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BUILDING A CAREER IN MARKETING COMMUNICATION IN A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ERA: WHICH KEY COMPETENCIES ARE REQUIRED?[*]

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Abstract. The paper focuses on identifying which key competencies the higher educated graduates need to succeed at entry-level jobs in the field of marketing communication in the current sustainable development marketing approaches era and create a competency model for such jobs. The resulting competency model, based on data collected from 194 SMEs operating in the Czech Republic, defines an optimal set of the six most critical key competencies as well as the expected behavior that a competent higher educated graduate should possess to be successfully hired for different marketing communication-related jobs and be able to perform work tasks well. The proposed competency model can bring more transparency to the selection process for both recruiters and job candidates by establishing standards for desirable key competencies in such marketing positions.

Keywords: competency model; marketing communication; reputation; graduates

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JEL Classifications: M31, O15, I25, D83

1. Introduction

One of the essential challenges of the 21st century the world is facing now is undoubtedly sustainable development, i.e. development that should meet the current needs without compromising the future generation's ability to meet their own needs (Brundtland Report, 1987; Zaidi, Ahmed & Raza, 2022; Oláh et al., 2023). From the perspective of marketing management, sustainable development is often perceived as a new socio-economic

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order with mechanisms that are forcing rational behaviour of all market participants as well as transition to a circular economy (Šimková et al., 2023; Androniceanu & Sabie, 2023). To meet these requirements, enterprises must find mechanisms to improve their performance in this area, which demands strategic flexibility (Yousuf et al., 2021). As essential market participants, small and medium-sized enterprises should focus on producing and offering products which ensure the highest utility of households' finance (Skowron & Szymoniuk, 2014; Çera et al., 2020). The way to establish a positive reputation in this new era is to cleverly use various marketing communication tools to communicate products and brands that respect the environment, social responsibility as well as rational needs and problems of consumers (Hao et al., 2020; Horvathova et al., 2020; Konečný, Kostiuk & Ruschak, 2022). However, the level of competition among SMEs is so high nowadays that no company can succeed in this competitive environment without a skilled and competent marketing department to provide operational flexibility that highly affects business performance (Yousuf et al., 2019; Soltes & Gavurova, 2014). In such a situation, the marketing communication specialists should have high competencies to adapt quickly to the market's changing and often unpredictable conditions (Akhtar et al., 2018).

For that reason, to start a successful career in the field of marketing communication nowadays in various sectors of the economy, it is all the more critical for graduate or entry-level candidates to possess and demonstrate the desired level of required vital competencies, as determined by employers (Rivera, 2020; Midhat et al., 2021; Petrovský et al., 2023). These requirements are usually no longer based only on theoretical knowledge but especially on the various personal abilities that provide a generic framework for the behaviour and skills expected of competent workers in various marketing communication specializations (Hay, 2008; Tomlinson, 2008). Modern higher education should undoubtedly aim to achieve the closest match between the key competencies required by the labour market and the key competencies that future graduates can acquire and develop during their study of marketing, business or economics degree (Tkacova et al., 2023). Therefore, universities have made some efforts over the past decade to prepare their students better to meet current requirements and expectations for entry-level positions related to marketing communication, such as junior marketing communication specialist, social media manager junior or promotions coordinator. A suitable unifying manual based on current employers' requirements should be the starting point for future efforts to apply the competency-based approach in higher education, including marketing degrees. Unfortunately, in most cases, it is either based on outdated information, improper assumptions or, worse still, it does not exist. Also, HR managers and recruiters, especially in smaller companies, should consider competency-based approach tools based on the current studies' recommendations when hiring competent employees for marketing departments (Gavurova et al., 2020).

In terms of HR management, one of the key personnel activities in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is the employee selection process, which is currently based mainly on assessing the critical competencies of candidates for offered positions (Malik, Froese & Sharma, 2020; Rivera, 2020; Gavurova et al. 2016). Therefore, to succeed in the selection process, candidates for jobs in the field of marketing communication, including university graduates of marketing, business or economics degrees, should have the desired level of required key competencies rather than theoretical knowledge. This paper aims to identify which key competencies the higher educated graduates need to succeed at entry-level jobs in marketing communication in the current sustainable development marketing approaches era. Subsequently, create a competency model for such jobs based on requirements and behaviour expectations of small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the Czech Republic. The developed competency model should define an optimal set of the vital competencies that a competent, higher-educated graduate should possess to be successfully hired for different marketing communication-related jobs and be able to perform work tasks well.

