Job-Related Competencies Desired By Those Who Hire International Development Consultants

Tim Kock
Northern Marianas College
Saipan, MP

William Weeks
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK, USA

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to describe industry (NGOs) perceptions of job-related competencies for entry-level international development consultants. An online questionnaire was used to collect data and 30 participants responded. Nine constructs were garnered from the research: conflict management and resolution, cultural diversity, management responsibility, personal and professional development, personal skills, program planning and evaluation, public relations, staff relations, and work habits. NGO management rated all nine constructs as somewhat important or important. When asked to rank the constructs in order of importance, participants ranked work habits as the most important followed by personal skills and management responsibility. Educational institutions are on the front-line in building nations, they educate students who build the future. Therefore, they need to be proactive and inquire what competencies will be needed to facilitate that outcome and prepare students for the global job market.

Introduction

Monetary wealth is not equally distributed throughout the world, and in recent years as developed countries have become richer, many underdeveloped countries have fallen deeper into abject poverty. Developing countries need help, and wealthy nations have a moral, if not ethical, obligation to help. This help comes in the form of aid direct from developed countries and non-governmental aid organizations focused on improving the health and well-being of disadvantaged populations. Based on the amount of financial and human capital being invested in underdeveloped or developing countries and the change to non-governmental organization-driven implementation, it is important to understand how best to help underdeveloped countries and consequently what governmental and non-governmental workers need to know to be effective (Kock, 2010). According to Kock and Weeks (2013a), the development industry puts greater value on employees who can work effectively in a globalized environment, which may add to success of a project being implemented.

Since the early 1990s the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has shifted from employee project implementation to outsourcing their projects through contractors. The United States General Accounting Office (2003) reports that USAID employee rosters have decreased by 37% over a ten year period, while total funding for development projects increased by 57%. "As a result, USAID has increasingly relied on contractor staff…to manage its day-to-day activities overseas" (USGA, 2003, p. 21). This shift in implementation of development activities to contractors has created more opportunities for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to lead aid-supported development projects (USGA, 2003).

As published in an email sent to the researchers, the Development Executive Group's International Development Jobs Weekly Newsletter (personal communication, August 16, 2013), more than 50 NGOs advertised to fill more than 1,800 positions throughout the world. By definition the job market in international development is global. The positions included agricultural and rural development, gender equality, business management, community development, and health services positions. As development opportunities continue to increase, a greater supply of positions will become available in the international sector. To prepare students for these jobs, educators need to know what job-related competencies are necessary for success in this highly specialized employment field. The U.S. Department of Education (2007) indicated there is a greater push for student education to become global, thus better preparing them for an international job market. Chuang (2013) suggested industry may be more willing to hire new employees who are prepared for a globalized job market. Kock and Weeks (2013b) indicated students who are prepared to work globally may find greater employment opportunities.

Higher education institutions are in the business of preparing students for the national and international job market. They prepare students using curricula that will provide students with the desired competencies that will prepare them to be successful in their chosen careers (Arnett & Polkinghorne, 2010; Irigoin, Whitacre, Faulkner, & Coe, 2002; Vulpe, Kealey, Protheroe, & Macdonald, 2001). The United States Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (2007) posits, if students are better prepared, the work force, job satisfaction, and the

possibility for advancement will follow. Irigoin et al. (2002) stated: "Ideally, education and training programs based on competencies that are needed in the 'real-world' will prepare students who are ready to take on the challenges ahead" (p. 7). Moreover, understanding what those job-related competencies are, especially from the point of view of potential employers, will allow college faculty to design educational experiences that will enhance students' competencies in the international development job market.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was driven by human capital theory. The theory postulates that as people advance knowledge through education, their capacity to be successful also advances (Becker, 1993). Colleges and universities prepare students to be competitive in the job market, be prepared for the labor force, and become productive adults. If students cannot gain a competitive advantage in the workforce via their education, they may look elsewhere for career alternatives. The same could be said of employers who look to higher education to prepare prospective employees to meet the demands and provide the company the competitive advantage they seek.

Higher education is based upon human capital theory; that education and training strengthens students in economic and socially productive ways (Conner, Roberts & Harder, 2012; Psacharopoulos & Patrinos, 2004; Reed & Wolniak, 2005). While some question the idea that people truly get ahead through education, in the American culture the relationship between education and economic advantage is widely accepted (Dimov & Shepherd, 2005; Reed & Wolniak, 2005). Therefore, it is important for educational institutions to know what industry desires in new entry-level employees (Becker, 1993; Quiggin, 2000, &

Shultz, 1961). If students have been given the needed tools to effectively work in the international arena, they should be better prepared and more productive on the job. One could conclude, as better prepared college graduates enter the international development sector, their employers, and the recipients of development programs would benefit.

