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A Framework for Developing a Multiple-Jobs Competency Model for Diplomats

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Abstract

Seeking to address deficiencies in the competency modelling and diplomacy literatures in general, and the competency modelling and diplomacy literatures in the Middle East in particular, the main purpose of this paper is, on one hand, to work between accepting reasonably-enough evidence for the possibility of developing a competency model for diplomats, and to, on the other hand, propose a five-phases framework for building a 'Multiple-Jobs Competency Model' that is needed for the effective diplomatic conduct of both Egyptian and Bahraini diplomats. This article also reports the findings of the first and second phases of the proposed model's building framework. Findings of the initial phase of this research strongly support the need for such a model in the domain of diplomacy. Moreover, an empirical support was found for the idea of accumulation in the competencies of the diplomats across their career, thus the general assumption concerning the development of a 'multiple-jobs' model is strongly supported.

Keywords: Competency Model, Modern Diplomacy, Competency-Based HRM, Behavioural Event Interviews.

1. Introduction

Human resource departments are now charged with ensuring that their current and future employees possess the necessary Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other competencies (KSAOs), which will allow their organization to achieve its strategic goals (Blancero, Boroski, & Dyer, 1996). The traditional HRM system has been job-based and has represented a bureaucratic model of organizing work (Nybø, 2004). Such job-based personnel management systems have shown a tendency to break down when jobs are dissolving under more flexible work organization (such as the case of the diplomacy profession). Many writers have called for a competency approach to replace the traditional job-based approach under these new conditions.

In today's world, the diplomacy field is characterized by a number of mutations shifting it towards so-called 'multi-disciplinary diplomacy', where the so-called traditional 'state-to-state diplomacy' is becoming increasingly complex due to the participation of a growing number of other governmental and non-governmental actors in international relations (Haynal, 2002). Identifying potential diplomats and developing their abilities, however, continues to be a troublesome issue for Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs).

This research contributes to the knowledge of two literature streams. While competencies have become a leading construct in human resource practices, still, however, empirical research on competencies lagged behind resulting in a gap between practice and science. Moreover, despite all efforts to develop competency dictionaries that identifies and describes generic competencies used in a wide range of jobs (see for instance, Spencer & Spencer, 1993), competencies in real practice are rather context-specific, and there is still a huge need for context-specific competency models that are built upon sound empirical processes (see also Van der Heijden, 1998).

Conversely, this research contributes to the field of diplomacy by providing a better understanding of the context and the nature of the diplomatic code of conduct, as well as the challenges facing the diplomacy as a profession and leading most foreign ministries around the world to undertake transformational processes. Moreover, while several competency models and dictionaries have been developed in the literature, none of them has been developed to cater the specific needs of the professional field of diplomacy.

Such a proposed framework aim to develop a competency model with the capacity of being applied to other ministries of foreign affairs beyond the realm of the immediate cases which were studied in this research project (i.e. *analytical generalization*) with the purpose of enhancing the success of Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs), as well as other foreign service governmental and non-governmental organizations, in selecting, preparing, allocating, and training their officers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Competency Concept Revealed: Its Definition and Conceptualization

The competency approach to human resource management is not new (Draganidis & Mentzas, 2006). The competency concept was first introduced by the distinguished Harvard's psychologist, David McClelland (1973) who proposed to test for competencies rather than for intelligence. Competency models are used for a variety of purposes, including selection, performance management, compensation, and succession planning (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). In the case of performance management, the use of competency assessments appears to be fairly widespread (McClelland, 1973; Spencer & Spencer, 1993; Gupta, 2005).

After the publication of McClelland's article numerous authors have shed their light on the competency concept. There is still, however, confusion and debate concerning the concept of 'competence' or 'competency' that it is impossible to identify a coherent theory or to arrive at a definition capable of accommodating and reconciling all the different ways that the term is used (Heinsman, De Hoogh, Koopman, and Van Muijen, 2007; Le Deist and Winterton, 2005). In semantic terms, *competence* is seen as a work-related concept (the tasks at which a person must be competent), while *competency* is a person-related concept defining the behaviours underlying competent performance (Woodruffe, 1991). In spite of that, many authors consistently treat the two as synonymous (Brown, 1993) resulting in lots of different definitions. Problems emerge, however, at the level of definition, depending on whether one was a psychologist, management theorist, HR manager, or politician; it took on different emphases (Ruth, 2006).

In 2009, the International Board of Standards for Training and Performance Instruction (IBSTPI) defines a *competency* as "a knowledge, skill, or attitude that enables one to effectively perform the activities of a given occupation or function to the standards expected in employment". The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the US Department of Education defines a *competency* as "the combination of skills, abilities, and knowledge needed to perform a specific task" (Youn, Stepich, and Cox, 2006, p. 307). The definitions by IBSTPI and NCES, suggest that a competency includes both means and an end. *Means* comprise knowledge, skills, or abilities, and the *end* refers to an effective performance of the activities of a given occupation or function to the standards expected in employment. Obviously, the concept of *competency* loses its true meaning if the *end* is ignored (Youn, Stepich, and Cox, 2006).