To achieve the goal, the following research questions are formulated:
RQ₁: Which key competencies of higher-educated graduates are the most important (and in what order) for entry-level positions in marketing communication?
RQ₂: Which ideal behaviour of a competent job candidate is expected for such positions by employers?

2. Theoretical background

The selection of suitable employees is becoming increasingly complicated and demanding because of the increasing number of job applicants for marketing-related jobs. Due to the requirements for matching the needs of companies, including SMEs, with individual employee abilities, human resource managers currently use a competency-based approach to select the most suitable candidate. The competency-based approach consists of the specification of the desired framework of the individuals' key competencies for specific positions utilizing a competency model as a basis for the selection of suitable applicants for a given position (Dubois & Rothwell, 2004; Gonsalvez & Calvert, 214; Campion & Fink, 2011). In 1973, American psychologist David McClelland published an innovative article entitled Testing for competency rather than for intelligence (McClelland, 1973), where he recommended considering especially the competencies when hiring new employees, that is, their capability, abilities, and skills, not only their intelligence, as it had been so far. His assumption was based on the hypothesis that simply testing individuals' knowledge does not enable predicting their ability to perform the required tasks resulting from a given job. According to the research conducted by McClelland's consulting company, the competencies critical for the successful performance of a managerial position included e.g. sufficient entrepreneurial and work maturity skills, interpersonal skills, or intellectual maturity (Raven, 2001).

The key competencies in terms of the individuals' employability in the job market and their personal development were first defined by Mertens (1974) as the abilities that help individuals cope with the reality around them and thus respond better to ever-changing requirements and new challenges of the labour market as well as political stability (Androniceanu et al., 2022). In the early 1980s, Richard E. Boyatzis, an expert in emotional intelligence, made a significant contribution to the popularization and subsequent application of the competency-based approach in human resources management. According to Boyatzis (1982), competency is one of the components contributing to the efficiency of work performance within a digital environment (Androniceanu, 2023).

In the 21st century studies, the authors agree (Belz, Siegrist, 2001; Armstrong, 2011; Bunker, Wakefield, 2004; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010) that key competencies can be defined as abilities, skills, knowledge, attitudes, and values that enable individuals to act adequately in various situations of personal and professional life. Moreover, they enable them to perform multiple positions, including a wide range of long-term qualifications and prerequisites for flexible responses to changing requirements of the global labour market. Thus, the key competencies are not directly dependent on the requirements of a specific position but represent certain universal abilities for coping with constant changes. Key competencies reflect the ability of people to use various skills in parallel and act adequately in a given (problem) situation (Belz & Siegrist, 2001). The competencies, however, are content-neutral since they apply in any life or professional situation. Their acquisition and development are always associated with solving a specific task or a problem (Weiss & Kolberg, 2010; Klaus, 2007; Wiek, Withycombe & Redman, 2011). Individual competency to the desired or required ideal behaviour of an individual is created by the interaction of the following specific groups of crucial competencies (Weber, Finley, Crawford, 2009; Rao, 2010; Stevens, 2012; Hadrich, 2020; Rieckmann, 2012; Gajdzik & Stverkova, 2023):
1) *competencies related to problem-solving:* e.g., creative problem solving, negotiating, presenting, information processing;
2) *social competencies (relational, interpersonal):* e.g., ability to communicate, empathy, ability to work in a team, ability to lead and motivate people, establish contacts and relationships, etc.,
3) *self-management:* e.g., ability to work independently, flexibility, willingness to learn, self-motivation, assertiveness.