Moreover, Becker (1993) indicated college graduates may not be prepared for the workforce after graduation and lack knowledge or skills deemed important by future employers, and therefore, are not competitive in the market place. However, according to Rubinson and Browne (1994) the main activity of school is not to teach technical job skills to students, rather to prepare them for different status levels in society. Research conducted by Schultz (1961) indicated education is connected to the adaptability and productivity of employees. Therefore, human capital for this study was defined as competencies needed by college graduates who aspire to work as consultants in international settings, and knowledge of those competencies for college or university faculty who teach courses in development.

Purpose/Objective

The purpose of this study was to identify the competencies needed for entry-level international consultants. Specifically, this study investigated job-related competencies as perceived by NGO administrators. NGOs have taken the lead in implementing development globally; they have become the primary leaders in industry. To achieve this objective, the research sought to gain consensus from those working currently in the field of international development. According to Irigoin et al., (2002) "the process of identifying competencies must be developed

with the participation of those who work in the field" (p. 12).

Population

A convenience sample consisting of two NGOs representing different aspects of the development field was queried for this research. The organizational structure of this study consisted of field staff in management roles and administrators in two American-owned, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), those were ACDI/VOCA and CNFA, providing development work throughout the world.

The combined staffs included 90 employees working or managing development projects worldwide. The composition for the first NGO was 26 employees and consisted of 18 field staff and eight human resource and/or administrator personnel. The composition for the second NGO was 64 and consisted of 40 field staff and 24 human resources and/or administration personnel. The convenience sample frame consisted of Senior Vice Presidents (SVP) or Senior Portfolio Managers, Project Directors (PD), Project Coordinators (PC) or Technical Managing Directors/Managing Directors, Chiefs of Party (COP), Deputy Chiefs of Party (DCOP), and NGO Human Resource administrators.

For purposes of classification, the researcher grouped all Senior Vice Presidents and Senior Portfolio Managers into one category (i.e., Vice Presidents). A similar grouping was done for the positions of Project Directors (PD), Project Coordinators (PC) or Technical Managing Directors/Managing Directors. These titles were reformed into the title of Project Directors. The other job titles remained the same. The diversity of the study's population was determined by the employment of the participating organizations. Because of the limited number of participants and the responsibilities of the different participating NGO personnel being studied, all levels of management below the level of presidents were included in this study. The categorical breakdown of the participants is indicated in Table 1. Thirty respondents (33%) completed the instrument.

Table 1

Categorical Breakdown of NGO Employee Positions

	n
Senior Vice President	10
Project Director	12
Chief of Party	29
Deputy Chief of Party	29
Human Resources	10

Note. $N = 90$.

Methods/Procedures

The methodology used in this IRB approved study was a criterion group survey research design. The research was conducted in 2010. Nonresponse error was controlled by comparing early responses to late responses (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001). To accomplish the research objectives, the researchers adapted an instrument used in research conducted by Cooper and Graham (2001) which used a five point, summated scale on competencies

needed by extension educators. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the importance of competencies needed for success. The respondents were also asked to rank the level of importance, one being least and nine being the most important.

In addition to the constructs identified in a study by Cooper and Graham (2001), a review of relevant research warranted the addition of constructs, conflict management/resolution, and cultural

diversity. Ilvento (1996), Langone (1992), and Moore and Rudd (2004) indicated that working with people in areas of community or agricultural development invited conflict. Mauro and Hardison (2002), and the United Nations (2005) suggested cultural diversity assists people to look for different ways to address company and community needs (see Table 2).

Table 2

Comparison of Competency Constructs

Cooper and Graham (2001) Constructs	Revised Instrument Constructs
Program planning	Program planning and evaluation
Public relations	Public relations
Personal and professional development	Personal and professional development
Faculty and staff relations	Staff relations
Personal skills	Personal skills
Management responsibility	Management responsibility
Work habits	Work habits
	Cultural diversity
	Conflict management and resolution

