Ana Skledar Ćorluka
University of Applied Sciences Baltazar Zaprešić
10290 Zaprešić, Croatia
askledarcorluka@bak.hr

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIALLY ADEPT BEHAVIOR FOR ADVANCING CAREERS AND ENSURING LONG-TERM EMPLOYABILITY WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of this paper is to highlight the increasing importance of social competencies in the business environment, with a particular focus on employee career advancement. The paper seeks to illustrate the significance of specific socially competent behaviors, evaluate their relevance across various industries, and assess how HR managers and top executives perceive these behaviors.

Methodology: The study included a sample of 113 employers. Statistical analyses were conducted using t-tests for dependent and independent samples, ANOVA, and Cronbach's alpha to ensure reliability.

Results: No significant differences were observed between the tested socially competent behaviors in relation to career advancement. These behaviors are equally valued across industries and by both HR managers and top executives in the context of long-term employability.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the importance of empathetic behavior as a key social competency for career progression and long-term employability, placing it on par with communication and conflict management skills. The study also indicates that empathy, communication, and conflict management are equally critical across all economic sectors, encouraging employers to invest in the development of these competencies regardless of their industry. Contrary to the assumption that HR managers prioritize empathy, communication, and conflict management more than top executives do, the research found no significant differences in their perspectives.

Keywords: Social competencies, career advancement, long-term employability, employees, employers

1. Introduction

In today's evolving business environment, competency management systems have become integral to human resource management, shaping organizational strategies and operations (Ivaldi et al., 2022). Social competencies, rooted in diverse disciplines including psychology, sociology, education, and management, are essential for understanding human interactions and behaviors (Wang et al., 2022; Bargsted et al., 2021). Psychology explores interpersonal dynamics and individual behavior, sociology analyzes social structures and norms, and education focuses on fostering social skills and emotional intelligence in students. In business, social competencies are critical to effective leadership, communication, and conflict resolution, pivotal in achieving organizational goals and fostering a productive workplace (Herrera Granda et al., 2023). The study focuses on several key social competencies:

1. **Empathy**: Initially conceptualized by Lipps and Titchener, empathy is defined today as a multidimensional construct requiring the ability to perceive, understand, and share the emotional states of others (Hirn, 2018).

2. **Communication skills**: Vital for organizational success, communication skills are essential behavioral abilities that include comforting, conflict management, persuasion, conversational skills, storytelling, regulatory skills, and referencing skills (Ivaldi et al., 2022)

3. **Conflict management**: Social conflict is inevitable and can have positive or negative consequences depending on how it is managed (Figueiredo et al., 2023).

The research highlights the increasing importance of social competencies in business, especially regarding employee career advancement. It aims to clarify the significance of specific socially competent behaviors, their relevance across industries, and how they are perceived by HR managers and executives. This study addresses a timely issue in today's business environment, examining how social competencies influence career opportunities. As organizations prioritize soft skills like communication and conflict resolution, this research offers a fresh perspective by linking these behaviors directly to workplace outcomes. It suggests that recognizing and developing socially competent behaviors can enhance employee development and retention strategies. Policymakers are encouraged to integrate social competency training into educational curricula and workforce initiatives to foster a more adaptable workforce.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 On social competencies

Interpersonal interactions play a crucial role both professionally and personally, influencing meaningful experiences across various aspects of life, from family and work to leisure activities (Selimović et al., 2018). Socially competent individuals exhibit behaviors such as socially responsible conduct, interpersonal skills, empathy, assertiveness, and cultural cooperation, among others (Maras, 2023). Gargie et al. (1981) define social competencies as goal-directed behaviors that individuals can learn and control. These competencies are essential for navigating social dynamics effectively in diverse contexts.

Social competencies are highly prized by employers for several compelling reasons. Strong communication skills are essential for effective collaboration with colleagues, clients, and partners, facilitating information flow and relationship-building, both internally and externally (Figueiredo et al., 2023). Empathetic employees who listen well and adapt to diverse team dynamics foster a productive work environment conducive to collaboration and mutual support (Galleli & Hourneaux Junior, 2021). In navigating the complexities of the business environment, adept conflict resolution skills are crucial; individuals who can understand other people's perspectives, show empathy, and negotiate win-win solutions contribute significantly to maintaining harmony and productivity (Collie, 2021). Especially in client-centric industries, such as services, employees with refined social competencies can cultivate trust and loyalty by communicating effectively, demonstrating empathy, and adapting to client needs (Collie, 2021). Leadership effectiveness is also amplified by social competencies; leaders who possess these skills are better equipped to motivate and inspire their teams, understand their needs, and foster a positive work culture that enhances overall company performance (Konrad et al., 2021). Ultimately, employers recognize that employees with

developed social competencies contribute to enhanced teamwork, client satisfaction, conflict resolution, and a positive organizational atmosphere, all of which are integral to achieving business success. Therefore, these competencies are often pivotal in recruitment and employee advancement decisions (Samat et al., 2020).