Exemplary definitions at this level that share some common components including: a characteristic of an individual that has been shown to drive superior job performance.

These include definitions such as ‘an underlying characteristic of an individual which is causally related to superior performance in a job’ (Boyatzis, 1982: 20); ‘an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation’ (Spencer and Spence, 1993: 11); ‘skills and traits that are needed by employees to be effective in a job’ (Mansfield, 1996: 718); ‘a measurable pattern of skills, knowledge, abilities, behaviours, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully’ (Jackson and Schuler, 2003: 161); ‘a combination of tacit and explicit knowledge, behavior and skills that gives someone the potential for effectiveness in task performance’ (Draganidis and Mentzas, 2006: 53); and ‘demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills which can be used as a measure of someone's intellectual performance’ (Małachowski, in Xiong and Lee, 2011: 282).

2.2 Competency Modelling Approaches

Throughout the years, many researchers have contributed to the extensive literature concerned with competency identification, modelling and reporting by studying a variety of job fields, such as engineering, management, scientific researching, as well as technical jobs (see for instance Barrett, 1994; Barrett & Depinet, 1991; Catano, Cronshaw, Wiesner, Hackett & Methot, 1997; Cooper, 2000; Dubois, 1993; Frazee, 1996; Gatewood & Feild, 2000; Lawler, 1994; Mansfield, 1996; McClelland, 1973; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Iversen (2000) identified three main approaches to competency:

- The Behavioural Approach is primarily based on outstanding performers. This approach was first triggered by McClelland (1973). Later then, different researchers measured competence and performance differently using the “behavioural event interviews” method, “behavioural observation” method and “360-degree ratings” method.
- The Standards of Functional Approach defines minimum levels of accepted performance on specific job/positions, and focuses on actual job outputs. This approach has dominated the competency work for the last couple of decades of the past century, and has been heavily criticised due to many problems above which is that work assignments/tasks are broken up into “fragments” that fail to reflect the actual work experience. Moreover, output competencies ignore process competencies. In sum, this approach would appear to have more limitations than behavioural approach.
- The Situational Approach explores the factors that may influence the required competencies. This approach was subject to a broad debate; on one side, some researchers claimed that situational factors vary dramatically that is impossible to make a generic list of competencies that are relevant for most positions. On the other side, others believe that certain job types and levels share a general profile of competencies.

Le Deist and Winterton (2005) argued that one-dimensional frameworks/approaches of competency are inadequate and are giving way to multi-dimensional frameworks. For example, functional competences are increasing being added to the behavioural competencies in the USA and UK, while France, Germany and Austria, entering the arena more recently, appear to be adopting a more holistic framework, considering knowledge, skills and behaviours as dimensions of competence. The challenge is to develop a coherent framework of competence in a context where the particular strengths of all dominant approaches are considered.

2.3 Competency Modelling Practices

A competency model provides identification of the competencies employees need to develop in order to improve their performance in their current job, or to prepare for other jobs via promotion or transfer. Competencies are the building blocks of competency models, and each competency in the model is defined using behavioural descriptors of how exemplary and lower levels of proficiency are demonstrated (Draganidis & Mentzas, 2006).

Lucia & Lepsinger (1999) identified different development practices for competency models, of which all the final outcome is essentially the same (i.e. identification of behaviours required to successfully perform a given role), the difference is, however, in the way of getting there. These approaches include:

- The *Job Competence Assessment Method* which uses critical incident interviews and observation of outstanding and average performers to determine the competencies (See Spencer & Spencer, 1993 for extensive description of this approach).
- The *Generic Model Overlay Method*, in which organizations purchase an off-the-shelf generic competency model for a specific role or function (Dubois, 1993, pp.86-90).

- The *Customized Generic Model Method*, in which organizations use a tentative list of competencies identified internally to aid in their selection of a generic model and then validate it with the input of outstanding and average performers (Dubois, 1993, pp. 91-95).
- The *Flexible Systems Method*, which demands reflecting not only on what outstanding performers do now, but also behaviours that might be important in the future (Linkage Inc., 1997).

Given the fact that most working organizations display a variety of different job types, Mansfield (1996) described three different job competency models. Firstly, the *single job competency model* focuses on one job. Data are collected from focus groups held with job incumbents and/or their managers, and from interviews with job holders, and are categorized into a list of 10 to 20 traits or skills. This list is used to identify the specific behaviours that describe effective performers.

Secondly, the *'one-size-fits-all' model* defines a set of competencies for a broad range of jobs. Instead of gathering data, a group of individuals selects competencies from available competency models, which they believe are necessary to achieve the goals of the specific organizational unit. The strength of this approach lies in the applicability of the resulting model to a large number of employees within the organizational unit. In addition, the model's use is relatively quick and easy compared with the single job model.

