

Full Length Research Paper

Exploring human resource (HR) account managers competency in semiconductor industry

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Current competency research in Asia mostly aims at building competency models for a certain job, or studies the relationship between competency and personal / organizational performance. However, ambiguities exist for the definitions and measurements of competency, while the lack of “context” in the definition so as to distinguish competency from traditional job qualifications is a serious flaw. This study takes into account the context-dependent (or situational) nature of competency, as the work role played or as conceived by an HR account manager (which serves as the “context”) influences his/her work competency. Through in-depth interviews with a semiconductor foundry’s human resource (HR) account managers based in Taiwan, as well as our extensive literature review on job competency, we propose a framework and confirm that managers with higher competency tend to take a more open, comprehensive and customer-oriented approach that emphasizes interacting with people, while managers with lower competency see work as a number of separate steps focused on the input of parameters and result output, and tend to take a closed, partial and mechanical view of their job roles.

Key words: Job competency, human resources account manager, systems theory, contextual factor, semiconductor industry.

INTRODUCTION

Competency plays an important role in maintaining business competitiveness; it is evident that an enterprise needs to integrate workers’ different competencies through effective human resource (HR) policies so as to align the workforce with business strategies (Vakola et al., 2007a, b). Ulrich (1997) identifies strategic thinking, innovation, creativity, and business sense as critical elements for success in almost any kind of job, and hence the need to define and develop new competencies. Azmi (2010) and Wickramasinghe and Zoyza (2009) indicate that competency-based performance management increase the level of service quality and achieve successful job performance. Stevenson and Starkweather (2010) investigating the human characteristics necessary and can get clearly identify six critical core competences. In this context, it is particularly important for businesses to comprehend the dynamic nature of workers’ competencies, while recognizing the need for connecting competencies with changing business needs (Athey and Orth, 1999).

The application of the concept of competency in HR practices is nothing new, but certain confusions remain

as to what competencies are and how they should be measured (Sanchez and Levine, 2009; Shippmann et al., 2000; Stevenson and Starkweather, 2010). Two major lines stand out in the competency literature: one line attempts to establish competency models and measurements (Katz and Crowston, 2008; O’Connor and Ayers, 2005; Stevenson and Starkweather, 2010; Sanchez and Levine, 2009; Stumpf, 2009; Li et al., 2009), while the other deals with the relationship between competency models and organizational (or personal) performance (Wang and Niu, 2010; Sign, 2008; Heinsman et al., 2008; Wingrean and Blanton, 2007; Mehta and Peters, 2009; Wei and Lau, 2005). However, a better definition of competency-complete and useful in practice is still needed. In addition, the literature does not explicitly stress the role of work context in the discussion of competency versus the more traditional idea of job qualifications. In response, our study will explore work competency across the full spectrum of the roles of a semiconductor HR manager, while considering the interplay between organizational needs and organizational adaptations to changes in environment.

This study aims to clarify and find a better definition of competency through a rigorous literature review and a case study of semiconductor HR managers. We compare the aspects of competency at different levels. We also compare competency with the more traditional concept of job qualifications. We examine the definition of competency through interviews with managers. Hopefully, a better and clearer understanding of competency would emerge.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and contents of competency

The concept of competency has been systematically explored since McClelland (1973). In his research, McClelland found that personal competency, rather than a worker's intelligence, determines whether the worker performs well or averagely. It is therefore insufficient to use intelligence and aptitude tests in predicting a worker's success or high performance; competency (which includes cognition capability as well as personality) is a more accurate behavior characteristic for identifying high performance workers. Catano (1998), in collaboration with the Canadian Human Resources Research Institute, reviewed the competency literature and expert as well as scholar opinions of various sources, and summarized three common elements applicable to different definitions of competency: (1) Competency, the latent factor for effective and successful work performances, combines knowledge, skills, capability and other personal traits; (2) Competency is observable and measurable; and (3) Competency distinguishes average and outstanding performers. Thus, competency as latent personal traits brings about success and superior performance in a worker's life (DuBois and Rothwell, 2004; Krogh and Roos, 1995; McClelland, 1973; Palan, 2005).

Boyatzis (1982) describes competency as an underlying characteristic of a person that makes him/her effective and perform better; competency may be "a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge he or she uses". Ulrich and Yeung (1989), in anticipation of worker competency in the 1990s, defined competency as the knowledge, skills and capabilities a worker owns or exhibits. Similarly, Knowles (1975) and McLagan (1989) defined competency as knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values that make an expert performer. Moreover, because of the latent characteristic, competency manifests itself in various work activities. Woodruffe (1991) used competency to refer to areas of work in which the person is competent. This is job-based competency, which is different from McClelland's (1973) person-related competency; the former describes a job or a worker's role, while the latter refers to personal factors that help accomplish the work (that is, transforming personal traits

into competency, which then shows in work performance). Drawing on Boyatzis's approach, Spencer and Spencer (1993) defined competency as personal underlying traits that contribute to work success and superior performance; these traits involve five categories: motive, personal attributes, self-conception, knowledge and skills. They investigated which competencies superior performers in more than 200 different jobs were using, and found that superior performance at work usually results from specific sets of a worker's competencies combined in a particular way. Thus, competencies are personal traits and skills to accomplish work goals, which can be measured by work performance (Green, 1999; McClelland, 1973). Similarly, competency involves specific attributes a person has which are consistently on display so as to achieve desired work performances (DuBois and Rothwell, 2004; Davis et al., 2004).

Parry (1998) nonetheless interpreted competency by defining a cluster of related knowledge, attitudes and skills that may affect a major part of one's job and correlate with job performance, and that can be measured against widely-accepted standards and improved via training development. Klein (1996) interpreted competency from a behavioral perspective. He indicated competency as clusters of observable behaviors, and inferences can be made through behaviors exhibited by a worker about whether he/she possesses a certain competency. Thus, a competency can be consistently verified by indirect indicators of an individual's behaviors, and a superior or average performer is subject to evaluation by a cluster of behaviors that are exhibited in specific tasks. Byham and Moyer (1996) defined competency as clusters of behaviors, motivations, and knowledge related to job success or failure. With this grouping, competency involves (1) behavioral competency: what a person says or does that results in good or poor performance; (2) knowledge competency: what a person knows regarding facts, technologies, a profession, processes, or procedures; and (3) motivational competency: how a person feels about a job, organization, or geographic location.

In general, whichever interpretation of competency a researcher holds, they all provide a list of traits of competency that may contribute to work performance. However, their lists differ, and the concept of competency is vague and is blurred with the more traditional concept of "job qualification". All in all, we may define competency as traits that make a worker perform his/her work effectively; moreover, the traits include knowledge, skills, personality, motivation and values.