Social competencies are crucial for ensuring employees' long-term employability, encompassing their ability to maintain jobs, enhance career skills, and navigate market changes effectively (Fadhila & Sulistiyani, 2022). This involves continuous learning, adapting to technological advancements, and fostering career flexibility. Employees with strong social competencies demonstrate greater adaptability to diverse workplace dynamics, quickly adjusting to new challenges and team structures, thereby boosting their competitiveness (Fadhila & Sulistiyani, 2022). Additionally, they excel in building professional networks that open doors to business opportunities, mentorship, and career advancement (Nserko, 2020). By cultivating positive relationships with colleagues, superiors, and clients, socially skilled employees foster a productive work environment and contribute to organizational success, reinforcing their long-term employability (Mezhoudi et al., 2023). Their ability to collaborate effectively within teams enhances productivity and supports continuous career growth in dynamic business environments (Potts, 2022). Ultimately, developed social competencies empower employees not only to thrive amidst workplace changes but also to stay competitive and achieve enduring employability in today's dynamic job market.

There is extensive research highlighting the importance of social competencies for achieving success in life. A joint Harvard and Stanford study emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence and its factors, placing it ahead of logical intelligence (Arghode et al., 2023). Goleman (1998) concludes that emotional intelligence is even twice as important as logical intelligence for achieving success. Morehouse (2007) underscores a strong connection between emotional intelligence, excellent results, and a positive organizational climate. McGee (2010) demonstrates in his research that a pleasant style of managing interpersonal relationships is associated with long-term employability.

The National Research Council (2011) proves that employers focus more on soft skills than on technical competencies. Hogan et al. (2013) later confirm the same. Van Laar et al. (2017) explore key competencies of the 21st century and conclude that they are precisely a combination of technical and social competencies.

2.2 Assessing social competencies

Some researchers equate social competency with social skills, leading to varied research methods and constructs for identical variables. Scholars exploring social competencies within social intelligence distinguish them from numerical intelligence (IQ), prompting the development of specialized measurement techniques (Matthews et al., 2004). IQ, a numerical indicator of cognitive capacity, assesses abilities like verbal comprehension and logical reasoning (Scoupe et al., 2023). However, IQ does not cover all aspects of intelligence such as creativity or emotional and practical skills. This gap has necessitated the introduction of tests tailored to assess social intelligence, complementing traditional IQ assessments (Scoupe et al., 2023).

The George Washington Social Intelligence Test, developed by Moss et al. (1955), is a prominent tool for assessing social competencies. It includes subtests like judgment in social scenarios, discerning mental states, and humor appreciation, showing a reliability coefficient of approximately 0.85, albeit with varying validity outcomes (Brdar & Smojver-Ažić, 1992).

The Six-Factor Social Intelligence Test, introduced by O'Sullivan and Guilford (1966), evaluates social intelligence through subtests such as drawing prediction and expression grouping, condensing over time to maintain reliability and validity (O'Sullivan et al., 1966).

Despite potential biases, assessments and self-assessments play crucial roles in appraising social behavior and emotional intelligence (Goldenthal, 1985).

Role-playing methods in social competency assessment, categorized into multiple-response and single-response scenarios, highlight challenges in replicating real-life interactions (Becker & Heimberg, 1988).

The Social Skills Test for Children (SST-C), with scenes categorized into assistance, praise, and as-

sertiveness, demonstrates satisfactory criterion validity (Williamson et al., 1983).

The Simulated Social Interaction Test, validated for reliability and validity, offers insights into social competencies across contexts (Campbell et al., 2010, as cited in Curran, 1982).

Overall, these methodologies have enriched the author's research by offering various tools to explore and measure social competencies across different contexts and populations, enhancing the depth and breadth of the author's investigations.

3. Materials and methods

3.1 Data

The research focuses on employers' perceptions in the Republic of Croatia regarding the importance of employees' socially competent behavior for career advancement and long-term employability. Specifically, the questions described empathetic behaviors of employees, behaviors indicating possession of communication skills, and behaviors demonstrating adept conflict management. Using

a Likert scale, respondents expressed the extent to which the aforementioned behaviors are important for advancement and long-term employability in their organization. Notably, the survey respondents consisted exclusively of human resource managers and top-level management personnel. The study involved 113 organizations from various economic sectors. The questionnaire was distributed via Google forms. The data collected from the study were processed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel software. In the analysis of primary data, statistical tests such as t-tests for dependent and independent samples, ANOVA and Cronbach's alpha were utilized. The survey is based on the self-assessment method.