Each of the nine constructs contained five distinct questions further describing each construct. Program Planning was described by an employee's ability to conduct needs assessments, planning programs, proficient in evaluation, professional writing, and record keeping. Whereas, Public Relations was related to ability to work with key leaders, work in public sector, teach decision making, respond to clients' needs, and public speaking. Personal Development included being a subject matter specialist, ability to effectively communicate, training/teaching experience, adaptable, seeks self-improvement. Personal Skills was expressed as goal setting, computer skills, credible/respected, containing a sense of

humor, and a desire to make a difference. Staff Relations constituted effective management skills, ability to delegate authority, promotes teamwork, empowers and motivates others. Management Responsibility was described as an employee's ability to be a trusted advisor, ability to network, recognizes others, ability to lead others, and making decisions. Work Habits was defined as an employee's ability to be self-motivated, organized, flexible, possessing a positive attitude, and committed. Cultural Diversity represented respecting people from other cultures, promote gender equality, open to indigenous knowledge, freedom of thought, and accepting of other cultures. Conflict Management consisted of the ability to

involve others, create an environment of understanding, handle conflict in peaceful ways, control emotions, and separate people from problems.

The instrument with the two additional constructs (cultural diversity and conflict management) was pilot tested on a group of international development consultants not associated with the two NGOs in this study. The construct validity of the instrument was determined by logical analysis during the pilot test; answers from the pilot study were compared for differences. The answers followed the theoretical concepts of the researchers, thus allowing the researchers to determine the

pilot group perceived the instrument in a similar manner. According to Wiersma and Jurs (1990), comparing the scores for differences to see if the research expectations are confirmed by data is an acceptable avenue of testing if the instrument is measuring what was intended. The instrument Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients indicated in the Cooper and Graham (2001) study and this study are reported in Table 3. Garson (2010) suggested that a cutoff as low as .60 is not uncommon for research, therefore all were included for this study.

Table 3

Reliability Coefficients for Both Populations

Constructs	Cooper/Graham	NGO
Conflict management		.64
Cultural diversity		.72
Management responsibility	.85	.88
Personal skills	.85	.60
Program planning	.90	.68
Professional development	.91	.66
Public relations	.88	.72
Staff relations	.59	.92
Work habits	.69	.79

Findings

Of the NGO respondents, data indicated more Project Directors/Project Coordinators completed the instrument, followed by COPs, DCOPs, and SVP. No Human Resource personnel participated in the study. Nine (34.6%) of PD/PCs

completed the questionnaire, 6 (23.1%) COPs and 6 (23.1%) DCOPs, and 5 (19.2%) SVPs answered the question (see Table 4). Twenty-six (27%) members from the NGO population completed the question.

Table 4

Current Position in Non-Governmental Organization

Position	Employee N = 26	
	f	%
Senior Vice President	5	19.2
Project Director/Project Coordinator	9	34.6
Chief of Party	6	23.1
Deputy Chief of Party	6	23.1

All thirty respondents rated all nine constructs as being *important* with scores ranging from 3.59 – 4.39. It is worth noting however, no constructs were perceived as being *very important*. To classify the rating of each construct, data were interpreted using the following scale: 1.00 - 1.49 = *Not Important*, 1.50-2.49 = *Low Importance*, 2.50 - 3.49 = *Somewhat Important*, 3.50 - 4.49 = *Important*, and 4.50 - 5.00 = *Very Important*. The lowest score for any construct was public relations and the highest score was work habits (see Table 5).

Table 5

NGO Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Constructs

Constructs	*M*	*SD*	Rating
Public relations	3.57	1.03	Important
Staff relations	3.61	1.14	Important
Program planning	3.63	1.08	Important
Management responsibility	3.67	0.96	Important
Pers/prof development	3.86	1.09	Important
Personal skills	3.99	0.86	Important
Cultural diversity	4.14	0.84	Important
Conflict management	4.20	0.81	Important
Work habits	4.39	0.64	Important

Note. N = 30. 1.00 - 1.49 = *Not Important*, 4.50 -5.00 = *Very Important*.