The obvious disadvantage is that it does not describe the competencies that are needed in one specific job. Thirdly, the *multiple-job model* defines non-technical competencies that are assumed to be common to all jobs, as well as technical ones that are specific to individual jobs. Mansfield (1996) suggests that while most of these competencies will be non-technical in nature, consideration should also be given to the technical competencies required to perform specific individual jobs.

2.4 Performance Gaps in Today's Diplomatic Services

Diplomacy is the art of advancing national interests through the sustained exchange of information among nations and peoples (CSIS, 1998). It is the practice of state-to-state persuasion. Classic diplomacy assumes that sovereign states control international relations. However, diplomacy in the 21st century must overturn its culture of secrecy and its penchant for exclusivity. The conduct of diplomacy faces unacceptable performance gaps between its outdated practices and the requirements of the new age of information. These performance gaps can be described by comparing the conduct of diplomacy to its promise. It will be no surprise to practitioners and observers that there are numerous gaps between promise and practice (CSIS, 1998). These gaps include diplomatic priorities, professional standards, leadership, infrastructure, resources, telecommunications, media deployment, and relations with the media, business, and NGO communities (Haynal, 2000; CSIS, 1998). These gaps in diplomatic performance have consequences.

As such, foreign ministries around the world are actively engaged in a complex process of change and adaptation in response to an international environment that is volatile and unpredictable (DiploFoundation, 2006). They have to sustain and redefine out their competence among competing government officials, as well as the multiple non-state stakeholders that have carved out their legitimate roles. The personnel division of the German Foreign Service, for instance, has focused on the need to fill existing or future vacancies (Boeckmann, 2007). Each time a vacancy had to be filled, the personnel division identified, on the basis of curricula and performance reports, the most suitable member for the position. This approach, in many cases, yielded good results, while in other cases the department faced difficulties in identifying suitable candidates. Being faced with the new realities of the 21st century and considering the increasing need to propose successful candidates for key posts in international organizations and/or missions, staffing procedures, as such, should be reviewed in order to optimize the use of available talent.

2.5 Transformational Processes in MFAs

Hocking (2006) posed two initial propositions: first, that significant change is occurring in ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs) around the world, second that this is largely unseen and unremarked by researchers. As far back as 1970, a US Foreign Ministry memo had talked about needing a new breed of 'diplomat-managers' (Rana, 2005a).

Ambassadors are now perceived as 'relationship managers' who emerges as the country's best resource, in terms of the concerned bilateral relationship in the target country.

A diplomat abroad is believed to be a potential source of innovative ideas. His/her colleagues at the MFA are generally over-preoccupied with classic headquarter functions. They lack the single-focus, honed on the bilateral relationship. This mono-focus, however, has its drawbacks which can develop into a conviction that one's place of assignment is the centre of the universe. It is precisely for these reasons that the ambassador and his/her team function continually under close supervision of the MFA. This supervision needs to be effective, especially to monitor performance. Currently, MFAs are responding to a range of challenges/pressures (Hocking, 2007; Saner & Yiu, 2003). These are set out in Table 1 together with the perceived reform requirements that flow from them.

Challenges/Pressures	Reform Requirement
Globalization and Regionalization Co-existence of divergent modern roles (e.g. public diplomacy, economic diplomacy, etc.)	Identify broader skill sets to respond to new issues. Redefine 'generalist' and 'specialist' balance.
Social Change (i.e. changing demographic patterns and values)	Human resources policies: recruitment and training.
Resource Management	Matching human and financial resources to commitments.

Well-managed foreign ministries around the world are underway in their reform agendas (Rana, 2005a; Rana, 2005b; DiploFoundation, 2006). Rana (2005a) argues that several interlocking factors are responsible for this. First, governments all over the world confront a demand for better efficiency and value-for-money from public services. Second, new management techniques have permeated all fields, starting with the corporate domain, and extending to social institutions and the public agencies. The techniques themselves have undergone rapid evolution and refinement. Third, it is clearly understood that the gap between productive diplomatic systems and those marked by inefficiency is largely one of management – plus training – and not resources. Another concern is that the productive work of a foreign ministry is not easily defined and measured in useful terms (Hannah, 2007). Often the successful outcome of a task, however well completed, is not controllable by the diplomat; circumstances outside one's control supervene. Moreover, an MFA most often has a large and geographically widely dispersed network of branches (embassies, missions, etc.), often operating in radically different environments from each other, and often tasked to deliver quite different outcomes.

Accordingly, the performance management framework of a foreign ministry would or should differ a little from that of any other equally well organized, that is – productive and profit oriented – enterprise, in the private or public sector (Rana, 2005b; Hannah, 2007). Meaningful job descriptions and performance indicators at all levels are a design challenge. There is also the point that foreign affairs officers, most often recruited out of university, are necessarily unproven managers.

