



ASSESSING THE RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT IN CROATIA

Ana Skledar Ćorluka

University of Applied Science Baltazar Zaprešić, Croatia

e-mail: skledar.a@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-7161-5764

Maja Buljat

University of Applied Science Baltazar Zaprešić, Croatia

e-mail: mbuljat@bak.hr

ORCID: 0000-0002-5500-6851

Ivana Cunjak Mataković

University of Applied Science Baltazar Zaprešić, Croatia

e-mail: icunjakmatakovic@bak.hr

ORCID: 0009-0009-9359-4891

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Abstract

Research background: While there is existing research on the importance of employees' social competencies, there is a need for further investigation into their specific impact on long-term employability and career advancement, especially in the context of different industries or cultural settings.

Purpose: To evaluate and analyze the factors that contribute to career advancement in Croatia, with a specific focus on distinguishing between social competencies and professional competencies.

Research methodology: A quantitative, cross-sectional, research approach was adopted, using a self-administrated questionnaire. The sample consisted of 113 HR or top management employees from all sectors. T-test, ANOVA and Cronbach's alpha were utilized.

Results: The results indicate that professional competencies are significantly more important for career advancement, but not for achieving long-term employability. Teamwork and Professional knowledge are equally important across all economic sectors. The results suggest that the opinions of top management and HR do not differ significantly regarding the assessment of the importance of individual competencies.

Novelty: It lies in its comparative analysis of social versus professional competencies specifically within the Croatian labor market, offering insights that are tailored to Croatia's unique cultural and economic

context. It provides original data and findings on how these competencies influence career advancement across different sectors, addressing a gap in existing research focused on Croatia.

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

JEL classification: C12, J24, M12, M50

Introduction

In today's era, nearly all organizations encounter challenges and changes inherent in modern business operations. The extent of organizational evolution raises questions. Additionally, contemporary employers' mindsets regarding innovation adoption are influenced by trends in the global labor market, especially the validation of social competencies. Both social and professional competencies are critical for career advancement and long-term employability. These competencies directly influence an individual's ability to perform effectively in the workplace and navigate organizational structures. Competencies, in general, hold significant importance concerning employee job performance. The foundation of human resource management in every organization has begun to be based precisely on the competency management system (Scoupe et.al., 2023).

To achieve maximum employee efficiency, it is necessary to provide basic predispositions for achieving that efficiency, starting from training, mentoring, education, and everything necessary to strengthen the competencies required to perform a task (Galleli, 2021). Professional competencies, including technical skills, expertise, and job-specific knowledge, are fundamental for performing tasks effectively. Social competencies, such as communication, teamwork, and leadership, are equally important for building relationships, problem-solving, and ensuring collaboration within teams. When thinking about education, it was most often considered necessary for the development of specific knowledge and competencies required for a job. However, the foreign market has become increasingly open to developing other competencies, particularly social competencies. Without these social competencies, it can be challenging to master specific knowledge since they are prerequisites for successful communication (Collie, 2021).

Career advancement and long-term employability rely on a balance between these two competency types. Professional competencies provide the technical foundation needed to fulfill job roles. In contrast, social competencies enable individuals to adapt, lead, and work effectively with others, which is crucial for sustained employability in dynamic work environments. Accordingly, Croatian employers have been following the trend of introducing education to strengthen both professional and social competencies for some time now. This study investigated how important it really is for their career advancement and long-term employability.

Vasta, Haith, and Miller (2005) emphasize that humans are inherently social beings and spend a significant portion of their time in interpersonal interactions. Vasta (2005) notes that a substantial portion of human behavior, especially social behavior, is acquired rather than innate. The fact that social behavior, and thus social competencies, are acquired rather than innate allows us to influence them (Froehlich, 2018). This suggests that social competencies can be developed over time through education and training. This development is essential for both career growth and maintaining long-term employability, especially in industries where interpersonal communication and teamwork are vital.

The paper is divided into three parts. The introductory section discusses the importance of social competencies as the central theme of this paper. It further provides a brief introduction to the significance of competencies that will be analyzed, as well as the two categories (career advancement and long-term employability) in which these competencies will be compared. The first part describes the social competencies that are the subject of examination and provides an overview of previous research on professional and social competencies. The second part of the paper describes the methodology, hypotheses, sample, and research results. The final section is the conclusion, summarizing the entire paper and listing the limitations of the research as well as recommendations for future research.