To create a more complete understanding of participants' perceptions, each was asked to rank the nine constructs in order of importance. NGO management ranked work habits most important followed by personal skills and management responsibility. Toward the lower end, NGO members listed personal and professional development, cultural diversity, and public relations as least important (see Figure 1).
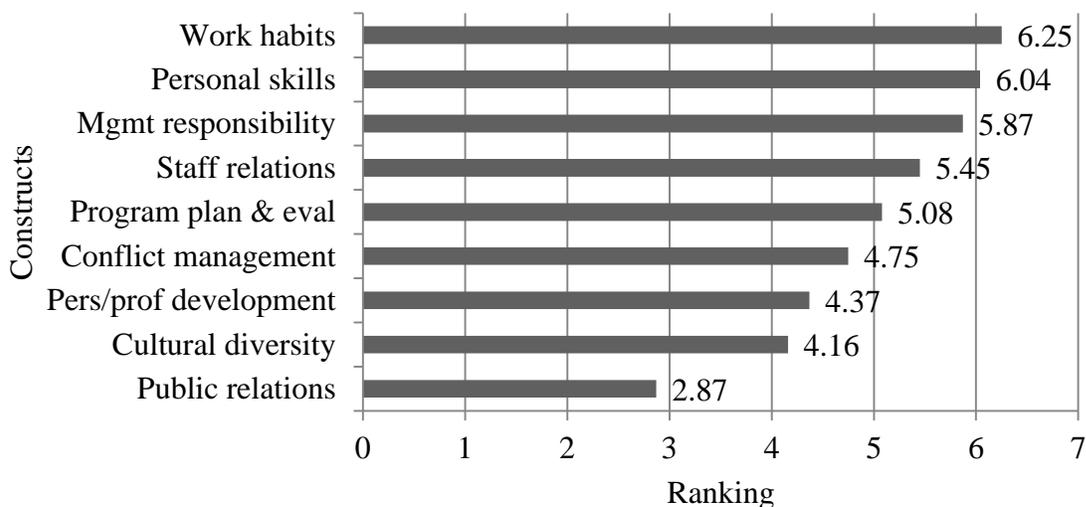
Figure 1. NGO ranking of constructs according to their importance, one being least important and nine being most important.

To create a more complete understanding of possible differences between field-based (international) employees and D.C. based employees of desired competencies needed in new consultants the researchers divided the NGO population into two subgroups, Vice Presidents/Project Directors (D.C.-based management team) and Chiefs of Party and Deputy Chiefs of Party (field-based management team). The Vice Presidents and Project Directors rated all the constructs somewhat important or important (see Table 6), five being very important.

Table 6

NGO Subpopulations Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Constructs

Constructs	VP/PD N = 14		COP/DCOP N = 13		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	Difference
Public relations	3.33	1.11	3.79	0.92	(0.46)
Staff relations	3.41	1.29	3.79	0.83	(0.38)
Program planning	3.50	1.28	3.94	0.85	(0.44)
Mgmt responsibility	3.51	1.01	3.96	0.73	(0.45)
Pers/prof development	3.64	1.24	4.08	0.81	(0.44)
Personal skills	3.87	0.91	4.10	0.82	(0.23)
Cultural diversity	4.04	0.88	4.12	0.79	(0.08)
Conflict management	4.18	0.69	4.20	0.90	(0.02)
Work habits	4.28	0.63	4.46	0.67	(0.18)

Note: 1.00 - 1.49 = *Not Important*, 4.50 - 5.00 = *Very Important*.

To explore deeper into an understanding of the NGO population, the researchers examined the length of time participants spent working in foreign

countries other than the country in which they hold citizenship. The researchers used the mean score of the number of years (11) to split the population; 11 participants had worked more than 11 years in foreign countries, while 16 had 11 or less years of experience in a foreign country. Data indicated 19 (65.5%) of those in the NGO sample were males while 10 (34.5%) were female. Data indicated the majority of respondents identified with the Western culture; the breakdown for the group indicated 22 (78.6%) identified themselves as Western, 1 (3.6%) identified as Latina, 1 (3.6%) as African, 2 (7.1%) as Asian, and 2 (7.1%) as Middle Eastern. Twenty-eight (90%) of the NGO group responded to this question, resulting in 4 (10%) non-respondents. Data indicated that all participants rated all constructs as somewhat important or important (see Table 7). The data also exposed no differences of perceptions for either subpopulation when compared to the total NGO population.

Table 7

NGO Number of Years Working in Foreign Country Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Constructs

	>11 Years N = 16		<11 Years N = 11		
Constructs	M	SD	M	SD	Difference
Public relations	3.33	1.04	3.62	0.94	(0.29)
Staff relations	3.32	1.20	3.80	0.95	(0.48)
Mgmt responsibility	3.37	0.98	3.87	0.81	(0.50)
Program planning	3.46	1.24	3.79	0.86	(0.34)
Pers/prof development	3.77	1.22	3.81	0.92	(0.04)
Personal skills	3.85	0.93	3.90	0.73	(0.06)
Cultural diversity	4.02	0.87	4.18	0.78	(0.16)
Conflict management	4.14	0.80	4.13	0.82	0.01
Work habits	4.39	0.64	4.20	0.65	0.19

Note: 1.00 - 1.49 = *Not Important*, 4.50 - 5.00 = *Very Important*.