At this stage, we would like to highlight the Performance Management Framework currently operating in New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It comprises a very clear and separate focus on the 'competency development' of a diplomat and his or her actual 'performance delivery' against key tasks for the job – right through the annual twin-track process (Hannah, 2007):

- 1) First, *performance delivery*, this deals with the WHAT – people's achievements on the job – the results or outputs.
- 2) Second, *competency development*, which deals with people's attributes, knowledge or behaviour, the HOW, the personal skills or inputs. While staff must be rewarded for performance, this competency development would be the pre-eminent focus in true management of performance.

2.6 Why Egypt and Bahrain?

The major research question which was raised by the competency model building framework presented in this paper was "what are the competencies needed for diplomats to be able to perform in a superior way?" Thus, it was a "what" question largely exploratory in nature as it "explored" links between diplomacy (as a profession) and competency modeling/profiling (as a branch of strategic human resources management). Reaching a reliable and valid answer to this question required involving two cases (i.e. Foreign Ministries); case of "classic/old-institutionalized" Foreign Ministry, which is the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as case of "modern/newly-restructured" Foreign Ministry, which is the Bahraini Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As s, it is worth mentioning that the inclusion of the above-mentioned two cases was meant to be for complementary purposes rather than comparative purposes.

In fact, although a central feature of grounded theory approaches is their constant use of comparative analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) using comparative case-study design *has not been supported by competency model-building researches* over the years.

3) A Conceptual Approach for Competency Model Building Process

Research to develop competency models is a “discovery of grounded theory” approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as it addresses the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained and analyzed in social research. The model building process that is outlined in this contribution follows the qualitative methodology developed by McClelland (1973) and is in line with the work further illuminated by Spencer & Spencer (1993), and Lucia & Lepsinger (1999).

Lucia & Lepsinger (1999) argues that for a competency model to be as useful as possible, it should be developed with a specific role in mind. In the process of developing a competency model from scratch, the steps of data collection and data analysis are intertwined. The challenge is to maintain a balance between the two activities and allow each to drive the other in equal measure. Classic (full-scale) competency studies include the following six steps (Lucia & Lepsinger 1999; Spencer & Spencer, 1993):

- 1) Identify criteria/measures that define superior/effective performance. Ideal criteria are hard outcome measures; such as profits for business managers or patents for research scientists. If hard criteria aren't available; like in our case, nominations or ratings by supervisors, peers, or subordinates can be used).
- 2) Identify a criterion sample (the performance effectiveness criteria developed in step 1 are used to identify a clear group of superior performers. A comparison group of average/poor performers can be also identified if the purpose of the study is to establish competency levels that predict minimal success in the job).
- 3) Collect data (several data collection are identified here; such as behavioural event interviews, expert panels, surveys or direct observation).
- 4) Analyze data for themes and patterns and develop an interim competency model.
- 5) Validate the competency model (this step may incline conducting surveys or focus groups to include a wider population and test the model's face validity. It may also incline testing the final model beyond its face validity; i.e. people may believe that competencies are relevant and important to their job even when no evidence links the competencies to individual performance.
- 6) Finalize the model (this step may include preparing applications for the developed competency model).

Spencer & Spencer (1993), however, identify few critical steps of preparatory work (mainly related to organizational strategy/design) that should be accomplished prior to beginning full-scale competency study design. Analysis of these factors is usually done by interviewing organization's top management level: 1) Identifying critical jobs to be studied (these are ideally jobs that have high added-value to the organizational success); and 2) Identifying organizational mission, vision, critical success factors, and challenges for reaching strategic goals. Figure 1 visualizes all research phases of the proposed competency model building framework. This article, however, goes into the first and second phases only.

Insert Figure (1) about here

3.1 Phase One: Preliminary Investigation

In order to assess the feasibility of this current research, and to explore in-depth the possibility of developing a competence model for the diplomacy profession, qualitative methods were chosen over quantitative methods because the purpose here is to obtain a detailed non-evaluative descriptions of Subject Matter Experts points of view regarding the investigated issue. This phase of the research is aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the criteria of selection for the entry level new diplomats?

RQ2: What is the nature of the recruitment process applied by most MFAs worldwide in order to select entry level new diplomats?

RQ3: To what extent does the current recruitment process applied by most MFAs achieve the effective selection of the entry level diplomats?

RQ4: What are the threshold (i.e. essential) competencies needed for the diplomat?

RQ5: What is the nature of the competency study that can be applied to the diplomacy profession in terms of the development approach?

As such, unstructured in-depth interviews have been conducted with seven senior ambassadors (from Egypt as well as from Canada, US, India, Austria, and the UK), with the purpose of providing adequate answers to those research questions. The researcher has employed qualitative *Content Analysis* as one of the classical procedures for analyzing interview data (Weber, 1990; Kvale 1996; and Flick, 2009). Out of the many techniques of *Content Analysis* suggested by qualitative research advocates, the *Summarizing Content Analysis* technique that was suggested by Flick (2009) was employed. The outcomes of this preliminary phase were essential as it formed the basis for subsequent research phases.