3.2 Methodology

3.2.1 Assessing questionnaire reliability

The reliability of a questionnaire measuring desirable social behaviors of employees for the purpose of achieving career advancement and long-term employability for employers was further examined. The questionnaire consists of two different measurement scales.

Table 1 Assessment of the reliability of a questionnaire measuring desirable social behaviors of employees for the purpose of achieving career advancement and long-term employability

Categories	N	Cronbach's alpha
Behaviors demonstrating social competency_Career advancement	30	0.94
Behaviors demonstrating social competency_Long-term employability	30	0.95

Source: Research results

It is evident that the survey questionnaire assessing desirable employee social behaviors according to employers, for the purpose of career advancement and long-term employability, demonstrates a very high degree of reliability, thus confirming its validity as a measurement tool for social competencies. As a measure of reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient stands at 0.94 and 0.95. The closer Cronbach's alpha is to 1, the higher the reliability.

3.3 Hypothesis of the study

H1: Employers posit that behaviors reflecting empathy hold lesser significance for career progression and sustained employability compared to employee

behaviors demonstrating adept conflict resolution and effective communication.

The terms "career progression" and "sustained employability" were chosen as variables because social competencies significantly influence their achievement, in contrast to logical intelligence, which is associated with the concept of employment itself (Hogan et al., 2013).

This proposition stems from the emphasis placed by employers on social competencies, notably underscoring the value of communication proficiency and conflict resolution skills. Consequently, it is hypothesized that empathy, as a social competency within the business domain, carries diminished importance (Ivaldi et al., 2022).

Table 2 Intercomparison of the perceived importance of socially competent employee behaviors (empathy, communication skills, conflict management) among employers

Comparison	Social behaviors of employees	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t-value	df	p - value
1	Empathy_ career advancement	113	3.72	0.71	-1.86	112	0.06
	Communication skills _ career advancement	113	3.81	0.63			
2	Empathy_ career advancement	113	3.72	0.71	-0.33	112	0.73
	Conflict management _career advancement	113	3.74	0.70			
3	Communication skills _ career advancement	113	3.81	0.63	1.53	112	0.12
	Conflict management _career advancement	113	3.74	0.70			
4	Empathy_ long-term employability	113	3.55	0.76	-2.11	112	0.03
	Communication skills _long-term_ employability	113	3.66	0.70			
5	Empathy_ long-term employability	113	3.55	0.76	-0.97	112	0.33
	Conflict management _long term_ employability	113	3.61	0.70			
6	Communication skills _long-term_ employability	113	3.66	0.70	1.09	112	0.27
	Conflict management _long term_ employability	113	3.61	0.70			

Source: Author's own elaboration

Table 2 indicates that in the first comparison, there is no statistically significant difference in responses (p > 0.05) regarding the assessment of the importance of employee behaviors indicating empathy and those indicating possession of communication skills, for the purpose of career advancement according to employers' perceptions.

In the second comparison, there is no statistically significant difference in responses (p > 0.05) regarding the assessment of the importance of employee behaviors indicating empathy and those indicating effective conflict management, for the purpose of career advancement according to employers' perceptions.

In the third comparison, there is no statistically significant difference in responses (p > 0.05) regarding the assessment of employee behaviors indicating effective conflict management and those indicating possession of communication skills, for the purpose of career advancement according to employers' perceptions.

In the fourth comparison, there is a statistically significant difference (p < 0.05) in responses regarding the assessment of the importance of employee behaviors indicating empathy and those indicating possession of communication skills, for the purpose of long-term employability according to employers' perceptions.

In the fifth comparison, there is no statistically significant difference in responses (p > 0.05) regarding the assessment of the importance of employee behaviors indicating empathy and those indicating effective conflict management, for the purpose of long-term employability according to employers' perceptions.

In the sixth comparison, there is no statistically significant difference in responses (p > 0.05) regarding

the assessment of employee behaviors indicating effective conflict management and those indicating possession of communication skills, for the purpose of long-term employability according to employers' perceptions.

H2: Behaviors denoting an employee's empathy, skilled communication, and conflict management proficiency hold equal significance across all economic sectors for both career progression and long-term employability.

