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In Pursuit of Business Excellence

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Abstract:

Excellence and the related notions, such as competence, expertise and expert performance, elude precise definition. Historically, these notions have been approached in different ways by scholars developing their theories in a number of disciplines. These theories are discussed in the article with special reference to determinants of excellence in business and in light of the anthropocentric theory of human languages. The author's main hypothesis is that all these three notions refer to the inherent, non-transferable properties of human beings and not to organizations. Referring to the dominant theory of deliberate practice as a key factor contributing to expertise, the author discusses other scholars' counter arguments and formulates, in addition, his own reservations based on the specificity of business practice. These reservations relate to the diversity of the business field and to certain impact factors inextricably linked with business activity that distinguish this domain from many others.

Introduction

The research problems of excellence and the related issues have led to a multitude of approaches and solutions proposed in many scientific disciplines, which resulted in the emergence of a terminological chaos. In this article an endeavour is made to sort out certain concepts pertained to competence, excellence and expert performance, considering especially the applicability of these concepts in relation to business. Brief presentation of the main concepts and counterarguments have also been presented with an attempt to formulate the author's position on the factors contributing to the achievement of competence in business.

1. Introductory remarks on concepts and notions related to excellence

Philosophers and scholars have been debating on the notion of excellence since time immemorial. For centuries they have considered excellence to be unachievable for humans since only God represents excellence, which contrasts with the imperfection of man. Even today, there is an ongoing debate whether greatness is born or rather made. This topic received first scientific treatment with the publication of Francis Galton's *Hereditary Genius* in 1869. Based on his analysis of eminent lineages, Galton, who was Charles Darwin's cousin and was greatly influenced by Darwin's ideas, argued that genius is primarily born (S.B. Kaufman 2013: ix). Particular concepts of expertise,

excellence and competence have gained relatively wide popularity in different disciplines and scholarly circles since the second half the 20th century.

Looking at these notions in historical terms, the concept of competence was first studied and applied by Americans in the mid-1950s in the procedures for recruitment into the US Air Force (cf. I.V. Mayev et al. 2014: 2).

Ten years later the concept of *competence* was introduced into linguistic terminology by Noam Chomsky (1965: 4), as the ability of an ideal speaker-hearer to produce an unlimited string of sentences based on a limited amount of lexical items and grammatical rules.

American sociolinguist Dell Hymes, in particular, and also Polish linguist Franciszek Grucza argued that Chomsky's idealized speaker-listener concept entirely disregarded real-life communicative situation. According to F. Grucza (1988: 311), D. Hymes was right in pointing to the social factors of competence, and in making use of the term communicative competence, meaning not only in terms of conformity of utterances with formal linguistic rules, but also in terms of appropriateness to the situation and context of use.

The concept of *competence* enjoyed growing popularity after the publication of David McClelland's article entitled 'Testing for Competence Rather Than Intelligence' in 1973 where he advocated testing competencies, which he considered to be the principal characteristics leading to the attainment of "superior" performance of one's professional duties (I.V. Mayev et al. 2014: 4-5).

The latest and most important achievements of western scholars doing research on competence were summarized in the comprehensive resource work, namely the *Handbook of Competence and Motivation* (2005) edited by Andrew J. Elliot and Carol S. Dweck, those two notions being discussed in parallel as considered interrelated and interacting with each other.

Though it is true that the contribution of western scholars in this field was far from negligible, yet the fact remains that it was the Polish linguist, F. Grucza¹, who as early as in 1983, developed a consistent concept of linguistic and cultural competence within his anthropocentric theory of human languages. Basic assumptions underlying this theory are also instrumental in theoretical frameworks of the notion of competence discussed in this paper. These may be summarized as follows:

- ✦ it is the human being that is in the centre of research focused on competence;
- ✦ competence is viewed as the human being's property, as is also with the other innate or/and acquired human properties such as culture, knowledge or language;
- ✦ competence, as is also the case with the other human properties mentioned above, is constructed and developed in the process of socialization, cognition, training and learning experience. That way both knowledge and skills are acquired and altogether they constitute human competence;
- ✦ what follows from the above is that none of the above human properties may be acquired in other way than through an individual's own cognitive and practical ex-

¹In F. Grucza's work: *Zagadnienia metalingwistyki. Lingwistyka — jej przedmiot, lingwistyka stosowana*. Warszawa, 1983.

ercise. The so-called transfer of competence or knowledge from one human being to another should be considered a metaphor.