Competency vs. job qualification

Job qualification refers to the required knowledge, skills or personality for accomplishing work; it has universal applicability. In contrast, competency refers to specific knowledge, skills and personality that are to be applied to

different work contexts. It considers an individual's contribution to an organization and his/her interaction with other people both inside and outside the organization. The emphasis is on how workers finish the tasks rather than simply on the required qualifications (Shippmann et al., 2000). For instance, even though the required qualification for microchip R&D engineers may be a formal degree in electronic engineering or a related field, the necessary qualities to accomplish work effectively may include specific knowledge of certain areas, knowledge of how to find resources in the organization, and the skills of cooperating with other people. Thus, Sandberg (2000) suggested that personal traits in competency are not static but evolve over time as a worker learns to cope with work effectively in the process. Aside from universal applicability and contextual variability, competency differs from job qualification in that it involves a worker's motivation and values, whereas motivation affects how well workers' perform, and how their values influence their priorities and judgment.

Ulrich et al. (2008) proposed that being a "credible activist" is most critical among the six competency factors presented in their article. This is akin to personal credibility which was raised by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005). Being respected, a credible activist proactively thinks about people-related issues for the business, and treats personnel challenges as opportunities to influence decisions and add value to the organization. McManus and Kelly (1999) offered a similar competency factor that is, forming a strategy for the most critical work, while taking the initiative and being innovative. Furthermore, Sandberg (2000) reviewed the rationalistic (and more quantitative) approaches to competency study, and distinguished three main approaches: the worker-oriented, the work-oriented, and the multimethod-oriented. The worker-oriented approach looks for attributes and personal traits required for effective work performance. The work-oriented approach takes the work itself as the point of departure; it first identifies activities that are central to the accomplishment of work, and then transforms these activities into personal attributes. By doing so, this approach avoids the "too generic and too abstract" problem. Sandberg (2000) suggested that the ability to self-teach represents an individual's real interest in his/her work. Similar to the ideas of the credible activist, taking the initiative and being innovative, the individual is motivated to accomplish work with innovative thinking and is able to learn relevant work knowledge and skills that improve his/her work performance.

Raven (1984) indicated that a list of work activities does not sufficiently describe attributes required to efficiently accomplish these activities. The multimethod-oriented approach is more comprehensive, drawing on both of the first two approaches. All three approaches regard competency as an attribute-based phenomenon. Although they differ in the ways they identify competency, they all point to a specific set of attributes that workers

use to accomplish work. The attributes are "de-contextual" (or context-independent), that is, free from the work context in which the worker and the work itself is situated. Even though research results can be used to verify the researcher's competency model, the results could be detached from the "true" competency contents, since de-contextual, quantified surveys may have pre-defined the scope of what is or is not included as competency.

Sandberg's study (2000) interviewed 20 engineers (a random sample out of a total of 50) at Volvo Car's engine optimization division; before the interviews, he arranged seminars with engineers in which he explained research objectives. As he analyzed the interview transcripts, he classified the engineers' conceptions of what makes an engine "optimized", the work content (what they conceive of as work) and the work context (how they conceive of that work). Sandberg then compared each other engineer's conceptions, regrouped the interviewees and re-classified the conceptions, and analyzed the transcripts again with the new regrouping. Variations in competency began to repeat themselves, and the possible variation in conceptions of engine optimization was captured. Through an ongoing iterative process, the analysis eventually reached a point where each conception of engine optimization remained stable. In collecting data, "communicative validity" was achieved through the following: First, ensuring that the researcher and engineers had established a common initial understanding of what they were doing; this is what Apel (1972) calls a "community of interpretation". During the interviews, only two principal open-ended questions were posed so as to encourage descriptions of work and job conception by the engineers themselves. Sandberg asked "What does optimization work mean to you?" and "What is a competent optimizer for you?", and followed up with exploratory questions such as "What do you mean by that?" or "Can you give an example?"; the engineers then elaborated on and demonstrated what they meant in practical situations. As for "pragmatic validity", when obtaining data, Sandberg observed the engineers on site and asked follow-up questions so that they could demonstrate what their statements meant in practice (Table 1).

In light of the analysis above, we conducted interview-based qualitative research that used the workers themselves as the point of departure. We studied the work as conceived of by the workers themselves, and explored how they think they should accomplish the work, then developed a competency model applicable to our specific organizational context.

The above studies point to the parts-to-whole characteristic of competency. When analyzing work competency, researchers can discern competency levels from elements to a more integral organizational perspective-levels that indicate what a worker is paying attention to. Among the highest in the hierarchy should be the worker's

Table 1. Structures of competency through variation in ways of conceiving of engine optimisation (excerpt from Sandberg, 2000).

Conception	Main focus	Key attribute of competency					
		Ability to Analyze and Interpret	Ability to optimize accurately	Knowledge of the Engine	Knowledge of the monitoring systems	Ability to Self-Teach	Ability to Cooperate With Others
Optimizing separate qualities	Relation between monitoring parameter and single engine quality	Analyze and interpret how one or several monitoring parameters have influenced the quality	Be accurate and methodical in the optimization	Understand how the qualities of the engine react to changes in the parameter	Understand which monitoring parameters have an influence on a specific quality of the engine and how they do so		
Optimizing interacting qualities	Relations between the qualities of engine		Optimize the qualities of the engine in the right order and be accurate	See links between the qualities of the engine	Understand and develop monitoring systems (to reach a desired interaction among the engine qualities)	Interest in engines and self-teaching (about links between engine qualities)	Cooperate with the other people involved and communicate to them on how the engine ought to be optimized
Optimizing from the customers' perspective	Relation between optimized engine and customers' experience of driving			Practice sense of the engine	Understand and develop monitoring systems (to achieve customers' requirements)	Interest in engine and self-teaching (about customers' requirements)	Cooperate and have relevant contacts

emphasis on how the work itself relates to customers or organizational goals. Furthermore, seen from a value-adding perspective, workers with the highest level of competence are able to think how to add value to the organization as a whole.

Goh (2008) argued that an HR account manager has three basic portfolios that form his/her scope of work: employee relations, performance consulting and change catalyst. As an employee relations expert and facilitator, he/she serves as employee champion and administrative expert, handles grievances, ensures fair and just processes, manages employee communications, acts as a bridge of trust, and pays attention to employee retention and engagement. As performance consultant, the manager acts as facilitator for performance management, coaches individuals and teams with actions that enhance performance, evaluates employee performance, and coaches and counsels for productivity and disciplinary

measures. As change catalyst—probably the most difficult role—he/she constantly supports, guides and works with line unit executives on organizational change.

Our study also reviews the literature that specifies HR work roles, so as to serve as the basis of concept classification. Ulrich (1997) in his book "Human Resources Champions" suggested four roles for HR, which include strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion and change agent. Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) in the book "The HR Value Proposition" proposed five roles, namely strategic partner, human capital developer, employee supporter, functional manager and HR leader. They also conducted competency surveys on HR staff from 1987 to 2000, and listed the five competency factors as strategic contribution, personal credibility, HR delivery, business knowledge and HR information technology. They considered the two roles of strategic partner and HR leader to be HR account

managers' core competencies. Ulrich et al. (2008) suggested a list of six HR competency factors, which are credible activist, talents manager, culture and change steward, business ally, strategy architect and operational executor. The various HR competency conceptions suggested by Ulrich's several important studies are widely acknowledged by human resources professionals, and our study benefits a great deal from them in terms of data analysis and interpretation of conceptions.