The presumption is grounded in the unanimous consensus among employers regarding the paramount importance of social competencies across all sectors of industry, spanning from service-oriented to manufacturing enterprises. It is believed that organizations can enhance operational efficiency through the contributions of employees skilled in effective communication, conflict resolution, and empathy.

Table 3 Display of the significance of socially competent employee behaviors (empathy, communication skills, conflict management) across various economic sectors

Social behaviors of employees	Economic sector	N	Mean	Standard deviation	*F*-value	p-value
Empathy_ career advancement	primary	3	3.40	1.11	2.68	0.05
	secondary	27	3.75	0.65		
	tertiary	60	3.86	0.61		
	quaternary	23	3.39	0.91		
Empathy_ long-term employability	primary	3	3.23	1.27	1.55	0.20
	secondary	27	3.48	0.78		
	tertiary	60	3.69	0.64		
	quaternary	23	3.34	0.95		
Communication skills _ career advancement	primary	3	3.23	0.75	1.80	0.15
	secondary	27	3.77	0.65		
	tertiary	60	3.92	0.51		
	quaternary	23	3.68	0.84		
Communication skills _long-term_employability	primary	3	3.30	0.70	1.34	0.26
	secondary	27	3.58	0.77		
	tertiary	60	3.78	0.61		
	quaternary	23	3.51	0.83		
Conflict management _career advancement	primary	3	3.07	0.42	1.38	0.25
	secondary	27	3.87	0.61		
	tertiary	60	3.76	0.66		
	quaternary	23	3.65	0.89		
Conflict management _long term_ employability	primary	3	2.93	0.64	1.06	0.36
	secondary	27	3.63	0.71		
	tertiary	60	3.66	0.63		
	quaternary	23	3.57	0.88		

Source: Author's own elaboration

Table 3 provides a comparative analysis of self-assessed social competencies required in various economic sectors, delineated into empathy, communication skills, and conflict management. Upon scrutiny of each competency individually, it becomes apparent that there are no statistically significant disparities among responses (p > 0.05). This

suggests the absence of a correlation between economic sectors and sought-after employee behaviors (their social competencies) conducive to career progression and sustained employability.

H3: Human Resources managers maintain that behaviors reflecting high empathy among employees,

effective communication, and conflict management are more significant for career progression and long-term employability than perceived by top management.

This proposition derives from the fact that Human Resources managers primarily interface with employees within the organization, evaluating their competencies, steering them through career development, facilitating additional training, mentor-ship, etc. As a result, there is an evident disparity in the recognition of social competencies between Human Resources managers and top management within organizations. Human Resources managers demonstrate a nuanced appreciation of the role of these competencies in fostering a positive work environment and nurturing organizational culture. In contrast, top management tends to prioritize technical expertise and final outcomes to a greater extent.

Table 4 Assessment of the significance of socially competent employee behaviors (empathy, communication skills, conflict management) from the perspectives of human resources managers and top management

Social behaviors of employees	Respondents	N	Mean	Standard deviation	*t*-value	p-value
Empathy_ career advancement	Head of HR	56	3.78	0.69	0.75	0.45
	Top management	57	3.68	0.74		
Empathy_ long-term employability	Head of HR	56	3.56	0.71	0.07	0.95
	Top management	57	3.55	0.82		
Communication skills _ career advancement	Head of HR	56	3.93	0.55	1.80	0.08
	Top management	57	3.71	0.69		
Communication skills _ long-term_employability	Head of HR	56	3.65		-0.29	0.78
	Top management	57	3.68	0.75		
Conflict management _career advancement	Head of HR	56	3.86	0.69	1.65	0.10
	Top management	57	3.64	0.71		
Conflict management _long term_ employability	Head of HR	56	3.63	0.68	0.28	0.78
	Top management	57	3.60	0.74		

Source: Author's own elaboration

Table 4 shows that based on self-assessment, there are no statistically significant differences in responses between Human Resources managers and top management. Both groups believe that employee behaviors indicating empathy, high communication skills, and effective conflict management are equally important for career advancement and long-term employability (p > 0.05).

3.4 Results

The first hypothesis, *H1: Employers posit that behaviors reflecting empathy hold lesser significance for career progression and sustained employability compared to employee behaviors demonstrating adept conflict resolution and effective communica-tion,* is rejected. Namely, based on the presented results and intercomparisons of competencies, it is evident that there is a statistically significant difference only in the comparison of empathy and communication skills for long-term employability. The comparison of empathy and communication skills for career advancement did not show a statistically significant difference in responses. Additionally, the comparison of empathy with conflict management competency did not show a significant difference in responses in the context of either long-term employability or career progression.