1. Literature review

1.1. On social competencies

Social competencies refer to an individual's ability to effectively communicate, collaborate, and build relationships with others in various social and professional contexts. Social competencies are crucial for teamwork as they enable individuals to cooperate efficiently, understand others' perspectives, and resolve conflicts constructively (Bar-On, Parker, 2000). The development of these skills not only enhances job performance but also increases job

satisfaction. Individuals with high levels of social competencies are better able to build positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors (Cherniss, Goleman, 2001).

Moreover, Froehlich (2018) highlights that social competencies are acquired rather than innate. This means they can be developed through education and practice. In professional environments, the ability to communicate effectively and build relationships can be as important as technical expertise. This is especially true in situations requiring teamwork and project leadership (Collie, 2021). On the global labor market, employers increasingly recognize the value of social skills. These have become critical for long-term employability and career advancement (Spitzberg, Cupach, 2002).

Therefore, social competencies help employees adapt to dynamic business conditions, build networks, and become more effective in interpersonal relations. These contributions promote both personal and professional growth.

The social competencies included in this research are:

1. Empathy

The earliest conceptualizations of empathy originated from German psychologist Lipps (1897) and American psychologist Titchener (1909) (Hirn, 2018). Current studies rely on the definitional approach by Derntl and colleagues (2010, p. 73). They adopt empathy as a “multidimensional construct” that “requires the ability to perceive, understand, and feel the emotional states of others.” Empathy is often described as experiencing the same emotions as another person or “putting oneself in someone else’s shoes” (Lazarus, 1991, p. 121). It is socially significant to the extent that Ickes (1997, p. 272) argues that empathy is “the second greatest achievement the mind is capable of.” This is because it facilitates communication and establishes relational connections. Empathy is commonly defined today as the ability to identify with others or empathize with their feelings, thoughts, or attitudes (Brooks, Goldstein, 2005).

2. Communication skills (negotiation skills)

Effective communication is a prerequisite for achieving organizational goals. It represents one of the most important processes in organizational functioning. It acts as the nervous system of all processes within the organization (Jurina, 2011). Since communication skills are “behavioral and behavioral abilities,” the next obvious point is to inquire about the exact “abilities” involved. Specifically, we need to ask which skills a competent communicator possesses (Ivaldi et al., 2022, p. 16) In response to this question, there are numerous lists and collections. One example is found in Burleson’s specification of eight communication skills related to interpersonal relationships (1990): comforting skills, ego support, conflict

management, persuasion, conversational skill (i.e., the ability to initiate conversation), and storytelling ability (e.g., gossiping, storytelling, and jokes). Other skills include regulatory skill (i.e., changing someone's non-normative behavior) and referencing skill (i.e., conveying information in a clear, unambiguous manner). It is important to note that subsequent research (Burleson, Samter, 1990) has shown that among these eight skills, "ego support" was rated as the most important for same-sex, friendly relationships among students. In contrast, persuasion skills were rated as the least important.

3. Teamwork

A simple definition of a team is: "A team is a small group of people who prioritize common goals and work together in harmony to achieve them" (Tudor, Srića, 1996, p. 21). Key areas of team competency development include knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Bahtijarević-Šiber, Sikavica, Pološki Vokić, 2008). Teamwork constitutes a crucial cornerstone in the realm of social competencies (Wang et al., 2022). The ability and willingness to work with others are competitive advantages in the job market. Not all individuals are willing to be part of group synergy to achieve collective goals. Instead, some people are self-reliant and prefer independent work without excessive social interaction (Herrera Granda et al., 2023; Connaway, 1975).

4. Conflict management

Social conflict is an inevitable occurrence in the life of every individual. In itself, social conflict is neither desirable nor undesirable, neither positive nor negative (Figueiredo et al., 2023). Its nature largely depends on how the conflict participant emerges from it. If they emerge as a winner, they will perceive the conflict as positive. Otherwise, the conflict will be negative for them (Uzelac, Bujišić, 2014). In the business sphere, the adage attributed to William Wrigley is widely recognized: "When two men in business always agree, one of them is unnecessary." For a long time, it was believed (and many still do) that conflicts are inherently bad and should be avoided at all costs. Today, there is a prevailing understanding that conflicts are neither inherently good nor bad. Their consequences can be either positive or negative, depending on our knowledge of how to manage a conflict situation (Fisher et al., 2000; Hellriegel et al., 2001; Konrad et al., 2021).