METHODOLOGY

The company in our case study is a leading Taiwanese semiconductor foundry, which provides semiconductor manufacturing services for worldwide customers. It has built its reputation in offering advanced wafer production processes with great manufacturing efficiency. Its staff in total amounts to 20,000 workers, including the manufacturing and support units. With this considerable organizational size, the company possesses a fully fledged human resources service function. The HR division has two division co-heads, twelve HR account managers, and twelve HR specialists who support the account managers. Every account manager is responsible for the HR affairs of one or more organizational units such as factories or divisions. Some account managers are also assigned within the HR division to coordinate promotion and annual evaluation efforts across the company, while some of them serve as assistants to the two HR division co-heads.

Research design

With reference to Sandberg (2000), in order to focus on the interpretative differences in the jobs of our research subjects, we opted for the qualitative method using in-depth interviews. As we aimed to identify interviewees' "job conceptions", we adopted a semi-structured interview design and used open-ended questions. We designed interview outlines beforehand according to our research objectives. However, during the interview, the interviewer could freely revise his questions along the way, which offered flexibility in collecting and exploring the data. We were particularly interested in finding out how each HR account manager interprets his/her work and what the meaning of work takes on for him/her. We then built a job competency model for the HR account managers at a semiconductor foundry.

The interview questions were designed to explore an HR account manager's work content and focus, and identify the knowledge and skills needed to accomplish this work. Similar to the studies of Kelley and Caplan (1993) and Sandberg (2000), we asked the interviewees (1) what is the work content of an HR account manager, and (2) what do they think are the necessary knowledge and skills an HR manager should possess. We then did follow-through with questions in response to the interviewee's answers, hoping to elicit further in-depth descriptions of their work content.

We dissected the paragraphs in the transcripts and categorized the concepts we obtained by using the open coding method. First, we divided the interviewees into three groups (junior, middle, senior) in accordance with each manager's seniority at work. We studied the interview transcripts in detail, sentence by sentence, and then interpreted the dissected paragraphs as certain phenomena. We then assigned codes to the dissected paragraphs according to the interpreted phenomena, and counted the number of appearances. We then analyzed the coded results according to the six competency factors summarized by Ulrich et al. (2008), and merged related factors into a tailor-made HR account manager competency model.

We compared similar sets of concepts gleaned from transcripts from the three work seniority levels, trying to distinguish the junior manager group's work concepts, say, from those of the middle manager group. We repeated the process and revised along the way, so that we could balance subjective interpretations with objective descriptions from the transcripts and obtain honest descriptions of an HR account manager. As the final set of concepts gradually emerged, we recorded the paragraph numbers and made an interview coding sheet for concepts (or "constructs"), and then counted the number of appearances in the interview transcripts (Figure 1).

Participants

This study takes Sandberg (2000) suggestion that a research design should "describe variations in competence that may occur at any one level, among novices, advanced beginners, or experts". We interviewed nine HR account managers, three each at the junior, middle and senior work levels (Table 2). All of them are professional human resource workers, and all of them have certain opinions about their work and ideas of job competence. Before we conducted each interview, we explained in phone calls the aims of our research and the presumed interview questions, in order to prevent the interviewees from digressing into descriptions unrelated to their ideas of work competence. After the formal time and place were set and before the interview, we sent an email reminder which included the interview procedures, the presumed questions and our need to tape the whole interview to make written transcripts. We conducted the interviews in non-interfering, independent conference rooms.

For the manager code, the letter J denotes junior HR account manager, M middle manager, and S senior manager, in terms of formal job classification. J1 refers to the first junior manager, J2 the second junior manager, S2 refers to the second senior manager, and so on. Excerpts from the interview transcripts are in *italics*. The codes for each excerpt refer to the transcript page number and the line numbers; for example, (J2, 2-1, L8-11) denotes an excerpt from interviewee J2's transcript on page 2-1, lines 8 to 11.

Proposition

Sandberg (2000) found that workers with higher competency tend to take a more open, comprehensive and customer-oriented approach that emphasizes interacting with people, while workers with lower competency see work as a number of separate steps focusing on the input of parameters and result outputs, and tend to take a closed, partial and mechanical view of job roles. We thus describe job competence along a horizontal axis (closed vs. open) and a vertical axis (partial vs. comprehensive), subdivided into 4 categories: comprehensive-closed; comprehensive-open; partial-closed; partial-open. The more comprehensive a worker's job conception is, the higher the competence level he/she possesses. (Similarly, the more open a worker's job concept is, the higher the competence level he/she possesses). The propose is as follow:

1. From the systems theory point of view, job competence can be categorized into High, Medium, and Low levels (Figure 1).
2. A high competency worker tends to have a comprehensive and open perspective toward his/her work, which involves value-adding activities to the organization as a whole and concerns the organization's adaption to the external environment;
3. A medium competency worker tends to have a partial but open or a comprehensive but closed perspective toward his/her work, which concerns interactions among department units within an organization but not the external influences on the organization as a whole. He/She proactively learns new knowledge and skills and has