The fundamental assumptions of anthropocentric linguistics, as laid down by F. Grucza (1983, 1988, 1989, 1992, 1997), have subsequently been developed by S. Grucza (2006, 2008) in the area of the linguistics of specialist languages, where the competence-related issues have also been extensively discussed.

Competence is undoubtedly a multidimensional construct, and in most scholarly disputes it was described as a set of components (or sub-competencies) making up the competence, but the exact combination of these components is still arguable. Many, if not most, definitions point to its three major components: knowledge, skill, and some behavioural factors such as attitude or emotions. Some scholars tend to add other psychological components (e.g. intelligence, concentration ability and memory) and even ethical ones, which makes the notion of competence comparable to a sack of multiple properties of different nature. As T. Hyland (1995: 47) rightly points out, there are clearly 'holistic' and 'minimalist' versions of competence. What is more, the terms 'competence' (competences) and 'competency' (competencies) are used interchangeably often without explanation. According to T. Hyland, there are grounds for arguing that 'competence' is a broad capacity more properly applied to persons, whereas 'competency' refers to dispositions and is more applicable to tasks or activities (ibidem).

In this paper, therefore, the notion of competence will be narrowed down to its minimalistic meaning including two essential components, i.e. an individual's knowledge and skill in applying that knowledge in a certain field of activity.

While *competence* appears to have no specific relevance to any discipline, area or activity, the other notion, that of *excellence* (cf. T. Peters and R.H. Waterman 2004), has been widely discussed by business academics. The term was coined by T. Peters and R.H. Waterman who in 1982 wrote their best selling business book in the US at that time, titled 'In Search of Excellence. Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies'. This book was still widely considered to be one of the top management books ever written and ranked as the "greatest business book of all time" in a 2002 poll by Britain's Bloomsbury Publishing. In their book, Peters and Waterman provided a handful of sensible pieces of advice for those striving for excellence but they also insisted on informality in communication in the workplace, and on transparency and family-like atmosphere. Their research led to model of the following seven success criteria for excellence divided into the so-called hardware and software factors according to this computer metaphor:

- ✦ Hardware factors comprising (1) Structure and (2) Strategy, and
- ✦ Software factors comprising (3) Systems, (4) Shared Values (i.e. culture), (5) Skills, (6) Staff and (7) Style (cf. 2004: 9ff.).

During their study Peters and Waterman observed that managers are getting more done in their business if they pay attention to all these seven criteria instead of just two (the hardware criteria), and real change in large institutions is a function of how management understand and handle the complexities of this model.

Peters and Waterman also pointed to the crucial aspect that “soft is hard” meaning that it is the software criteria of the model which often are overlooked and which should have the highest focus when embarking on the journey to excellence. The authors state (2004: 122-123) that “the excellent companies are a vast network of informal, open communication. (...) The intensity of communications is unmistakable in the excellent companies”. This is the first, to my knowledge, such a clear narrative pointing to the significance of the soft elements, namely language and communication. Since that time communication has been more often cited as a contributing factor to business success as, for example, by the C.H. Prahalad and G. Hamel in their article the ‘Core Competence of the Corporation’ (1990).

A substantial body of research has been devoted to yet another related concept, namely that of *expertise* or *expert performance*. According to K.A. Ericsson (2006: 3), expertise refers to the characteristics, skills and knowledge that distinguish experts from novices and less experience people. In some fields there are objective criteria for identifying experts, who are regularly able to demonstrate superior performance for representative tasks in a given domain (ibidem). In some domains, however, it is difficult to identify expert performance and researchers have to rely on peer appraisals in the same domain.

The area of study on expert performance and expertise has been presented and reviewed in *Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance* (2006). Most of this research has been done in domains of expertise, where performance can publicly be observed and even objectively measured during public performances by musicians, dancers, chess players, and athletes. Surprisingly little research has been carried out on the expertise or performance of businessmen or people exercising business-related professions. Some exceptions will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

On the other hand, there exist yet two notions, both related to the effectiveness of human action and researched mainly in business and economics. These two notions and disciplines bear almost the same name of *praxiology* and *praxeology*. The former refers to the theory of working and doing from the point of view of effectiveness and this discipline has its roots in the writings of French philosophers Louis Bourdeau and V. Alfred Espinas, both considered to be founding fathers of the theory of human action. The term *praxeology* (*praxéologie*) was first used in 1890 by A. Espinas (cf. A. von Mises 1949: 40). *Praxeology*, on the other hand, while referring to the same roots, appears to be more linked with the Austrian school of economics and works of Ludwig von Mises. Both Alfred Espinas and Ludwig von Mises researched the laws of effective human action and the fruit of their research was almost identically titled, namely ‘The Science of Human Action’ by Alfred Espinas published in 1890 and ‘Human Action’ by Alfred von Mises published in 1949. What should be emphasised is that ‘Human Action’ by Alfred von Mises is a much more extensive work since it is a comprehensive treatise on economics, which has had an enduring significance and impact on economic theory and policy till our times. According to W. Gasparski (2013: 3), Ludwig von Mises was one of the two parallel followers of the Espinas’ human action

theory; the other was Tadeusz Kotarbiński who originated the Polish *praxiology* school in the second half of the 20th century².