Previous research on the importance of social competencies

Research indicates a significant shift in understanding the importance of employees' social competencies. However, studies do not extensively address categories such as career advancement and long-term employability. These are primarily what distinguish professional and social competencies. As Vrančić (2015, p. 67) stated, "IQ gets you hired, EQ gets you

promoted.” Considering that social competencies are part of EQ, it is evident that they are essential for career advancement. This, in turn, ensures long-term employability (Arghode et al., 2023). This assumption is corroborated by a joint study conducted by Harvard and Stanford universities. The study revealed that IQ (intelligence quotient) accounts for only 15% of success in life and career progression. In contrast, EQ (emotional intelligence) accounts for as much as 85%. Furthermore, Goleman’s (1998) analysis of job performance across various positions in 121 companies worldwide found that emotional intelligence is twice as important for excellence in work as logical intelligence. Morehouse (2007) notes that research demonstrates a correlation between emotional intelligence, superior performance, and a positive organizational climate. According to such research, emotional intelligence is endorsed as a vital element for excellence in business and organizational practices. It is also responsible for fostering a positive service climate, employee care for quality, and conflict resolution skills in the workplace.

Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) conceptualized employability as a set of five different competencies. Their conceptualization combines job-specific expertise with social competencies such as flexibility and adaptability. They also emphasize the optimization of one’s abilities, voluntary participation in various workgroups, and maintaining a work-life balance. This highlights the importance of social competencies in every job task. In their study (2006), they asked the employees of a Dutch company to complete their employability scale of five components. They were also asked to select the component most significant for achieving long-term employability. The best predictor of long-term employability in that study was corporate sense. This refers to the ability to behave socially acceptable at work, which is more of an interpersonal function than professional competency.

Gallo (2003) and later McGee (2010) in their research demonstrate how a pleasant style of managing interpersonal relationships is associated with long-term employability. Hogan and Brinkmeyer (1994) examined job advertisements in their study. A total of 47% of the advertisements sought candidates with “good interpersonal skills.” In addition, 71% of the positions involved client contact, 78% required collaboration with colleagues, 83% involved interaction with subordinates, and 84% required interaction with management. Therefore, from the employers’ perspective, the most important characteristic determining employability is interpersonal skills and social competencies. Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic, and Kaiser (2013) point to research conducted among 222 top employers in the UK. It has been proven that employers focus more on soft skills rather than technical competencies. These include teamwork, interpersonal skills, and cultural awareness. Studies on career failure lead to similar conclusions. Hogan, Hogan, and Kaiser (2010) state that managers who are dismissed are

intelligent, well-educated, experienced, hardworking, and successful. However, such managers tend to have an abrasive style in interpersonal relationships and a history of problematic relationships. Although managers are sometimes dismissed due to poor performance, poor performance is typically a pretext for removing difficult managers.

The National Research Council (2011) highlights the importance of social competencies as emphasized by employers. This may stem from two facts. The first is that jobs are becoming less formal, structured, and routine. The second is that workplaces increasingly require collaboration with colleagues from different cultural, educational, and technical backgrounds. Štimac (2015) emphasizes in his research that social and professional competencies are almost equally important from the employers' perspective. However, he does not take into account categories such as career advancement and long-term employability. Lončar-Vicković and Dolaček-Alduk (2009) state that the results of the "Tuning" project research have shown that the most important competencies to be developed are the ability to work independently and in a team, adaptability to new situations, concern for quality, information management skills, and analytical and synthesis skills. Additionally, the research highlights learning ability, applying knowledge in practice, and problem-solving ability. Furthermore, Lider Media, the Croatian portal for entrepreneurs, in its extensive research from 2015, lists key competencies. These are teamwork, analytical skills, leadership, interpersonal skills, communication skills, and technical skills. These competencies are considered a combination of professional and social competencies, with no single type being dominant. In a study conducted by DOBA Business School from Slovenia (2017) across six countries (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Macedonia, and Turkey), competencies that employers mention as crucial for achieving work success and long-term employability include managerial, entrepreneurial, and communication skills. Van Laar, Deursen, Dijk, and Haan (2017) conducted a systematic literature review. They searched for the competencies most commonly cited as crucial in the 21st century. Once again, it is a combination of professional and social competencies, such as information management, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, collaboration, communication, technical skills, self-management, lifelong learning, ethical awareness, cultural awareness, and flexibility.