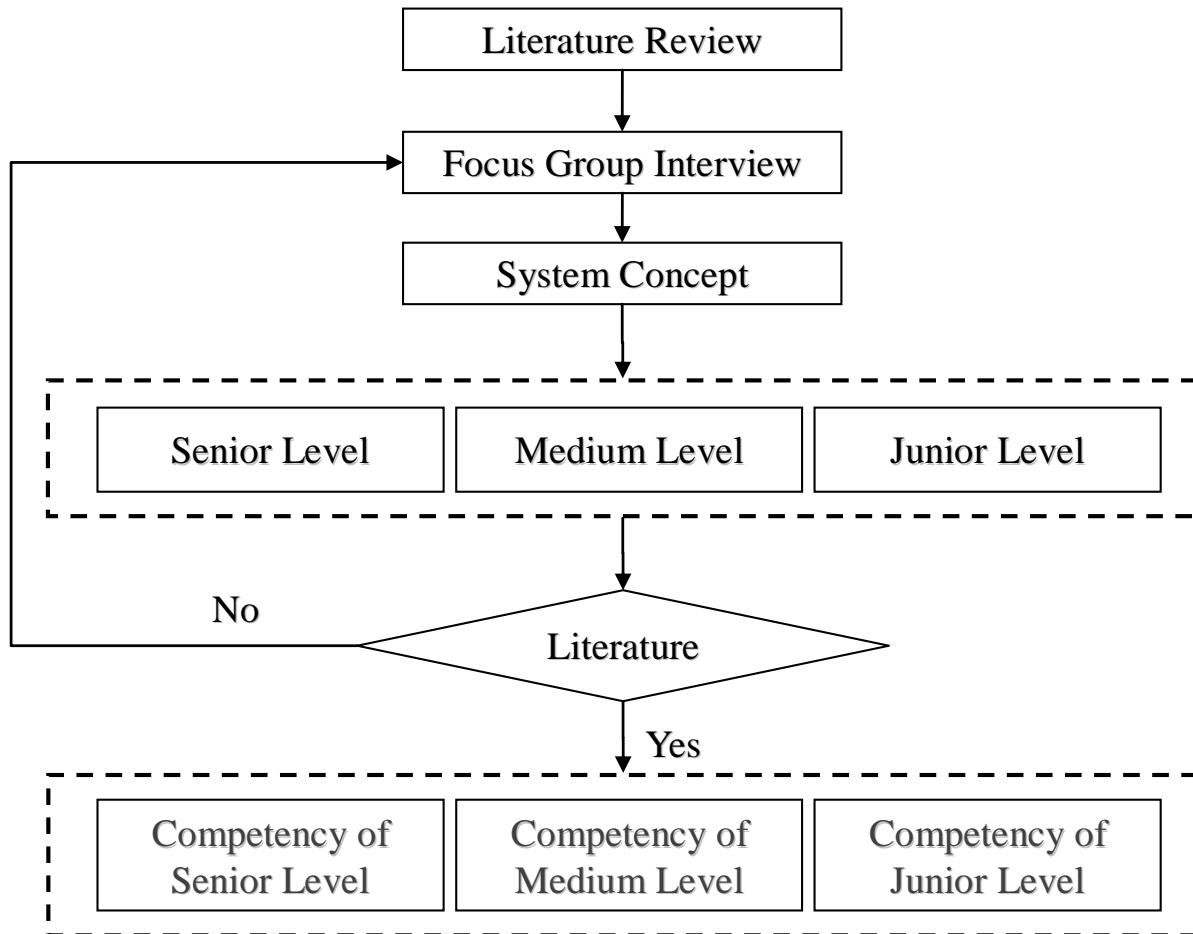


Figure 1. Research design flow diagram.

the ability to self-teach;

4. A low competency worker tends to have a partial and closed perspective toward his/her work, which involves learning to use basic work tools and assembling the available resources in his/her own department unit to achieve departmental tasks.

5. A higher competency worker possesses the abilities of a lower competency worker; however, a low competency worker does not possess the abilities of a higher competency worker (Figure 2).

Reliability and validity

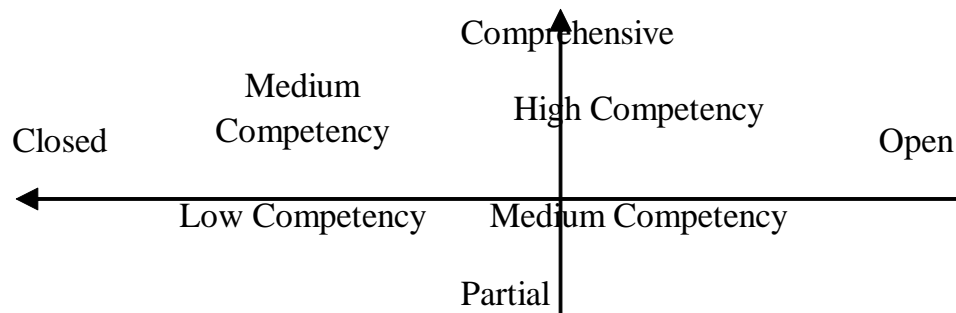
Our research design is based on the concepts and frameworks of Kelley and Caplan (1993) and Sandberg (2000), so our design should have a certain degree of external validity. We first clarified and confirmed the concepts after extensive literature reviews, and then coded and classified the texts from the interview transcripts based on our readings. We therefore proposed the two-dimensional conceptual framework and our definitions of high, medium and low competency workers. In order to verify the internal validity of our design, we asked another researcher to code one randomly-selected sample (M3) from our interview transcripts, by using the same classification of concepts; initially, he identified six relevant concepts, which is 83% consistent with our readings of seven relevant concepts (six of them are the same). We further clarified some definitions of concepts to the researcher, and after reworking, the exact seven relevant concepts were identified. The internal validity was thus in effect exactly verified.

RESULTS

In analyzing the results, we discovered that for an HR account manager, his/her key attributes of competency are: ability to build relationships with line unit staff ("credible activist"), employee relationships and development, ability to cooperate with others, knowledge of the line unit, making business allies, and operational executor. In terms of an account manager's job conception, we also identified the three levels at which he/she could operate: (1) mediating between the HR function and the line unit; (2) responsible for all his/her line unit's HR affairs; and (3) being the HR leader and strategic partner for the line unit. In other words, junior HR account managers tend to have a closed perspective, seeing their work as somehow limited to an HR functional role; middle managers tend to take a more comprehensive view of their roles within the line unit, and take charge of the line unit's HR affairs; while senior managers tend to assume the leadership role, as the HR leader of the line unit, with presumed organizational influence on their line units. In the following sections, we discuss the specified three levels of job conception an

Table 2. List of Interviewees and their HR work years.

Manager code	Name	Job classification	HR work years
J1	Ms. A	Junior HR Account Manager	10
J2	Mr. B	Junior HR Account Manager	13
J3	Ms. C	Junior HR Account Manager	9
M1	Ms. D	Middle HR Account Manager	15
M2	Ms. E	Middle HR Account Manager	11
M3	Mr. F	Middle HR Account Manager	13
S1	Mr. G	Senior HR Account Manager	19
S2	Ms. H	Senior HR Account Manager	11
S3	Mr. I	Senior HR Account Manager	12

**Figure 2.** The four quadrants of competency: Conceptual framework.

HR account manager may hold, and further delineate the differences at each level in light of the six key attributes of competency we have identified.

Competency for an HR account manager

Junior account manager

Job conception: mediating between HR function and line unit. The three junior account managers we interviewed position themselves each as the medium between the HR functional division and the line unit he or she is responsible for.

They define their work role as an implementer of corporate HR policies who plans and executes according to the need of the line unit. Their job conception looks to be a closed one, unaffected by influences external to the company. They do the usual things required by the company's HR division, transmitting the feedback from the line unit to the HR division, and implementing the adjusted policies accordingly. The interviewee J2 manager described:

“As far as our work is concerned, we do things bi-directionally. Our HR division asks us to implement something for the line unit, and we custom-make the practices and language that are fit for our line unit. We are like salesmen from the HR division, and we

try to pitch what our division hopes to implement. Another thing is, when the line unit's executives need our assistance from the HR side, we try to find resources from the HR division for them, or we let the HR division know what the line unit wants, and we're trying in every way to help the line unit executives to achieve their goals... (J2, 2-1, L8-11)”

Key attributes of competency

Operational executor

As suggested by Ulrich et al. (2008), an operational executor executes the corporate HR policies, and possesses the ability to update and renew his/her HR skills. Our interviews indicate that the junior account managers' HR job competencies are very similar to those of an operational executor, which include mainly (1) resolving practical issues in implementation; (2) re-packaging the HR policies and practices according to the needs of the line unit.