3.2 Phase Two: Preparatory Work

Current and retired Foreign Ministers as well as senior ambassadors were involved in this phase of the model building process. Semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 2 for the interview protocol) were conducted with ten SMEs in order to identify:

- A) Critical jobs
- B) MFA's mission, vision and critical success factors
- C) Challenges for reaching strategic goals

Summarizing Content Analysis technique was used to interpret collected data. The concept of "challenges" was the subject of a simple scaling based on the work done by Hocking (2007), which produced 2 categories: "High Impact", and "Medium Impact". Since the development of valid and reliable content-analytic instruments is a prerequisite for developing competency dictionaries/models (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), and in order to permit the assessment of achieved reliability and validity, interview transcripts have been interpreted by two human coders. The full interview transcripts can be obtained from the first author of this manuscript.

3.3 Phase Three: Capturing Competencies and Behavioural Indicators

Behavioural Event Interviews (BEIs); a protocol and guidelines of which was suggested by Spencer and Spencer in 1993) were conducted. Criterion non-probability sample was first identified to include 70 diplomats who were nominated as superior performers (ten from each of the *seven job levels*; out of which 35 were Egyptian diplomats, and 35 were Bahraini diplomats). Sample respondents were selected based on a triangulation between solid criteria (i.e. annual performance reports) as well as *judgmental* nominations made by top management in each of the two foreign ministries.

Most of the interviews (each of which has lasted for an average of sixty-ninety minutes) were taped. The raw data of the BEIs were then subject to "Thematic Analysis" to identify competencies and behavioural indicators describing those competencies in action (Spencer and Spencer, 1993). Interview transcripts were interpreted by two human coders (one of whom was the first author of this manuscript) to permit the assessment of achieved reliability and validity.

3.4 Phase Four: Building the Preliminary Competency Model

Findings of the previous phase (i.e. identified competencies and behavioural indicators) were used to create a preliminary competency model. This preliminary competency model was aimed to be verified through the use of additional criterion sample of diplomats in the last research phase. A modified, three-round Delphi procedure with five competency modelling subject matter experts was employed, that differed in some significant ways from traditional Delphi approach. The process involved a number of iterations which were seen essential for further distilling of the collected feedback. Moreover, this iterative process was intended to cause diverse viewpoints to converge toward a common understanding. (Gordon, 1971; Strauss and Zeigler, 1975). Analysis of collected feedback involved using open coding and axial coding approaches (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), being used by the panellists to build up the preliminary version of the model.

3.5 Phase Five: Validating the Developed Preliminary Competency Model

Validation of the preliminary competency model developed in the previous phase was conducted. Only the *face validity was ensured*, thus providing a chance for extending this study towards assessing the *predictive validity* of the developed model either in one of the two involved countries (i.e. Egypt or Bahrain), or in other countries.

In this final phase of the model building process, personally-administered questionnaire was run with additional criterion sample of 50 senior diplomats (selected on a *non-probability judgmental* basis from both Egypt and Bahrain), for two objectives to be achieved: 1) to validate the preliminary inductively-built competency model, and 2) to develop scales for each and every competency of the model. Both quantitative (non-parametric tests of statistical significance), and qualitative (content analysis) data analysis interpretation techniques were combined to drive the final competency model sufficiently reliable and valid within the Egyptian and Bahraini diplomatic setting.

4. Findings of the Research

This article goes into the outcomes of the first two phases of the competency model building process. The outcomes of the remaining phases will be thoroughly reported in future publications.

4.1 Results of Research Phase One: Preliminary Investigation

This preliminary phase aimed at providing answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the criteria of selection for the entry level new diplomats?

Almost all respondents indicated that there are three basic selection criteria for the new diplomats at any MFA entry level. These are: 1) Bachelor degree from an accredited university/institution; 2) demonstration of excellence in one or more foreign languages (both written and spoken); and 3) an age limit that is not exceeding 30 years upon application.

RQ2: What is the nature of the recruitment process applied by most MFAs worldwide in order to select entry level new diplomats?

Investigation of the recruitment procedure at few profound MFAs around the globe indicated that they are, more or less, similar. For instance, MFAs of Austria, Canada, Egypt and the US run a set of written examinations for all the applicants who satisfy the entry level criteria. Those exams differ in their duration, and the subjects they cover, however, most of them cover the basic areas of international relations, political economics, law, language translation, and of course history and culture of the home country. Those who successfully pass the written tests are then subject to oral assessment (i.e. personal interviews). The main objective of those interviews is to assess personal skills/ characteristics that are believed to highly impact the conduct of the diplomatic profession; such as: interpersonal communications, public speaking, stress/ambiguity tolerance, persuasiveness and conflict resolution. All the investigated MFAs were found to use situational scenario-based questions in those interviews that are mainly operated by a panel of senior diplomats; however, the Austrian MFA was praised for applying psychometric tests in parallel to personal interviews. In all of the four countries, accepted applicants who pass the personal interviews and/or psychometric tests are enrolled for a training program that lasts between one to two years at most.