1.2. On professional competencies

Professional competencies refer to the specific knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for the effective execution of tasks within a particular profession or industry. They encompass technical expertise, problem-solving, analytical thinking, and the use of specific tools or technologies required for job performance (Boyatzis, 1982; Kraiger, Ford, Salas, 1993).

These competencies are developed through formal education, specialized training, and work experience, enabling individuals to competently fulfill their professional obligations (Salas, Sims, Burke, 2005; Eraut, 2004).

Professional competencies are crucial for technical performance and contribute to work processes within specific fields (Cappelli, 2015; Katz, 1974). For example, engineers must possess advanced technical knowledge to effectively design systems. Meanwhile, medical professionals require clinical expertise for proper patient care (Dreyfus, Dreyfus, 1980; Eraut, 1994). Professional competencies are continuously evolving in response to ongoing changes in technology and business processes. This necessitates lifelong learning and adaptation (Robles, 2012; Kraiger, 2002). Although technical skills are important for carrying out specific tasks, their connection to a broader work context underscores the need for integration with other skills such as teamwork and adaptability (Spitzberg, Cupach, 2002; Goleman, 1995).

Employers often assess professional competencies based on performance and outcomes in specific tasks. This makes them foundational for career advancement and long-term employability (Cherniss, Goleman, 2001; Salas, Sims, Burke, 2005). Ultimately, professional competencies enable individuals to remain competitive in the labor market. However, they must be continuously refined to stay relevant in a changing business environment (Eraut, 2004; Robles, 2012).

Examples of such competencies include professional knowledge, organizational abilities, entrepreneurship, strategy implementation, and project management, which will also be integral to this research.

1. Professional knowledge

This refers to the specialized information and understanding necessary to perform tasks effectively within a particular field. It includes both theoretical knowledge acquired through education and practical knowledge gained through experience (Kraiger, Ford, Salas, 1993; Eraut, 2004). Having a solid foundation in professional knowledge allows individuals to make informed decisions. It also enables them to apply the best practices in their work, enhancing overall job performance (Cappelli, 2015).

2. Organizational abilities

These competencies involve the capacity to effectively manage resources, including time, personnel, and materials. Individuals with strong organizational skills can streamline processes and improve efficiency. They also foster a productive work environment (Drucker, 1999; Robbins, Judge, 2019). Such abilities are vital for roles requiring coordination among

various teams or departments. This ensures that objectives are met within deadlines and budgets.

3. Entrepreneurship

This competency encompasses the ability to identify opportunities, take risks, and innovate within the workplace. Entrepreneurial skills involve creativity, initiative, and a proactive approach to problem-solving (Shane, Venkataraman, 2000; Drucker, 1985). Professionals with strong entrepreneurial competencies can drive organizational change. They also contribute to the development of new products or services, enhancing a company's competitive edge.

4. Strategy implementation

The ability to execute organizational strategies effectively is crucial for achieving long-term goals. This competency requires a clear understanding of strategic objectives, as well as the skills to mobilize resources. It involves aligning team efforts toward these objectives (Kaplan, Norton, 2001; Mintzberg, 1994). Effective strategy implementation ensures that plans are translated into actionable tasks and that all stakeholders are working towards a common vision.

5. Project management

This competency involves the planning, execution, and oversight of projects from inception to completion. It requires a blend of technical skills and interpersonal abilities. These include leadership, communication, and risk management (Kerzner, 2017; PMI, 2013).

1.3. Career advancement and long-term employability

This paper will compare two categories: long-term employability and career advancement, specifically examining how social and professional competencies influence their development.

Long-term employability is defined as 'being capable of keeping fulfilling work' and encompasses personal attributes, transferable skills, and career planning skills (Potts, 2022, p. 1218; Lankard (1990, p. 96).

Long-term employability refers to an individual's ability to maintain and secure employment over time by adapting to job market changes and workplace demands (Mezghoudi et al., 2023). This concept involves having relevant skills and qualifications while continuously learning and developing professionally (Fugate, Kinicki, Ashforth, 2004; Berntson, Gustafsson, Nordic, 2006). As industries evolve due to technological and economic shifts, individuals need to cultivate a growth mindset. They must be open to acquiring new competencies to remain competitive (Koo, 2019; Naik, Ambig, 2015; Robles, 2012).

Ultimately, fostering long-term employability benefits not only individuals but also organizations. It enhances organizational performance and economic stability by creating a more skilled and adaptable workforce (Bargsted et al., 2021; Bimrose, Brown, Kettunen, 2016).