Resolving practical issues in implementation

As the company sets directions for HR policy, guidelines and schedules, an HR account manager implements them. He/She needs to solve practical issues of

implementation, through activities or events or procedures. He/She serves as the medium between which the company and the line unit communicate HR and other policies. In discussing her work, account manager J1 said:

“For the HR annual activities, I communicate first the company policies and guidelines as well as the implementation schedule with the line unit executives. What is required or what should be done, and we figure out the methods that are acceptable and workable for the line unit people. For example, during the annual promotion reviews I discuss with the unit executives the nomination process, the performance data they should collect, the performance measures and how the documents would be reviewed. I hope that through these discussions I would help the unit executives gain better results for the promotion decisions...(J1, 1-3, L35-39)”

Repackaging the HR policies and practices

The account manager, aside from executing HR policies in the line unit, also tries to meet the practical needs of the line unit by “product re-packaging” or re-assembling the product elements. The account manager suggests solutions or programs that can be likened to “products”. In selling to the line unit with better appearance and/or substance, an account manager may “re-package” to gain wider acceptance. As J1 and J2 manager indicated:

“All I do is sell HR with different packaging or appearance, or find various ways of selling. For example, I just held a multi-level, internal coordination meeting in the line unit, but I ditched the formal name and called it “June Connection”. I designed a framework the same as a coordination meeting, and gave them surveys to do at the end of the meeting. I did the same thing, just with different packaging... (J1, 1-8, L141-144)”

“I see packaging as product marketing that raises the profile of your event. We HR account managers also compete with each other at times. Just last month I did a coordination meeting for my line unit, the same thing every account manager did. But those who packaged their events got mentioned by the big boss... (J2, 2-8, L148-150)”

Understanding business and personal relations in the line unit

An HR account manager, in order to meet the line unit’s various demands as well as providing solutions, should also understand his/her line unit’s business and the

personal relations within the unit. Manager J1 mentioned the importance of self-learning:

“I often glean the necessary information from the company’s internal website and databases. I think an HR manager’s self-learning ability is also an important element for good performance at work. At times, when I attend staff meetings, I hear and learn about the organization dynamics and knowledge, as well as the business objectives...(J1, 1-7, L129-132)”

In addition, an HR account manager should spend time figuring out the personal relationships in the line unit, the personal attributes of each of the line executives, and attitudes towards HR function, so as to avoid unnecessary interpersonal conflicts. Account manager J3 put it in these words:

“An HR account manager should maintain his/her sensitivity to people; each unit is different in its own way, and situations surrounding the unit may be different. After some chats with a unit worker, you should have a good sense of what the person is like, his/her attitudes towards some major issues and towards HR. Is he/she for or against a certain HR policy? This would help you interact with him or her later on... (J3, 3-3, L38-41)”

Improving staff relationships in the line unit

Junior manager assists the line unit executives in finding out what the workers think about the changes and their emotions, and facilitates communication through meetings or informal interactions. Using meetings as an example, account manager J1 explained:

“As well, executives are afraid of unsaid workers resistance and public defiance from unit. They also need HR people’s help with talking to workers. At that time, I would think of clear steps in communicating ideas, or even put out some feelers so that workers know something in advance, and I can observe the feedback. I usually communicate the background of the event, what efforts and limitations the executives have so far, when the event will take place, and so on. Workers are more accepting of changes in this regard... (J1, 1-7, L119-124)”

In resolving issues in the line unit, the junior account manager should pay attention first to the emotions of the workers, trying to deal with the human side of the issue and only after that with the issue itself. Manager J3 said:

“We often deal with workers whose openly expressed dissatisfactions are different from their

true grudges; they oppose issue A, but what really matters to them is issue B. Some cases require the HR people to deal with the workers' emotions first, because more troubles would come if the workers' emotions are not dealt with in the first instance... (J3, 3-5, L93-95)".

Gaining trust and establishing a reputation

All three junior HR account managers emphasized the importance of gaining trust from line unit executives and of building up a personal reputation. It shows in four types of activities: (1) speedy responses to line unit executive's requests; (2) data analysis and interpretation; (3) investment of time in building relationships with executives; (4) a positive attitude and enthusiasm towards work.

Speedy responses to line unit executive's requests

Speedy responses to the requests and needs of executives are essential for building professional trust between a new HR account manager and the executive team. This could be evidence in the executives' eyes that the HR manager is able. Manager J1 said:

"The initial responses to a line unit executive's request are very important. When they are in a hurry to find workers, you must by all means try to get the recruitment department to find the right people, as soon as possible. This way the line unit executives know that their HR people do help greatly, and then they trust you more... (J1, 1-7, L114-116)".

Data analysis and interpretation

In the planning and execution of HR measures and policies, the account manager must possess good ability in data analysis. According to organizational demands, he/she gathers and interprets the evidence about the HR situation of staff in the line unit, and finds the strengths and weaknesses and trends. All of these add to the trust the line unit executives place in the HR manager. Managers J1 and J3 both mentioned this aspect:

"I did personnel analysis and told my line unit executives about the gap in recruitment. They therefore remained alert about the personnel needs. The point is still about "creating the demand" by yourself. Our line unit executives like numbers, so I supply them with numbers, along with a good story that combines organization goals with HR policies... (J1, 1-3, L48-50)".

"I do exit interviews with those workers who leave the line

unit. I do some analysis, see which sub-unit has the most serious problems, find out what the reasons are. Is the problem a general one across the line unit or specific to the sub-unit? And then I tell my line unit executives, and provide them with evidence. They usually ask what my professional HR suggestions would be. And we may conduct an off-campus workshop to discuss the several themes we have... (J3, 3-1, L13-17)"

Investment of time to build relationships with executives

A junior account manager builds his/her professional reputation through speedy responses to requests or evidence analysis. He/She also invests a substantial amount of time in building the trust of the line unit executives. J1 mentioned the importance of trust:

"Trust is very important. You can say it's about "engaging" with line unit executives. A new HR account manager should go to every birthday party, wedding, hospital visit, funeral, etc., and take every chance to meet in person the line unit executives... (J1, 1-6, L112-114)".

Manager J2 thinks interactions are important, too. He said:

"We should go visit them outside the office. We should talk to them face to face. We should figure out with them our differences and commonalities. Gradually, they would be willing to hear more about our ideas... (J2, 2-1, L18-19)".

Middle account manager

Job conception: taking charge of all HR affairs for the line unit. The middle account manager with the job conception feeds more input into the line unit and puts more emphasis on the interactions between the line unit and the HR function. He/She does not limit him/herself to a mediating role, but takes a more open view of the work of the HR staff, seeing all HR affairs—being related to the line unit he/she is responsible for—as his/her own work. Middle manager M3 commented, for the scope of work; Manager M2 mentioned that the work focus of an account manager varies with the different line units he/she is responsible for:

"As their own duty, account managers are responsible for all things that are related to HR in the line unit. Everything, whether it is minor or major; everything. They have to develop solutions to problems, and help communicate and execute the solutions. They deal with employee relations. They are also initiators of things. They are advisors; they

provide the line unit executives with advice. For this, they have to be prepared all the time... (M3, 6-1, L6-9)".