The competency model defines a combination of priory skills, abilities, and knowledge necessary to effectively perform the tasks related to a specific position within an organization. Competency models can thus be characterized simply as a strategic tool of human resources management, which helps meet the defined objectives of a company by defining measurable levels of the required behaviour, thus improving the preparedness of the

company for constant changes in global markets (Dubois, Rothwell, 2004; Vazirani, 2010; Szostek, Balcerzak, Rogalska, 2020). Specific models serve as a basis for hiring, evaluating, motivating, and rewarding human resources and their education and development. On the one hand, competency models provide employees with clearly defined tasks and objectives; on the other hand, they represent a specific assessment tool for the employees' superiors (Emery, 2002; Soltes & Gavurova, 2015).

Based on the objectives companies use as a platform for creating and applying competency models, competency models can be divided into two basic types – generic and specific. When defining a generic model, emphasis is put on creating a universally applicable and proven competencies model that would reflect the requirements essential for any organization regardless of the position performed. It is often a model of required key competencies in such a case. These generally applicable models represent a company's first step to successfully implementing a competency-based approach in relation to the development of human resource management. Unlike the generic model, a specific competency model defines competencies that are a prerequisite for the required performance of a given employee occupying a particular position in a company. This kind of model, which is used mainly for managerial positions, describes in detail the expected behaviour of an individual when performing activities to achieve the set objectives, which are closely related and matched with the company strategy in this case (Dubois, Rothwell, 2004; Sanghi, 2004; Liebenow et al., 2020; Aisha et al., 2019).

3. Data and methods

Based on the analysis of relevant secondary resources (Weber, Finley & Crawford, 2009; Xin & Zhao, 2009; Mitchell, Skinner & White, 2010; Wiek, Withycombe & Redman, 2011; Rieckman, 2012; Stevens, 2012; Humburg, Velden & Verhagen, 2013; Loveland et al., 2015), as well as the employer's (SMEs operating in Czech Republic) often recurring requirements (described in many job advertisements published online) a set of priority critical competencies for the research was defined. The most common offered open positions in the field of marketing communication suitable for graduates with marketing, business or economics degrees, whose advertisements were analyzed, are as follows: marketing communication assistant; marketing communication specialist (junior); media assistant; social media specialist (junior); public relations coordinator/assistant; event planner; promotions coordinator; brand marketing specialist (junior); (junior) copywriter.
The chosen competencies for the research are as follows:
1. Creative thinking;
2. Ability and willingness to learn;
3. Ability to communicate;
4. Ability to cooperate;
5. Ability to find, select and analyze information;
6. Ability to solve problems;
7. Ability to work independently;
8. Ability to work under pressure;
9. Flexibility;
10. Public speaking.

Within the next step – the questionnaire survey- each selected competence's degree of significance was subsequently determined. The following criteria were defined for the selection of the target population from among SMEs:

a) companies with 25 - 249 employees;
b) companies with a marketing (communication) department;
c) companies operating in the Czech Republic.

The minimum number of 25 employees was set due to the assumed existence of a more sophisticated marketing communication strategy and processes strategy and the possible presence of the marketing (communication) department in such SMEs. Based on the information provided by several online organizations databases (Firmy.cz; RES, Merk, B2Bdata), SMEs from all 14 regions of the Czech Republic were addressed via phone and emails in 2018 – 2021. While respecting the condition of equal representation of all regions of the Czech Republic in the sample, valid quantitative data was finally obtained by questionnaire from 194 companies (n = 194) that met the specified characteristics. The data was primarily collected from employees responsible for the recruitment process – HR managers, recruiters, or directors in some cases. Using a 5-point scale (from 1 to 5, where 1 = most important competency and 5 = totally unimportant competency), the respondents rated the importance of 10 key competencies that job candidates should have to successfully perform duties of a marketing communication-related job suitable for graduates. In the second part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to define their description of the optimal and expected behaviour of a competent graduate for each specific key competency from the set.