RQ3: To what extent does the current recruitment process applied by most MFAs achieve the effective selection of the entry level diplomats?

Most respondents felt strongly that current recruitment methods are no longer enough, especially to cope with a rapidly changing environment of world politics. This goes well with the argument made by Rana (2005a) who indicated that creating the right human resources management is at the heart of any MFA's Reform Process, and accordingly, a merit-based recruitment system needs to be in place. It was also indicated by some respondents that the old notion that skills are accumulated on the job is no longer sufficient; mid-career and senior level training, adapted to the MFA's own requirements, has become the norm. Thus, the called upon human resource management system should also involve updated methods for promotions and career planning, to ensure high motivation.

RQ4: What are the threshold (i.e. essential) competencies needed for the diplomat?

Interviewees have indicated that they believe the following tentative list of competencies to be most important for today's diplomats. The final list shall be the outcome of phase three of this research and shall be reported in future publications.

- Networking/alliance building (N = 7)
- Interpersonal Communication and negotiation skills (N = 7)
- Gift for languages and public speaking (N = 7)
- Domain-specific areas of knowledge (such as; international relations and economics) (N = 6)
- Cross-cultural sensitivity (ability to accept and deal with different cultures) (N = 6)
- Drafting and reporting of the different diplomatic correspondences (N = 6)
- Credibility and tactfulness (N = 5)
- Political/Analytical thinking (N = 5)
- Management and delegation (N = 4)
- Self-Control (N = 4)
- Entrepreneurial skills (N = 3)
- Adaptability/flexibility (N = 3)
- Problem solving and the ability to prioritize (N = 3)
- Following-up on different advances worldwide (N = 3)
- Computer literacy (N = 2)
- Commitment to one's own learning (updating one's knowledge) (N = 2)

Although management and delegation were highlighted by only four (out of ten) respondents, literature review has indicated a massive support for the need of management skills among today's diplomats, especially senior levels. Many authors (Rana, 2005a, and 2005b; and Hocking, 2007) indicated that ambassador needs management skills as s/he takes personal responsibility of the mission's performance, as well as handling large teams, and setting priorities.

RQ5: What is the nature of the competency study that can be applied to the diplomacy profession in terms of the development approach? Most respondents were in favour of developing a full-scale competency model from scratch, rather than customizing one of the of-the-shelf generic models. To this end, they have illustrated three main reasons: 1) An existing and validated competency model may save time on data collection and analysis and on validating a model, but the functions and roles appropriate for it will remain limited, as it will seldom reflect the unique mixture of competencies needed for the diplomatic conduct; 2) Of-the-shelf model is generic and is not developed with a specific job or position in mind, and thus it may not address the technical skills and knowledge required for the different job levels along the diplomatic career; 3) Generic Models are best suited for leadership and management roles that cut across several functions and for positions that require limited technical skills and knowledge, which is not the case with the diplomatic career.

4.2 Results of Research Phase Two: Preparatory Work

Identifying Critical Jobs

The entry post in the diplomatic career is called Diplomatic Attaché. The subsequent diplomacy career posts are respectively; Third Secretary, Second Secretary, First Secretary, Counsellor, Plenipotentiary Minister, and Ambassador. Administrative jobs do also exist in any MFA, however, it is the diplomatic jobs that add value to the output of any MFA, and help shape the country's policy by achieving the targeted strategic goals.

Identifying MFA's Mission, Vision, and Critical Success Factors

The majority (N = 7) of the interviewed senior diplomats agreed on the fact that a clear mission statement existed, which is a general statement defining the guidelines of the foreign policy of the country. An example of the statements, which have been reported by the respondents, sounds as follows: "Representing and defending home country's concerns abroad", "Protecting country's interests which demands, basically, a good understanding of the international and regional political issues, as well as country's standing towards these issues". Responses differed with respect to whether this specific statement was communicated to all levels in the Ministry. Six of the interviewees assured that it was well communicated to all levels, while the remaining ones (N = 4) assured that it was only communicated to the diplomats positioned at the higher levels, who set the policies of the Ministry. Moreover, most of the respondents (N = 9) were not sure whether a clear vision statement existed, and, accordingly, were not able to formulate it. Regarding the suitability of the existing mission statement, some of the respondents believed it to be adequate and suitable, while others assured that it needed to be renewed, because the scope of diplomacy has become wider. Therefore, the scope of mission and vision statements has to extend beyond the older narrower one, which was only related to defending the country's interests abroad.