"In fact, all HR account managers do similar things. Selection, employment, training, and retaining—these are basic things; every account manager does it. But because your account is special in its own way, you need to focus on different things... (M2, 5-1, L1-3)"

Key attributes of competency

Managing the talent

Ulrich et al. (2008) argued that talent management includes retaining and developing current (and future) talent that the organization needs. The middle account managers described their experience in designing training programs for line unit executives and workers, with the aim of developing the needed skills. In accordance with his/her job conception, a middle account manager pays much attention to the interactions between the line unit and the HR function. As for developing talent in the line unit, manager M2 remarked on her efforts to design training programs in response to line unit executives' requests:

"I have spent a lot of time and energy developing talent in my line unit, in the past year or so. My goal has been to transform the workers' behaviors and mindsets, in order to help them serve clients at the frontline... (M2, 5-1, L9-11)".

Learning the dynamics of the line unit

In contrast to junior account managers' more static view of personal relations in the line unit, middle account managers see the dynamics in the organization, and continually update the internal dynamics. Managers M2 and M3 discussed their ways:

"Watch and listen as much as possible. Have your own 'grapevine'. Have friends 'on the ground'. In meetings, play your HR role well; try to draw more from the executives about how a certain worker performs his or her strengths and weaknesses and so on. For annual performance reviews, promotion discussions or 'talent forums', you not only keep written records, but also confirm the evidence about the person. The ways to confirm are, like, my personal observations of the person, or during meetings with executives I ask more questions about a person to see if other people's reviews are justified or not. I cannot really specify how it works, but just go visit people and mingle... (M2, 5-5, L78-84)".

Working with line unit executives and executive assistants

Middle account managers work with executives and executive assistants to accomplish HR goals. Manager M2 said:

"We have got excellent executives and secretaries. At meetings such as the VP seminars, secretaries maintain detailed records and keep all the files. We rely on them a great deal. For training, from entry-level engineers up to executives, we set indicators with representatives from each department in the training committee. HR specialists can contribute ideas... (M2, 5-4, L62-65)".

Being proactive

Being a credible activist (Ulrich et al., 2008), aside from building trust with line unit executives, a middle account manager should proactively learn new knowledge and skills that would contribute to the line unit. He/She should find potential problems and possible solutions. He/She should show passion for the HR work and be persistent and brave when facing difficulties.

Proactively learn new knowledge and skills

Middle managers put in more effort than junior managers do, as they interact with line unit members. Middle managers try to learn new skills and knowledge, and think how to apply it to their line unit. Both managers M1 and M2 mentioned this, for example:

"When I started the HR account manager job, I was under great stress. I had no problem with recruiting and staff training, but managerial development and training was hard for me. I had no experience, so I read books and asked around. It was a big challenge to learn a lot of things during a short period. I read a lot of HR books, literature, and found by myself some CLC (Corporate Leadership Council) materials... (M2, 5-6, L97-100)".

Proactively identify problems and provide solutions

Middle managers think that identifying problems proactively by HR people shows their appreciated professionalism; line unit executives recognize these efforts. M2 and M3 said:

"It is best that the HR people proactively identify problems, such as the DL (demand for labor). There used to be no HR model to predict overtime work loads—it wasn't usually until after the overtime was

reported and calculated that we knew the overtime workload. We thought it was wrong, since overtime should be a leading indicator rather than a lag indicator... (M2, 5-2, L24-27)".

"I believe the value of an HR account manager lies in his/her ability to provide advice and solutions for the challenges the line unit faces, both in terms of personnel and in the organization, as well as assisting in executing the solutions. Also, aside from the current issues, he/she also needs to see future HR challenges to the line unit. When you observe that the new deputy manager does not work smoothly, you are supposed to go help executives to solve it before the problem spreads... (M3, 6-1, L16-17)".

Persuade the line unit executives

M2 discussed that persuasion requires the account manager's understanding of the issues and the logic behind them:

"Propose your solutions while the executives are still thinking. Tell them this is the way to go. A clever presentation—a "strategic" way to put things together—is essential. An HR account manager needs to be persuasive in order to be influential. He/She conducts this high-level, sophisticated communication, in the hope of affecting executives. You dare to say things, because you really have something solid in you to say. Moreover, you have to make yourself understood; write well, speak well, speak in a literate and civilized way. Say things with insight and content, so that you may be able to persuade people... (M2, 5-4, L57-90)".

Senior account manager

Job conception: being an HR leader and strategic partner. From our interviews with senior account managers, we found that they do not simply restrict themselves to an HR functional role in the line unit, but instead view themselves as the "chief executive" of all HR-related affairs. They see the line unit as an enterprise, thinking about how external influences affect the line unit and its members. They then translate the thoughts into workable HR strategies. This represents an integral and open perspective of HR. Manager S2 said:

"Because the role of HR account manager is like an advisor or executive to your line unit... You are helping this unit to implement its business plans and goals with your HR strategies... (S2, 8-1, L2-3)".

Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) mention that HR people

have a kind of leadership in influence other people, and we found the same prove in the interview. Senior account managers influence not only line unit executives, but also their organization, so that the line unit responds to the changing environment. Manager S1 said:

"As for leadership, I think there are two kinds. One is to become the leader of the internal HR function. The other is to influence the line unit you are responsible for but not through the formal leadership role. Do not underestimate an HR account manager; when your ideas are accepted—either through your mouth or the mouths of line unit executives—you become very influential in the line unit... (S1, 7-10, L173-177)".

Finding current and future talent

Ulrich et al. (2008) argued that talent management should be included as one of the human resource competencies. Senior managers should be able to work with line unit executives to develop and retain talent and successors. Managers S1 and S3 described the following:

"From an organizational perspective, every plant chief or every division head should have his/her successor ready. We have several plants, and each plant has several departments. I need to think if the ladders are filled with talent, in every department. Are we going to have successors ready in several years' time?... (S1, 7-2, L20-23)".

"As a strategic partner, an HR account manager should help his/her organization, with its distinct features, to build its own talent database, recruitment plan, succession plan, and improve the organization's capabilities to form the organizational culture... (S3, 9-1, L8-9)".

Strategic partner

A senior account manager sees him/herself as a strategic partner for the line unit. He/She proactively acquires and learns the relevant information external to his/her company, and translates it into useful information that can be used for the line unit's HR practices. He/She aligns the line unit's HR policies with company goals, so as to support the company's business needs.

Construct HR strategies

A senior account manager understands the integral objectives of the company, thinking about the linkage between his/her personal work goals and organizational

goals. He/She implements the company's business strategy through the line unit's HR policies. Managers S2 and S3 revealed their ways of thinking:

"When you speak of how an HR account manager's work relates to organizational goals, you are in fact discussing the linkage between we HR people and the company's strategies...The company develops certain strategies according to company objectives what would be our HR policies in response to the devised strategies? How can we maintain growth and competitiveness for the company? This is our importance, our value as HR. Our value lies in the success of the company's business... (S2, 8-3, L43-54)"

"When facing external events or activities, I would need to think about the relations and influences of events on our company. How do these events relate to and affect my current work? This kind of thought process helps HR develop insights... (S3, 9-2, L31-33)".