Career advancement is an organizational process that involves the selection, assessment, and development of employees. This ensures that a competent workforce meets the organization's future needs (Samat et al., 2020). Career planning helps employees stay motivated to perform their job well in the hope of being promoted. It also requires collaboration between both the organization and its employees (Fadhila, Sulistiyani, 2022). Additionally, career advancement serves as a reward for employees' hard work (Majid et al., 2017).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data

The research examines Croatian employers' views on the significance of social competencies compared to professional skills for career advancement. It also explores how these competencies impact long-term employability. The study involved 113 organizations from various economic sectors. The questionnaire was exclusively intended for individuals in human resource management and top management positions. Respondents evaluated the importance of competencies based on their relevance to career advancement and long-term employability within organizations. Competencies were divided into social competencies (empathy, communication skills, negotiation skills, teamwork, and conflict management) and professional competencies (professional knowledge, organizational abilities, entrepreneurship, strategy implementation, and project management).

The data were processed using IBM SPSS 25 and Microsoft Excel. In the analysis of primary data, t-tests for dependent and independent samples, ANOVA, and Cronbach's alpha were utilized. T-tests determined whether there was a significant difference between the means of two groups. It measures whether the difference between group means is statistically significant or likely due to random chance. ANOVA was used to compare the means of three or more groups, checking for statistically significant differences between them. ANOVA evaluates both within-group and between-group variance. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure internal consistency, indicating how well a set of items measures a single latent construct. A high value (generally above 0.7) suggests high internal consistency, while a low value may indicate poor consistency. The data were collected using a simple random sampling technique through

a structured questionnaire containing the Likert scale. The questionnaire had five sections, each with ten items describing desirable employee behaviors, rated on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (extremely important). These ratings assessed their significance for long-term employability and career advancement. Additional questions gathered profile information on respondents and their organizations. Over 50% of respondents came from organizations with more than 250 employees, and more than 50% were from the tertiary sector.

A sample of 113 employers is considered credible given the number of enterprises in Croatia. However, it is recommended to further increase the sample size (Lind, Marchal, Wathen, 2019). The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms, and was based on self-assessment.

2.2. Methodology

Testing the questionnaire reliability

The reliability of the questionnaire for employers was further examined. The questionnaire consists of four different measurement scales.

Table 1. Display of questionnaire reliability for employers

Scales	Competences	Categories	Cronbach's alpha
1	Social competences	Career advancement	0.85
2		Long-term employability	0.84
3	Professional competences	Career advancement	0.85
4		Long-term employability	0.86

Source: own elaboration.

In Table 1, the first measurement scale pertains to questions that describe concepts indicative of employees' social competence. These competencies are aimed at facilitating career advancement within the companies. The second measurement scale addresses questions focused on social competence, but it targets long-term employability within the companies.

The third measurement scale deals with questions describing professional competence, specifically aimed at career advancement. The fourth measurement scale relates to professional competence focused on long-term employability. Upon examining the table, it is clear that the survey questionnaire exhibits a very high degree of reliability. This confirms its validity as a measuring instrument for competencies. The closer Cronbach's alpha is to 1, the higher the reliability. In this case, values range between 0.84 and 0.86, indicating strong reliability.

2.3. Hypothesis of the Study

Null Hypothesis (H01): The mean importance rating of social competencies for career advancement and long-term employability is not significantly greater than the mean importance rating of professional competencies among employers in the Republic of Croatia.

Alternative Hypothesis (HA1): The mean importance rating of social competencies for career advancement and long-term employability is significantly greater than the mean importance rating of professional competencies among employers in the Republic of Croatia.

Table 2. Display of differences in importance between social and professional competencies from the employer's (HR managers or top managers) perspective

Competences _categories	N	Mean	Standard error	t-value	df	p-value
Social competences _ career advancement	113	4.18	0.71	-2.57	112	0.01
Professional competences _ career advancement	113	4.31	0.68			
Social competences _ Long-term employability	113	3.92	0.76	1.09	112	0.27
Professional competences _ Long-term employability	113	3.86	0.79			

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2 illustrates the differences in importance between social and professional competencies from the employer's perspective. This perspective is specifically from HR managers or top managers, according to two categories: career advancement and long-term employability. Based on the self-assessment method, there are no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) in the category of long-term employability. This indicates that social competencies are equally important as professional competencies for achieving long-term employability. However, there are statistically significant differences in the category of career advancement. This indicates a greater importance of professional competencies over social competencies. The statistical analysis shows a significant difference ($p < 0.05$), demonstrating that employers in Croatia perceive professional competencies as significantly more important than social competencies for career advancement.