Conclusions

Non-Governmental aid consultants believed all nine constructs were important for the success of new employees. When divided into subgroups, D.C. management (SVP & PD) and field management (COP & DCOP) groups, their views were remarkably similar. This was also the case when participants were divided into subgroups based on years of foreign work experience. The respondents ranked the work habits construct the highest (most important) followed by conflict management, then diversity and the public relations construct lowest. This supports the research of Ilvento (1996) as well as Langone (1992), Moore and Rudd (2004), who suggested that consultants working in development experience conflict on a daily basis. The NGO population perceived public relations to be the least important competency, while Cooper and Graham (2001) reported public relations to be an important competency for extension agents. Cooper and Graham also found that commitment and dependability

were important traits for Extension educators.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the research, faculty have good reason to include in curriculum and course work in the areas of work habits, conflict management, cultural diversity, and management responsibility. That recommendation is buttressed by research conducted by Cooper and Graham (2001), Hassel (2004), Ilevto (1996), Mauro and Hardison (2002), Moore and Rudd (2004), Vulpe et al. (2001), and the United Nations (2005) support this idea. Kock and Weeks (2013a) found that the international development industry puts value on work habits of new employees, employees with good work habits may be more successful.

The years of foreign field experience may not play an important role when developing educational opportunities for students. The respondents showed little difference in perceptions when divided by years in foreign country. Moreover, research conducted by Picket (1998) indicated identifying competencies provides for organizational growth and assists the organization to meet future demands. Academic courses designed to prepare graduate students for international employment should contain some aspect of the nine competencies listed in this study.

Schultz (1961) postulated knowledge acquisition is important in the development of human capital and this knowledge was the key in the advancement of western societies. If educational institutions and industry have a greater understanding of the competencies deemed needed by industry, those institutions may be able to provide their students and employees the competitive advantage. This understanding would also benefit both educational institutions and organizations in the

preparation of the students or employees (Becker, 1993).

Implications/Discussions

As wealthy countries continue to give aid (human or financial) to underdeveloped countries, the need for trained development specialists will remain. Understanding what competencies are needed in the field may help educators design courses that could better prepare students for careers in the international sector. Industry strives to hire well-prepared employees who can thrive in different cultures. Courses containing components of cultural diversity, conflict management, and communication skills could be advantageous to student development. As the economy becomes more global, opportunities to live and work in many parts of the world will certainly be presented to new employees. If educational or training institutions can enhance students' understanding of different cultures that may allow students a broader platform when seeking employment and could make them better global citizens.

Many training sectors are adding curricula that promotes internationalism; business education programs uses international opportunities to teach students about international markets, thus enhancing the student experience and make them more competitive in the job market. Medicine and engineering utilize global knowledge when teaching students, according to The U.S. Department of Education (2007) there is a push for education to become more global. Because of globalization, industry recruits employees with a global mindset (Chuang, 2013) and those future employees (students) who are prepared for the international job market may be more successful in their job search (Kock & Weeks, 2013b). The Centre for Intercultural Learning concluded that courses addressing international issues

create a broader experience for the students (Vulpe et al., 2001).

    Research suggests students are generally unfamiliar with global issues (Acker & Grieshop, 2004; Elliot & Yanik, 2002; Hartmann, 2002; Miller, 2004; Wingenbach et al., 2003). If educational institutions hope to prepare students for the global job market, there exists a need to insert internationalism into the curriculum. Duffy et al. (1998) stated, "curriculum is the cornerstone to building human capacity" (p. 47). If developed countries and the NGOs that implement programs hope to help developing nations, they need employees with the human capacity to reach that end.

    Educational institutions are on the front-line in building nations, they educate students (both undergraduate and graduate) who build the future. Therefore, they need to be proactive and inquire what competencies will be needed to facilitate that outcome. Acker and Grieshop (2004) explained it best when they said "we cannot afford to move into the future using only our rear view mirror" (p. 60). Becker (1993) asserts education is a key in enhancing the capability of employees by providing them with knowledge, skills, and the ability to solve problems. Employers hope to hire people who have skills desired by the company and in demand in the industry. When that happens the organization may have the competitive advantage (Quinn, 1992; Lepak & Snell, 1999). Studies like this help both higher education and industry, it provides information on the competencies needed to build the human capacity of future employees.

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