According to the interviewed Subject Matter Experts, the following list of six points summarizes the most pressing critical success factors of the MFAs: (1) Updating the knowledge of the diplomats continuously, through mid-term training programs, and not only by providing training for the new Attachés at the entry level of the Foreign Service, (2) Cooperation and coordination (i.e., experience sharing) between the different departments and sectors of the MFA is needed, (3) Specialization, both inside and outside the Ministry. Inside the ministry, additional specialization is needed with respect to allocation of a diplomat in an unrelated department upon his or her return from a mission abroad.

Outside the ministry, additional specialization is needed on a geographical basis, as this will help the diplomat to continue building experience in the same direction and would lead to a better performance in all the subsequent missions, (4) Giving support to the departments which are concerned with human rights, immigration, science and technology, and environment, as well as other related important issues worldwide, (5) Giving support to the role of female diplomats.

Identifying Challenges for Reaching Strategic Goals

Rana (2005a) argued that Foreign Service reform are instrumental in their efforts to deal with globalization and regionalization, which are believed to be the challenging forces that portray the structure and role of the MFA in today's world. Asking for the current challenges facing diplomacy, Table 1 summarizes the empirical outcomes and provides a clear picture on the current challenges, along with their level of impact from the point of view of the interviewed subject matter experts.

Insert Table (1) about here

4. Conclusions and Discussion

To conclude, competencies and competency dimensions seem interesting to study in more detail using different methodologies and different data sources and thereby making an attempt to fill the existing gap between practice and science. Foreign ministries around the world are actively engaged in a complex process of change and adaptation to an international environment that is volatile and unpredictable. They have to sustain and redefine their competence among competing as well as multiple state and non-state stakeholders that have carved out their legitimate roles.

Reflection upon the Outcomes

We have observed a general agreement among the respondents on the fact that due to the ever-increasing worldwide challenges, on political, economic and social levels, there is a prevalent need for competent diplomats who are able to cope with those challenges.

Moreover, , we are able to conclude that these major developments of emerging diplomatic activities deserve greater attention and invite rethinking of the role definition of diplomats, and the functions of MFAs. Diplomats are now confronted with new actors, new agenda items and new working methods, and are caught with inadequate training and preparation (particularly in topics that are not directly related to diplomacy, such as management, corporate business, strategic leadership, and so on).

Practical Implications

With the growing competition for talent, there is a strong need for effective competency-based HRM system for diplomats (Wilton Park, 2005). The Egyptian and Bahraini MFAs lacks such a competency model, and this model can only be developed using the classical (i.e. from scratch) approach, because it has to respond to the quality of a specific group of professionals, and to their requirements. Egyptian and Bahraini diplomacy has been successful in many ways, but the basis is still weak due to the lack of solid criteria, whereby only competent people are rewarded, while people who are not able to cope with more responsibility are not given higher responsibilities. The multiple-jobs competency model building framework that is suggested in this contribution shall provide such a solid basis. Although we emphasize the need for scientific rigor and the use of statistically accurate data when developing a competency model, outcomes of the preliminary phases introduced in this article has taught us that statistics alone cannot provide an accurate picture of what people need to do on the job to be successful. Nor is using only qualitative data and incumbent comments on what people believe they should do on the job sufficient. Striking the correct balance between statistical techniques and qualitative considerations is critical for a high-quality result.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Le Deist and Winterton (2005) argued that different cultural contexts influence the understanding of competence and this is especially important in relation to the extent to which competence is defined by cultural literacy involving group identities such as race, gender, age and class (ascription), as opposed to demonstrable behaviour (achievement). The same argument can be made in relation to the neglect of organizational culture and workplace context when using generic competency models, since generic competences may not be transferable across different organizational cultures.

Job Competences Survey developed by Dulewicz and Herbert (1992) demonstrated that the skill needs of managers are sufficiently generic to permit generalizations across the occupation. Despite differences in the managerial function in different contexts, they found that firm-specific competencies represented only 30 per cent of the total competencies basket, while the remaining 70 per cent were common to a wide range of organizations.

Such critics claim that generic competency approaches create narrow and oversimplified descriptions of competence that fail adequately to reflect the complexity of competence in work performance. It is paradoxical that, while management strategists were emphasizing competences that are unique and firm-specific, the HRD literature was more concerned with developing highly transferable generic competences that are required for most jobs roles or particular occupations.

The competency model that is aimed in this study will be limited only to the diplomatic profession. Moreover, the usability of the model's different competencies across the different career levels will be subject to the country. This is simply due to the fact that MFAs of the different countries do differ in their internal structures, work systems and many other things. Accordingly, the model that is aimed by this study would be of primary benefit to the Egyptian and Bahraini MFAs, however, other MFAs can use the accompanying competency dictionary to extract those competencies of interest to them.