The data obtained was statistically analyzed using the STATISTICA 9 software. As the collected data is ordinal and thus does not follow the normal (Gaussian) distribution, only non-parametric tests were used for its analysis. To test the hypotheses on the corresponding significance of an individual key competencies, the Friedman test (Friedman ANOVA) was used. Kruskal-Wallis test with subsequent Post-hoc analysis was applied to identify the individual clusters of competencies with similar importance levels for the surveyed companies. By comparing the correspondence of the medians of each pair of quantities, the post-hoc analysis determines the p-value in the interval <0,1>. Medians correspondence is confirmed if p-value is > 0.05. The closer the p-value is to 1, the stronger the relation of the individual competencies is in terms of their significance, and the competencies can be included in one specific group. Based on the data analysis results, a generic fundamental competency model for entry-level positions in marketing communication was created.

4. Results

4.1 Significance of Individual Key Competencies

The first step in developing the competency model of the desired candidate for the marketing department is to determine the significance of each of the examined key competencies. The objective is to determine which competencies could be potential parts of the resulting model. Using the Friedman ANOVA, the following hypotheses were tested at the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$:

H_0: The significance of individual key competencies determined by the surveyed employers is identical.
H_A: non H_0
Results: ANOVA = 362.1802; df = 9; N = 194; p-value = 0.000

At the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$, the null hypothesis about the correspondence of the significance of individual key competencies from the employers' points of view was tested using Friedman ANOVA. Considering the obtained p-value = 0.000, the null hypothesis is thus rejected. This means statistically significant differences were identified in the surveyed SMEs' perception of the individual key competencies' significance

when hiring suitable candidates with higher education for the open positions in the field of marketing communication. The average importance of personal key competencies based on the requirements of the surveyed companies is shown in Table 1 and is represented by means. The closer the individual means are to 1, the higher the significance of a specific key competency is for surveyed companies.

Table 1. Average significance of individual key competencies for employers

Key competencies	Mean	St. dev.
creative thinking	1.19	0.46
ability to find, select and analyze information	1.27	0.59
ability to work independently	1.33	0.62
ability to work under pressure	1.41	0.66
ability to solve problems	1.49	0.75
ability to communicate	1.55	0.71
ability to cooperate	1.62	0.73
ability and willingness to learn	1.80	0.84
flexibility	2.04	0.90
public speaking	2.59	0.86

Source: Application and own processing

In terms of the key competencies (based on the results in Table 1), it is possible to describe the skills characteristics of the desired candidate/graduate with higher education for the jobs in the field of marketing communication as a very creative individual with the ability to effectively find and analyze relevant information both independently. To achieve the job duties, the graduate should be able to work under pressure and solve all kinds of possible problems when completing tasks as assigned. The advantage is the ability to communicate and cooperate with others and a willingness to learn. On the other hand, the desired graduate can be a flexible person with developed public speaking skills.

4.2 Identification of Homogeneous Groups of Key Competencies

Kruskal-Wallis test was used to test the following hypotheses at the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$:
H_0: Medians of individual key competencies are identical.
H_A: non H_0
Results of Kruskal-Wallis test: $Q = 301.4927$; $df = 9$; $N = 194$; p-value $= 0.000$

The null hypothesis about the correspondence of the medians was rejected. By subsequent application of the post-hoc analysis, three groups of key competencies were based on the statistically significant medians correspondence of the individual competencies (i.e. p-value > 0.05; see Table 2). The closer the p-value is to 1, the stronger the relation of the individual competencies is in terms of their significance level for questioned companies. It can be included in one specific group of competencies. Each of the groups below is characterized by a mutual relation of the competencies in terms of the similar high significance for surveyed employers. This means that the key competencies included in Group 1 are more significant for respondents than those in Group 2 and Group 3.

Group 1: creative thinking; ability to find, select and analyze information; ability to work independently; ability to work under pressure.
Group 2: ability to solve problems; ability to communicate; ability to cooperate.
Group 3: ability and willingness to learn; flexibility; public speaking.