2. Further approaches and paths of research on excellence-related issues

The notions discussed here refer to everlasting aspirations for best achievements in any human undertaking. They have given rise to research disciplines that flourish nowadays and are studied in a number of universities and research centres in the world. These notions certainly do not exhaust the whole list of excellence-related concepts that have so far been formulated.

Though similar in some respects, these notions differ in both their essential meaning and function. It seems that they differ essentially in that they are considered to refer either to humans or organizations, and on the other hand that they refer to the outcomes of either human or organizational action. These different approaches have been summarized in the table below.

Property/outcome→	Designations for properties of human being or of organization	Designations for outcomes of human being's or organization's activity
Agent/possessor ↓		
Human being	ability competence excellence expertise effectiveness	achievement performance expert performance results
Organisation	competence cost-effectiveness efficiency effectiveness excellence productivity	achievement bottom line performance results financial results

Table 1. Designations for properties and outcomes of both humans and organisations.

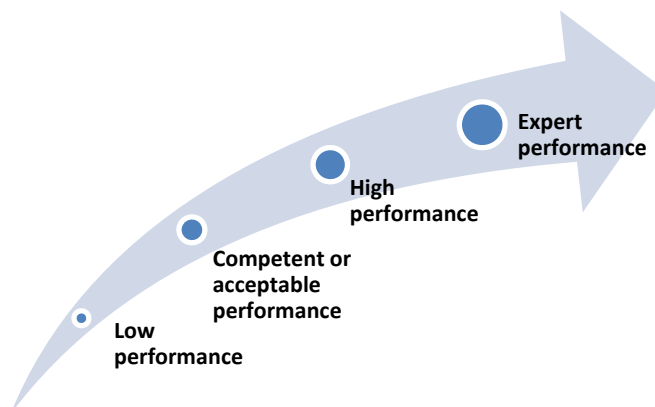
² with the publication of *Traktat o dobrej robocie* (1955) in English translation titled as *Praxiology: An Introduction to the Science of Efficient Action*, New York: Pergamon Press, 1965.

Table 1 summarises some, but certainly not all, designations used for properties of human beings and organisations. The question arises, however, whether all these designations are really appropriate in use and relevant for both humans and organisations. Basing on the assumptions of the anthropocentric linguistics, the only conclusion suggests itself, namely that at least some properties, including competence and expertise, may only be regarded as inherent human properties, and not as the properties of organisations.

Attributing human properties to an organization (i.e. anthropomorphization), although widely accepted and adopted in some disciplines, appears to be misleading and incompatible with scientific reasoning. Knowledge, competence and expertise, being the properties of concrete individuals, manifest themselves at different levels of their performance or outcomes. As regards organisations, on the other hand, different traits and measures of their performance have been developed in economic sciences, and these have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere³.

Different levels of performance are displayed by individuals as a result of their combined innate and developed competence, being also the function of a set of other factors among which deliberate practice and experience play a particularly significant role (cf. K.A. Ericsson 2003: 112). In his publication K.A. Ericsson argues that at least ten years' experience is required to demonstrate regularly expert performance by individuals striving for expertise in a wide variety of the disciplines where he conducted his research (ibidem). K.A. Ericsson also recognizes the potential risk of getting over trained, overly specialised, which may lead to thinking and reasoning becoming inflexible.

The hypothetical curve presenting the performance development of an individual is shown in Figure 1.



*Figure 1. The hypothetical curve of rising performance (vertical axe) as function of experience (horizontal axe)
(Own elaboration based on K.A. Ericsson 2003: 111)*

³ A noteworthy analysis of the notions of efficiency and effectiveness has been made by W. Kowal (2013) whose paper is included in the bibliography.