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Appendix 1: Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Competency Model Building Framework (Phases of the Model Building Process)

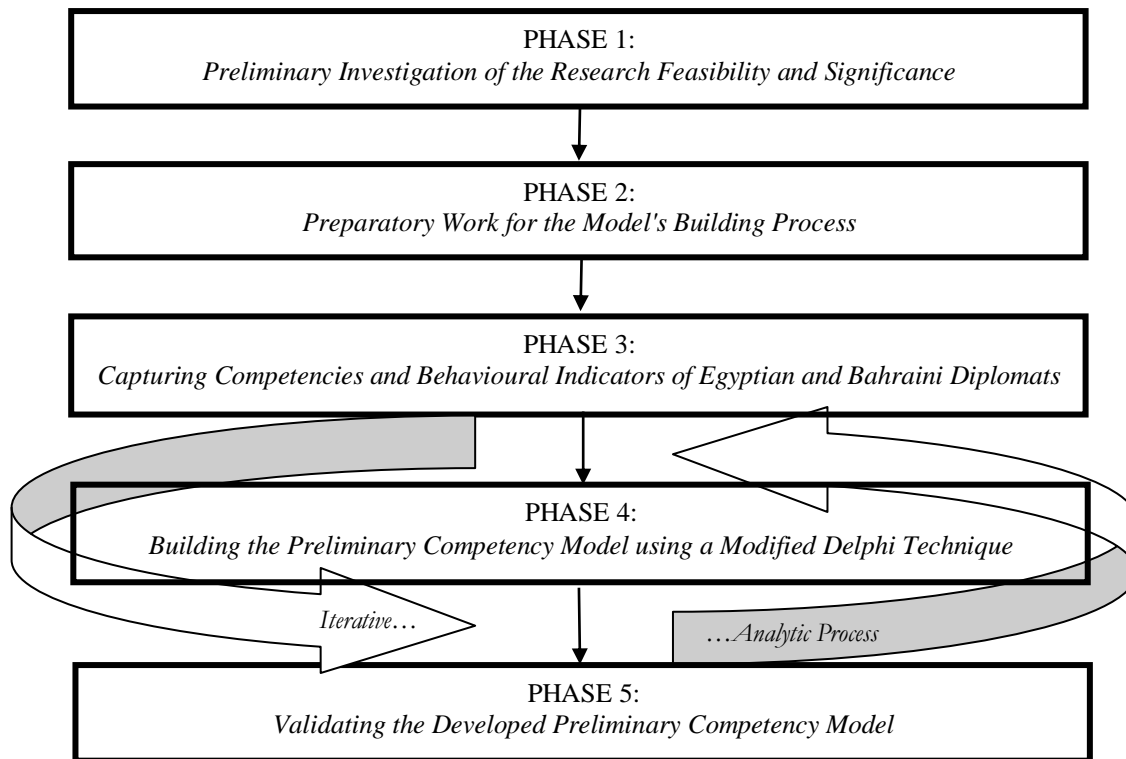


Table 1: Mental Factor Loadings of the Challenges Facing the Diplomacy Profession
(Loadings less than 0.3 were omitted¹)

Challenges	High Impact (Loadings)	Medium Impact (Loadings)
Ability to initiate economic/business cooperation between home country and the country of assignment	0.9	
New dimensions of diplomacy (such as economic, commercial, or NGO diplomacy)	0.8	
Globalization	0.8	
Dealing with the media	0.7	
Impact of the cultural differences on the performance		0.9
Cultural adaptability		0.7
Building the global proper image of the home country		0.7
Scientific and technological revolutions		0.5
Ability to translate presidential strategies into actions		0.3

¹ The idea of mental factor loadings was extracted from the work of Andy Field, 2002. Discovering Statistics using SPSS for Windows. London: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Appendix 2: Interview Protocol of Research Phase 2

Subject Matter Expert Name: _____

Interview Data & Venue: _____

A. Identifying Critical Jobs:

1. What are the critical jobs/job levels that are believed to be adding value to the organizational success?

B. Defining MFA Mission Statement, Vision Statement and Critical Success Factors:

1. A) Does a clear mission statement for the MFA exist? B) If so, Please formulate it? C) To which diplomatic levels of the MFA is this statement being communicated?
2. A) Does a clear vision statement for the MFA exist? B) If so, Please formulate it? C) To which diplomatic levels of the MFA is this statement being communicated?
3. A) Given the two statements defined above, what do you think are the critical success factors for the MFA? B) How would you rank them (Put them in order)?

C. Identifying Challenges facing the Diplomatic Profession:

1. A) What are the challenges, which you believe are facing the diplomatic profession? B) What are their implications on the functioning/performance of the diplomats (please classify each challenge under one of the following 2 categories: 1) High Impact, or 2) Medium-Low Impact?

D. Re-Visiting Current Mission & Vision Statements (Refer to Section A)

1. In the light of the previously defined current challenges, do you think that the current mission and vision statements are suitable?
2. In the light of the previously defined future challenges, what do you think the future mission and vision statements should be?

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