Table 2. Official YouTube profiles of destinations and their activity

Key competencies	creative thinking	ability and willingness to learn	ability to communicate	ability to cooperate	ab. to find, select and analyze information	ab. to solve problems	ab. to work independently	ab. to work under pressure	flexibility	public speaking
creative thinking	■	0	0	0	1.00	0	1.00	1.00	0	0
ability and willingness to learn	0	■	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.85	0.81
ability to communicate	0	0	■	0.92	0	0.94	0	0	0	0
ability to cooperate	0	0	0.92	■	0	0.91	0	0	0	0
ab. to find, select and analyze information	1.00	0	0	0	■	0	1.00	1.00	0	0
ability to solve problems	0	0	0.94	0.91	0	■	0	0	0	0
ability to work independently	1.00	0	0	0	1.00	0	■	1.00	0	0
ability to work under pressure	1.00	0	0	0	1.00	0	1.00	■	0	0
flexibility	0	0.85	0	0	0	0	0	0	■	0.86
public speaking	0	0.81	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.86	■

Source: Application and own processing

4.3 Competency Model of Competent Graduate

Based on the data analysis results, a generic competency model of a university graduate of marketing or a business or economics degree was developed in accordance with the requirements of SMEs operating in the Czech Republic for their entry-level jobs in the field of marketing communication suitable for the graduates. This competency model determines a set of key competencies that a competent graduate as a job candidate should have to be a desirable potential employee for surveyed SMEs' marketing departments. The significance of each key competency is directly proportional to its position in the graphical representation of the model (see Figure 1). So, the competencies listed in the lowest levels within the model are more significant than those listed in the upper part of the proposed model. The statistical tests mentioned above were used to determine the priority key competencies, which subsequently became individual components of the model. The Friedman and Kruskal-Wallis test with post hoc analysis was used to assess the significance of specific competencies. In developing the model, emphasis was put on its generality, mainly to ensure its easier transferability and subsequent applicability for diverse marketing communication-related positions a competent graduate may occupy in the SMEs.

The final form of the competency model consists of two components:
1) graphical representation of the model (see Figure 1)
2) Table that contains more detailed characteristics of a competent graduate's required/desired behaviour in terms of the individual key competencies. This was created based on merging and subsequent generalization of desired characteristics of ideal behaviour most frequently mentioned by the respondents (managers responsible for the recruitment process) for each competency in the proposed model (see Table 3).

The generic competency model defines the basic skills requirements for entry-level positions – that means clarity of the selection process for both recruiters and job candidates because of established standards regarding desirable

knowledge and skills for such positions. HR managers, recruiters or owners of smaller companies can take a competency-based approach and the results of this study into account when hiring new employees for entry-level marketing positions.
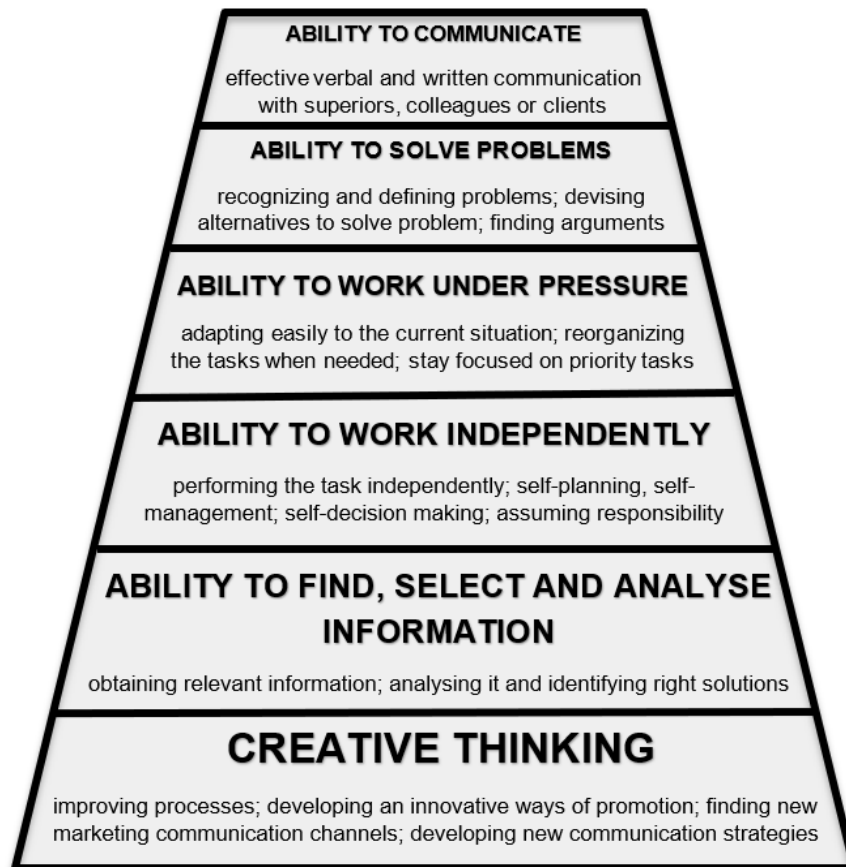