As can be seen from Figure 1, after the first phase of training and experience, especially when an acceptable level of performance is attained, the development becomes slow or even arrested, at least for most individuals. However, when individuals are motivated strongly enough to improve their performance, they are able to achieve higher levels, and their performance can gradually be improved by intensive and deliberate practice (K.A. Ericsson 2003: 112). And yet this improvement is not an automatic result of merely performing the same activities on a regular basis. Further improvements require continuously increased effort and challenges that raise the performance above the current level (*ibidem*). This effort is also orderly and deliberate, therefore, it is referred to as deliberate practice.

K.A. Ericsson (2006) and N. Charness (2006) consider it uncontroversial that attaining an expert level of performance in a domain requires mastery of all of the relevant knowledge and prerequisite skills. Indeed, nearly all other studies showed a positive relationship between practice and performance: The more people reported having deliberate practice, the higher their level of performance in their specific domain.

This belief has become widespread in scholarly circles in recent years, and deliberate practice has received considerable attention in these debates, while innate ability has been pushed aside, contrary to earlier assumptions. By way of analogy, one might assume that deliberate practice and experience are also the factors instrumental in competence development, i.e. in the development of an individual's knowledge and skills.

As in the case of performance development, also in respect of competence building, this property may be developed gradually in more or less linear process rising from lack of competence to its highest level referred to as excellence or expertise. That is to say, the individual's competence is meant to understand the acquired knowledge plus skills allowing this individual to do the job at least properly. One might ask, why this lack of competence is not referred simply to as incompetence. It should be noted, however, that there is quite a difference between knowing how to do a certain task and performing it badly, which is incompetence, and not knowing how to do it, which is no competence (*cf.* A. Furnham 2003: 78). Competence of competent individuals should be displayed in their regular performing a specified task or a set of tasks in a particular domain to an agreed and at least satisfying standard. However, some scholars observe that the term competence, with its allusion to mere sufficiency and adequacy, sounds dated in a world that demand excellence and outstanding performance (Jacobs cited in A. Furnham 2003: 71).

In Figure 2, competence is presented as a gradual property, starting with the lack of competence, acceptable level as competence, while the highest level is referred to as an excellence or expertise.

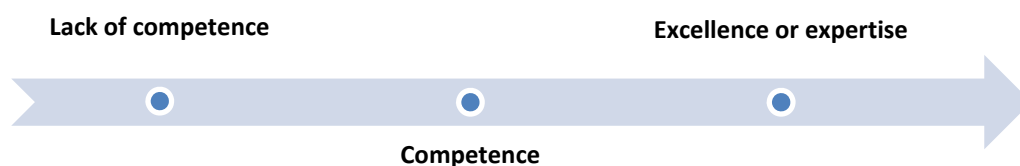


Figure 2. Stages of competence development

It seems reasonable to treat all these notions as interrelated in a process starting with the initial stage that comprises innate abilities, and that may be developed later into varying levels of competence and afterwards, though not always, into excellence or expertise. Competence is both field specific and human specific notion, relating to possessed individual knowledge and skills that manifest themselves in the performance achieved by that individual in a specific field.

Surprisingly enough, the new study, from psychological scientist B. Macnamara (2014) of Princeton University and colleagues, offers a counterpoint to this seemingly established paradigm. This study suggests that the amount of practice accumulated over time does not seem to play a huge role in accounting for individual differences in skill or performance. B. Macnamara, the author of these findings admittedly states that deliberate practice is important, from both a statistical and a theoretical perspective. However, he adds that it is less important than has so far been argued. According to this scholar, the relationship between deliberate practice and performance would vary considerably across domains. The effect of deliberate practice accounted for about 26% of individual differences in performance in games (26%), about 21% of individual differences in music (21%), and about 18% of individual differences in sports (18%), and it was much weaker for education (4%), and even less than 1% of individual differences in professions. The question arises, why is it so? It will also be tempting to search for other factors contributing to excellence if the paradigm of deliberate practice is to be disproved. B. Macnamara speculates (2014) that the age at which a person becomes involved in an activity may matter, and that certain cognitive abilities such as working memory may also play an influential role. Another possibility is that deliberate practice is less well defined in these domains. Let us now consider the domain of business.

3. Business excellence

As was mentioned above, most research was focused on the domains of the arts, sport, games, and relatively little research was devoted to expertise or excellence in business. This changed radically at the turn of the century. Now research on competence and excellence in business is flourishing in a considerable number of research centres in the world, including Poland. However, scholarly research is mostly conducted under the banner of quality or total quality management and the outcomes of this research are different and do not seem to provide clear-cut findings as to the nature and factors contributing to the best performance and excellence.