The second hypothesis, *H2: Behaviors denoting an employee's empathy, skilled communication, and conflict management proficiency hold equal*

significance across all economic sectors for both career progression and long-term employability, is accepted. Based on the presented results, there are no statistically significant differences in responses between employers from different economic sectors; hence it is concluded that the mentioned social competencies are equally important in all economic sectors.

The third hypothesis, *H3: Human Resources managers maintain that behaviors reflecting high empathy among employees, effective communication, and conflict management are more pivotal for career progression and long-term employability than perceived by top management,* is rejected. Based on the presented results, there are no statistically significant differences in responses between Human Resources managers and top management, thus it is concluded that Human Resources managers and top management have similar views regarding the importance of behaviors indicating social competency for career advancement and long-term employability.

3.5   *Managerial implications and limitations of the study*

Employers acknowledge the significance of empathetic conduct in advancing careers and ensuring sustained employability. They view empathetic behavior as equally important as behaviors that demonstrate communication skills and conflict management. This underscores the need for continuous promotion and cultivation of empathy among employees to bolster their prospects for long-term employability. It is paramount to underscore that empathy, communication, and conflict management hold equal importance across diverse economic sectors for career progression and sustained employability. This underscores the imperative for employers to invest in fostering these social competencies within their organizations, irrespective of their industry. While it was hypothesized that Human Resources managers attribute greater weight to empathy, communication, and conflict management compared to top management, research findings reveal no notable disparity in their perspectives. It is inferred that top management, despite their primary focus on non-human resources management functions, recognizes that social competencies are as indispensable as technical skills for long-term employability. Consequently, it is advisable for organizations to ensure the promotion of these competencies across all management echelons to opti-

mize employee career advancement and long-term employability outcomes.

The study may have been limited by the size and diversity of the sample (especially in the context of economic sectors). Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample to ensure greater generalizability of the findings across different industries and organizational contexts. Research design and methodology used in this study may have certain limitations. Future studies could employ longitudinal designs or experimental approaches to establish causal relationships between variables of interest. As a limitation of the study, it is also possible to mention the use of parametric tests instead of non-parametric tests. The study relies on perceptual measures of the importance of certain behaviors for career advancement and long-term employability. Future research could incorporate objective measures or performance evaluations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of these behaviors on career outcomes. The study does not fully explore the influence of contextual factors such as organizational culture, industry norms, or leadership styles on the perceived importance of social competencies. Future research could investigate how these contextual factors may moderate or mediate the relationship between these behaviors and career outcomes.

4. Conclusion

Throughout one's lifetime, individuals are interconnected with others, both during working hours and leisure time. Social skills stand out among the key competencies currently in demand in the job market, characterized by swift job turnover and the concurrent necessity for adaptability. This paper underscores the exceptional significance of social competencies in today's business world and beyond. Crucial to the success of both individuals and organizations, social competencies encompass communication, empathy, conflict resolution, and team leadership. Employers increasingly appreciate employees with well-developed social skills, recognizing their pivotal role in creating a productive work environment, cultivating quality client relationships, and attaining business objectives. Additionally, social competencies play a vital role in the long-term employability of individuals, contributing to their adaptability, offering opportunities for career development, and fostering the

establishment of professional networks. Various methods for measuring social competencies enable the assessment and comprehension of these essential skills, thereby contributing to improved human resource development and management within organizations. Ultimately, understanding and applying social competencies are pivotal for successful business operations and the realization of personal and professional success in the dynamic contemporary business environment.

Previous research tends to focus more on the perception of the importance of social competencies alone and does not necessarily relate them to achieving career advancement and long-term employability. The focus of this research is on the importance of socially competent behaviors for career advancement and long-term employability. Employees are given the opportunity to identify behaviors preferred by employers to ensure long-term employability, thereby enhancing their competencies.

The conclusion of this research highlights several noteworthy findings. Primarily, it illustrates that employers value empathetic behavior as a crucial social competency for career progression and long-term employability of employees, ranking it alongside communication skills and conflict man-

agement skills. This underscores the imperative to actively promote and cultivate the development of these competencies within organizations to enhance the long-term prospects of employees. Furthermore, the research suggests that empathy, communication, and conflict management are equally vital across all economic sectors for career progression and long-term employability, prompting employers to invest in the development of these social competencies irrespective of their industry. Despite the assumption that Human Resources managers assign greater importance to empathy, communication, and conflict management compared to top management, the research indicates no significant difference in their perspectives. For future research endeavors, it is recommended to employ larger and more diverse samples, introduce objective measures or success assessments, and explore the influence of contextual factors on the perception of the importance of social competencies.

Acknowledgements

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