Support the organizational culture as well as change

Ulrich et al. (2008) suggested that HR sustains organizational culture and also facilitates change; an HR manager cultivates culture while promoting and encouraging organizational change. He/She sees the culture implemented down to the individual level, as well as inside and outside of the organization. For senior account managers, the important thing is to help push for organizational change and to facilitate the change processes. At times, the line unit needs the HR manager to guide it through meetings and communications. Managers S1 and S3 said:

"Speaking of change management, you see, it involves the tangible organizational structure changes and the intangible culture and communication stuff... In terms of change management, we HR people are facilitators, but not the initiators or propellers. You must be the facilitators, helping or assisting with a part of the change.

As you play the facilitator role, you provide the line unit with insights... (S1, 7-1, L4-106)".

"You must help facilitate the processes. You must assist with communication and dialogue through meetings and discussions. This is what is called change management... (S3, 9-2, L21-22)".

Working with HR colleagues

For the aspect of cooperation with others, senior account

managers differ greatly from junior or middle managers. Junior managers are used to relying on themselves to fulfill their line unit needs, while ignoring the usefulness of the HR operations center. Senior managers, however, find the HR operations center useful and helpful, and they believe they accomplish more tasks because of it. This represents the partial but open perspective of senior managers. Both managers S1 and S2 made the point:

"You need to have good collaborations with your colleagues. You can't work alone. You should try to use the HR operations center as much as possible. We account managers make referrals to the HR operations center; we don't do everything. But not all account managers think this way. This year I persuaded recruiters at the HR operations center to make in-person presentations with my line unit's factory chief. I also read recruiters' weekly reports, and I pointed out mistakes should there be some. I challenge recruiters with my factory chief's words. I use the operations center in this way... (S1, 7-9, L162-167)".

A senior manager thinks over the common goals and his/her collaborator's gains and losses, which is why the manager is adept at using the HR operations center. He/She tries to pull together a "virtual", informal team. The three senior managers we interviewed described the following:

"Learn how other people do things. As long as you're not limiting yourself-you are willing to see and respect other people's specialties, and to borrow their specialties-you may be able to create a win-win situation, working toward a common goal with your partners. That is the reason I see much collaboration with other people. You grow, and so do your partners. Your partners learn the account's needs and its operations, while you find new ways to do things... (S2, 8-5, L108-111)".

"HR is like a giant aircraft carrier. You have the commander and many other members of the staff. There are fighter jets on the carrier—you can probably liken a fighter jet to an HR account service team, and the account manager to the pilot. Only a few people sit in the fighter jet, usually two at most. Every fighter jet has its own mission. Whatever strategy there is for execution, the well-trained pilot should do with precision. Successful missions rely on a huge ground service staff and support system, which is just like the HR operations center to an account manager. As a jet lands on the ground, it receives a lot of support such as reloading ammunition, and then the jet goes up again... (S3, 9-13, L41-46)".

Activism

All three senior account managers emphasized the ability to provide HR insights, and the need for a proactive, motivating attitude toward other people. Senior managers show persistence and patience as they push things through and make them happen. Managers S1 and S2 said:

“Sometimes, the line unit executives question you in order to see if your role as HR is well-placed and focused. We HR should play our role well. We do not simply run through the steps on the workflow chart, but have insights during the process... I feel that being an HR account manager requires a proactive attitude, a willingness to communicate, as well as the ability to provide insights and creative ideas... (S1, 7-9, L162-167)”.

Being persistent and patient helps senior account managers push things through and make things happen. Senior managers consider their own role among workers, while motivating people to make things happen. S1 said:

“I play the role of a background propeller and promoter, like a mid-wife. In order to hold successful meetings like this every month, I figure out the topics, who prepares what, the roles and duties and so on, so that the same thing would happen again—meaningful discussions at the meeting... (S1, 7-2, L33-35)”.

Analysis of competency of human resources managers

HR account manager competency model

By dissecting the paragraphs in the transcripts, we categorized the concepts we obtained using the open coding method. We then analyzed the coded results according to HR account manager competency factors, and merged related factors into a tailor-made competency model. We compared similar sets of concepts gleaned from the transcripts from the three work seniority levels, trying to distinguish the junior manager group's work concepts, say, from those of the middle manager group (Table 3).

According to our analysis of the interview transcripts, we built a competency model for HR account managers (Table 4). It is worthwhile pointing out that a higher competence level usually incorporates attributes from a lower competence level. Take staff relationships and development for example; senior account managers not only improve staff relationships but also identify current and future talent, an attribute not shared by junior and middle account managers.

Verify the proposition

Based on our findings, we verified the proposition raised earlier:

1. From the systems theory point of view, job competence can be categorized into high, medium, and low levels: Established.

With the competency-context relationships at hand, we categorized the competency factors (obtained from the interviews with the junior, middle and senior managers) into four quadrants (separated by two axes: integral-partial, open-closed; Figure 2).

2. A high competency worker tends to take a comprehensive and open perspective toward his/her work, which involves value-adding activities to the organization as a whole and concerns the organization's adaptation to the external environment. A senior account manager's competency involves identifying current and future talent, working with HR colleagues, constructing HR strategies and supporting the organizational culture as well as change. He/She sees the organization as an integral unit that adapts to changes in external environments and those internal to the organization. This is an open and comprehensive perspective.

3. A medium competency worker tends to take a partial-but-open or a comprehensive-but-closed perspective toward his/her work, which concerns interactions among department units within an organization but not the external influences on the organization as a whole. He/She proactively learns new knowledge and skills and has the ability to self-teach. A middle account manager's competency involves being proactive and working with line executives and executive assistants; he/she sees the HR function and the line unit as parts of an organization, and considers the interactions between parts. This is a partial-but-open perspective. On the other hand, a middle manager's competency involves learning the dynamics of the line unit and managing talent; in this way, he/she sees the organization as an integral unit without considering external influences. This is a comprehensive-but-closed perspective. As for the ability to self-teach, a middle manager being proactive initiates the learning of new work methods and knowledge by him/herself.

4. A low competency worker tends to have a partial and closed perspective of his/her work, which involves learning to use basic work tools and assembling the available resources in his/her own department unit to achieve departmental tasks: A junior account manager's competency involves being an operational executor, understanding business and personal relations in the line unit, improving the staff relationships, as well as gaining trust and establishing a reputation. He/She sees the people and work processes of the line unit as separate parts, without considering interactions between the HR function and the line unit. This is a partial and closed perspective (Figure 3).

Table 3. Number of appearances of various constructs, by interviewee category.

Text coding category	Text coding sub-category \ interviewee category	Junior account manager	Middle account manager	Senior account manager
Job conception	Mediating between HR function and line unit	6	3	
	Responsible for all line unit's HR affairs		3	
	Being the HR leader and strategic partner			8
Competency factor				
Operational executor	Operational executor	5	2	6
	Identify current and future talents			2
Staff relationship and development	Improve the staff relationship	2	2	2
	Talent management		1	
Build relationship with line unit ("Credible Activist")	Gain trust and reputation	21		3
	Persuade the line unit executives	3		
	Build trust		3	
	Show passion, persistence and bravery		4	
	Be proactive		10	3
	Activism			7
Knowledge on line unit	Understand business and personal relations in line unit	7		
	Learn the dynamics in line unit		3	2
Cooperation with others	Work with line unit executives and executive assistants		1	
	Work with HR colleagues			6
Strategic partner	Construct HR strategies			10
	Support organizational culture as well as changes			4

5. A higher competency worker possesses the abilities of a lower competency worker; however, a low competency worker does not possess the abilities of a higher competency worker: Established.