Figure 1. Proposed graduates' generic competency model for entry-level marketing communication jobs
Source: Application and own processing

Table 3. Characteristics of competent candidate's required competencies and behaviour for the marketing communication jobs according to respondents

	Key competencies	Desired behaviour of competent graduate
1	**creative thinking**	• *ability to evaluate a specific process and offer suggestions on how to improve it* • *ability to develop an innovative way to solve the task or achieve the project goal* • *ability to identify a unique way to promote the products, brand, events as well as develop the right strategy to do so in the future* • *ability to find and try new marketing (communication) channels to effectively communicate products, brands, events etc.*
2	**ability to find, select and analyze information**	• *ability to obtain necessary and relevant information purposefully and efficiently from various resources* • *ability to find a core message and distinguish between important and unimportant information* • *ability to analyze data and information to understand topics or problems, formulate possible solutions and identify the most effective one*
3	**ability to work independently**	• *independent performance of assigned tasks in the field of marketing communication* • *ability to independently find data and information and make decisions based on the resources obtained* • *being proactive as well as the ability to self-planning and self-management* • *ability to assume responsibility for the results of own projects*
4	**ability to work under pressure**	• *ability to adapt easily to the current situation and reorganize tasks or projects when needed* • *ability to produce high-quality results even when deadlines are changing* • *ability to stay focus on tasks that need to be done as a priority* • *ability to stay calm and focused on the project goals even in stressful situations*
5	**ability to solve problems**	• *ability to recognize and define problems* • *ability to devise different alternatives for solving the defined problem and evaluating them* • *ability to implement the most viable problem solution* • *ability to find arguments to support and defend specific decisions*
6	**ability to communicate**	• *effective verbal and written communication with superiors, colleagues or clients* • *ability to describe facts and proposals clearly, concisely, and intelligibly* • *ability to present facts and proposals to a smaller group of listeners* • *ability to make listeners interested, ability to argue*

Source: Application and own processing

Thus, employers can make the recruitment process more transparent with competency-based HR management and, as a result, more easily select suitable and competent candidates for the correct positions. Another possible application of the proposed competency model in practice is developing the right competencies of future higher education graduates through updated marketing or business study programs according to the actual expectations of employers defined in the model. It can be understood as a strategic tool for re-evaluating and updating the content of various marketing and marketing communication-related study programs, especially regarding the systematic development of the most desirable key competencies group required by employers.

5. Conclusions

The key to establishing a positive reputation for small and medium-sized enterprises and their products and brands in the current era of sustainable development is effectively utilizing various marketing communication tools. However, this strategic objective cannot be accomplished without skilled and competent marketers. This paper aimed to identify the key competencies that should be included in a competency model for entry-level positions in marketing communication, which would meet the requirements and behavioral expectations of SMEs

operating in the Czech Republic. The developed generic model, based on data collected from 194 SMEs, consists of two components. It outlines an optimal combination of six key competencies. It defines the expected behavior for a competent candidate to excel in specific selection processes for various positions in the marketing communication field that require a higher education. The resulting competency model can bring more transparency to the selection process for both recruiters and job candidates by establishing standards for desirable key competencies in such marketing positions. Simultaneously, this tool can serve as an accelerator and a suitable starting point for the wider implementation of the modern competency-based approach in marketing and business degrees. The research limitations are caused mainly by two factors - the SME's size and the products that the company is offering. Although specific key competencies can be rated as very important by two different recruiters or managers, the behavior requirements of a smaller company operating in the current competitive environment may be significantly higher than that of more prominent companies with large marketing departments and an extensive customer base, or vice versa.

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