit significant leadership, encouraging and building the commitment of others to personal and company goals. They have the ability to motivate others and set the pace for their endeavour. They act as “champions” for the company, its goals, projects and ideals and infect others with their enthusiasm. They are keen to encourage teamworking and invest time in building and developing strong teams. They are keen to give feedback and actively promote the development of their team members. They consult colleagues at all levels but retain the responsibility for their own decision and the consequences of them.

### *Implementer*

The following suggested competencies are included in this section: organised, co-ordination, thoroughness, systematic approach, planning, implementer. Top Managers are able to define responsibilities and objectives for their staff and departments. They delegate effectively and give clear directions as to what is expected. They exhibit thoroughness in what they do and ensure that the right quality is built into the work for which they are responsible. They plan, organise and monitor progress effectively. They co-ordinate activities and the required inputs of others towards achievement of the goals. They devise and employ systematic approaches to the implementation of plans, paying particular attention when the plan includes novelty, experimentation or the institution of change.

### **Conclusion**

In order to meet the business challenges of the 1990s and beyond, there is a need for a new and innovative approach to management education and development which recognises that a keynote in shaping organisational performance is the performance and capability of the senior management team. Business growth is inspired, guided and facilitated by leaders leading people to perform more effectively. The key to driving business forward to the year 2000, therefore, will be in the form of leading organisational members to achieve their maximum potential in an environment of change and ambiguity. To be effective in this environment, business leaders will need to develop key skills -organisational direction, vision, mission and purpose; implementation and management of change, personal understanding and effectiveness; and the understanding of international business opportunities.

To meet this need the University of Ulster has developed an innovative International Directors Programme in Executive Leadership. The aims of the programme are: to develop competent, skilled, flexible and adaptable senior executives; contribute to the process of organisational change and development; and stimulate improvements in the international competitiveness and profitability of Northern Ireland industry and commerce. The programme seeks to do this by preparing senior executives for their role as team leaders in stronger more dynamic growth businesses, providing them with the knowledge, skills and coaching which will enable them to meet the challenges of a complex and changing environment.

A key element in this programme has been the design of an assessment centre to provide a developmental focus for participants by providing them with documented feedback on their performance in a range of simulated critical senior management job activities which indicates both areas of strength and areas for further development (Dulcewicz, 1989). This centre has been designed on the basis of both a review of existing competency lists (e.g. Schroder, 1989; Boyatzis, 1982; Powers, 1987; Evans, 1987) and a specifically undertaken survey of participants designed to identify those competencies most appropriate and relevant to senior executives in a predominantly small and medium sized company environment in Northern Ireland.

Based as it is on a small sample, the results are indicative rather than diagnostic: they represent a valid statement of current and anticipated competency requirements for the survey participants but are not necessarily generalisable to a wider population, not least because within the sample it was clear that what was a new competency for some respondents was a current competency for others. These results do, however, provide a useful basis for further research into managerial competencies in an SME environment which will, on the basis of much more intensive multi-staged research process, begin to develop such a generalisable framework.

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