As shown in Table 3, after dissecting the paragraphs in the transcript, we categorized the concepts we obtained and counted the number of appearances. We found that a higher competence level usually incorporates attributes from a lower competence level; junior and middle managers' attributes such as being an operational executor, improving staff relationships or learning the dynamics of the line unit are shared by senior managers. On the other hand, higher-level managers' attributes are usually not shared by lower-level managers; competency attributes such as cooperation with other people or strategic partners that are salient to middle and senior managers, are not shared by junior managers. In the transcripts, for example, senior account manager S2 mentioned the coverage of more junior account managers' competencies:

"At first, I simply went by the books and schedules. My goal was to execute annual events well, while

building up procedures and mechanisms. I looked to be a fine HR account manager... Later I found it was not quite right—I should've been doing a lot more. So I started to think about organizational goals and challenges... (S2, 8-4, L63-66)".

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In Asia, empirical studies on competency mostly stress the aspect of a worker's knowledge and personal traits. Quantitative and quantified surveys are usually used to determine what factors distinguish good and average performances; pre-conceived criteria are applied to the design of questionnaires. Our study thus seeks to understand job competence as is practiced by managers, with the aim of defining competence levels and their contents. In addition to depicting the relationship between competency and managerial contexts, we have also sought to distinguish between competence and job qualification through a review of the literature, and to specify various attributes of competency. As a case study, we conducted interviews with HR account managers at a

Table 4. HR account manager competency model.

		Key competency factor					
Seniority	Job conception	Operational Executor	Staff relationship and development	Credible activist	Knowledge of line unit	Cooperation with others	Strategic partner
Junior	Mediating between HR function and line unit	Operational executor	Improve staff relationships	Gain trust and reputation	Understand business and personal relations in line unit		
Middle	Responsible for all line unit's HR affairs		Talent management	Be proactive	Learn the dynamics of the line unit	Work with line executives and executive assistants	
Senior	Being the HR leader and strategic partner		Identify current and future talent	Activism		Work with HR colleagues	Construct HR strategies; Support organizational culture as well as change

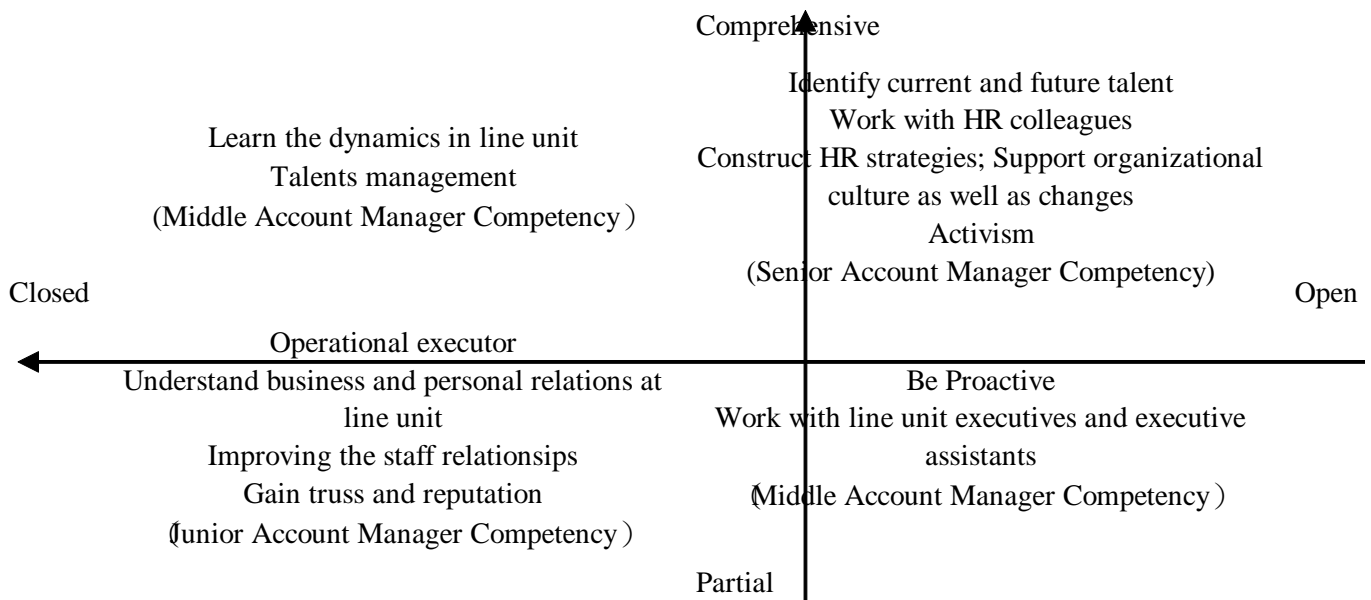


Figure 3. The four quadrants of HR account manager: Competency vs. managerial context.

major Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturer. We then verified our propositions. Our findings should provide practical insights for organization researchers and HR practitioners alike.

Our main finding is that a worker's own "job conception" determines his/her competency level. Workers with higher competency tend to have a more open, comprehensive perspective of their work, and they are more concerned with value-adding activities integral to the

organization, and its adaptation to external influences. Moreover, a higher competency worker possesses the abilities of a lower competency worker, and the higher competency worker cares about the value he/she creates for the organization.

As is generally accepted in the HR literature, competency results from the interactions between personal traits and work situations ("managerial contexts"); Green (1999), Dubois and Rothwell (2004) and Sandberg (2000)

for examples. However, aside from some references to certain types of organizational structures, the exact meaning of “context” on which competency is situated does not have a clear definition; a general consensus is lacking. Our research contributes to the study of “managerial contexts” by systematically discussing the nature of contexts along the two dimensions (closed vs. open; partial vs. comprehensive). Using a case study at a semiconductor firm, we examined the exact meaning of managerial contexts, which gives rise to a plausible classification. This systematic view of managerial contexts takes into account a worker’s competency on the basis of organizational concerns.

A useful suggestion for practicing HR account managers is that, in order to raise a junior manager’s competency to another level, his/her “job conception” needs to transform from a somewhat partial and closed perspective to a comprehensive and open one. This suggestion can also be applied when recruiting HR account managers. In the meantime, we offer an analytical framework of managerial contexts which can be broadly applied to studies of organizational behavior and HR. For further studies related to organizations, we suggest examining how competency may be affected by changes in an organization’s operating environment. For studies related to work competency, we suggest including psychological studies on personal traits that can be applied to the workplace environment—such as knowledge, skills, personalities, motivation, values and so on—and to investigate how these personal traits may bring about the work competency side of the story.

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