As K.A. Ericsson argues (2003: 105), finding individuals with superior performance in the area of business, turned out to be surprisingly challenging because experts in some these domains, especially in banking, investing, business auditing, have not been found to perform at a level superior to other experienced individuals in their domains. He quotes Stael von Holstein's findings (*ibidem*) who states further that stock market experts and bankers are not able to forecast stock prices reliably better than university teachers and students. These findings seem to challenge the theory of prevailing role of experience at least in certain domains. It may be well that becoming expert in certain business fields takes more than practice and that more factors are in-

volved. As mentioned above, this was partly confirmed by the latest findings of B. Macnamara et al. that deliberate practise accounted for less than 1% of individual differences in performance achieved by professionals (without indicating any particular type of profession) and this may be linked to a host of factors. It seems, in particular that B. Macnamara's speculation about deliberate practice as less well defined in certain domains may also refer to the broad field of business. To take this speculation a step further, some general remarks seem appropriate here. There are huge differences between domains and demands for different sorts of skills imposed on individuals striving for expertise in these domains. These might be human related (e.g. cognitive, or other human skills) or domain-related. However, even within the domain of business different skills are demanded from marketers and from accountants. Let us consider the following differences:

Firstly, there are huge differences in the degree of cognitive demands in different domains with probably the lowest in sports and the highest in academic professions.

Secondly, there are also differences in demands for repetitive and mechanical skills with probably the highest in sports and the lowest in academicians.

Thirdly, there are differences in demands for creativity, for communication skills and for other properties and skills required for achieving peak performance in different domains.

The banal conclusion that suggests itself is that each domain is specific and requires well tailored working practices with a view to developing expertise.

As regards business, the real difficulty in researching this field lies in its complexity as compared with other domains. This complexity consists in multiple factors that come into play and that are in-existent in other domains. These factors are external factors that make business activity less predictable and more risky than any other activity where deliberate practice may be continued undisturbed by external events such as tax control and changes in taxation policy and other disturbances that occur not so infrequently. These factors in regard to entrepreneurial competence were also tackled elsewhere by this author (J.B. Łompieś 2014: 119–134).

One is tempted to speculate that a division into two approaches characterises the dominant theoretical perspectives on business excellence – namely the above mentioned approach represented by A.K. Ericsson and other scholars from departments of psychology, and the other approach represented by economists and management experts. While the former focus on the research of an individual's excellence, the latter are more concerned with the performance of organizations and with integrating the research on excellence into the study of management in business. This divide is also visible in Poland, although the approach of business, management and economics seems to prevail, which deserves some critical remarks.

This research is targeted mainly at the competence and knowledge of organisations understood as organisational assets that are manageable and transferable. Research papers are loaded with one magic and utterly overused word *management*, which is combined with almost everything, including knowledge management and human (or intellectual) capital management and many others. The reasoning in this matter seems to be based on a false premise, which might be explained as follows:

1. The so-called knowledge management is based on conceptualizing knowledge as a tangible thing that can be stored and transferred outside the human brain, which is not the case. Storage and transfer may only refer to knowledge representation carriers, such as paper or electronic writings or other data carriers. Disseminating electronic or paper data cannot be regarded as knowledge transfer. More difficult, but more efficient knowledge transfer, would be the face-to-face contact and direct communication allowing all participants to provide and get immediate feedback. Knowledge is admittedly not built this way, but the feedback provides participants with some essential insights.

2. Human capital management is based on conceptualizing people in accounting terms as a capital asset, which is not only depreciating and dehumanizing, but it is becoming obsolete in our times. CEOs and other company leaders will not attain best economic performance by managing human capital but by communicating properly with the people, which is an art in itself

What should be highlighted in this connection is that communicative competence is not a skill apart, but is an integral part of an individual's competence in any specific domain. Possessing specific knowledge and competence without sufficient skill in demonstrating this competence in oral or written communication is of little use.

4. Concluding remarks

Between Peters and Waterman's intuitive and optimistic approach and Ericson's critical 10-year threshold to cross in pursuit of expertise, there is a broad and striking difference in perceiving the road to business excellence and success. We know today that many of the excellent companies identified in the studies by Peters and Waterman later on declined in performance and have not withstood the test of time. This observation tells us what should be obvious that any model has its limitations, simplifications of reality in which any business operates, and the reality is extremely complex, risky and unpredictable.

But it is to Peter and Waterman's credit that they praised the importance of communication as a success factor in business. Hopefully, further research will shed new light on the intricacies and underpinnings of business excellence.

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