This alternative hypothesis is not supported by the results. The data indicate that while social competencies may hold some importance, they are not rated significantly higher than professional competencies for career advancement. Furthermore, in the context of long-term employability, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This is due to the absence of statistically

significant differences ($p > 0.05$) between the importance of social and professional competencies. This suggests that both types of competencies are viewed as equally vital for achieving long-term employability. The final decision is: reject H01 and accept HA1 (Career Advancement) and fail to reject H01 (Long-Term Employability).

Second Null Hypothesis (H02): The mean perception of the importance of social and professional competencies for career advancement and long-term employability is not significantly different between human resource managers and top management.

Second Alternative Hypothesis (HA2): The mean perception of the importance of social and professional competencies for career advancement and long-term employability is significantly different between human resource managers and top management.

Table 3. Differences in the assessment of employees' social competencies between human resource managers and top management

Employee competencies	Respondents	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t-value	p-value
Empathy _ career advancement	Head of HR	56	3.70	0.99	2.66	0.01
	Top management	57	3.18	1.09		
Empathy _ long-term employability	Head of HR	56	3.66	0.92	1.55	0.12
	Top management	57	3.37	1.08		
Communication skills _ career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.57	0.63	1.00	0.32
	Top management	57	4.42	0.94		
Communication skills _ long-term _ employability	Head of HR	56	4.11	0.91	0.10	0.92
	Top management	57	4.09	1.11		
Negotiation skills _ career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.61	0.65	0.68	0.50
	Top management	57	4.51	0.87		
Negotiation skills _ long-term _ employability	Head of HR	56	3.89	1.04	-0.65	0.52
	Top management	57	4.02	1.01		
Teamwork _ career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.27	0.86	1.21	0.23
	Top management	57	4.05	1.03		
Teamwork _ long-term employability	Head of HR	56	4.13	0.88	0.11	0.91
	Top management	57	4.11	0.98		
Conflict management _ career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.36	0.82	1.07	0.29
	Top management	57	4.18	0.98		
Conflict management _ long term _ employability	Head of HR	56	3.96	0.91	0.09	0.93
	Top management	57	3.95	1.01		

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3 illustrates a comparison of all employee competencies, categorized by career advancement and long-term employability. This comparison is among respondents who completed the survey – human resource managers and top management, based on the self-assessment method. Observing the competency of empathy, there is a statistically significant difference among responses within the career advancement category ($p < 0.05$). However, there is no significant difference within the long-term employability category. When examining the competencies of communication skills, negotiation skills, teamwork, and conflict management, it is evident that there are no statistically significant differences among the responses. This lack of difference is noted between human resource managers and top management within both the career advancement and long-term employability categories ($p > 0.05$)

Table 4. Differences in the assessment of employees' professional competencies between human resource managers and top management

Employee competencies	Respondents	N	Mean	Standard deviation	t-value	p-value
Possession of professional knowledge _career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.41	0.83	0.95	0.34
	Top management	57	4.25	1.01		
Possession of professional knowledge _long term_ employability	Head of HR	56	4.29	0.76	0.37	0.71
	Top management	57	4.23	0.89		
Organization skills _career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.50	0.79	0.62	0.54
	Top management	57	4.40	0.86		
Organization skills _long-term employability	Head of HR	56	3.98	0.88	0.38	0.71
	Top management	57	3.91	1.07		
Entrepreneurship_ career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.43	0.81	0.39	0.69
	Top management	57	4.37	0.82		
Entrepreneurship _long term_ employability	Head of HR	56	3.86	0.96	-0.01	0.99
	Top management	57	3.86	1.09		
Strategy implementation _career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.32	0.79	1.24	0.22
	Top management	57	4.12	0.91		
Strategy implementation _long term_ employability	Head of HR	56	3.59	1.06	-0.38	0.71
	Top management	57	3.67	1.12		
Project management _career advancement	Head of HR	56	4.27	0.70	1.26	0.21
	Top management	57	4.05	1.08		
Project management _long term_ employability	Head of HR	56	3.68	1.01	0.57	0.57
	Top management	57	3.56	1.15		

Source: own elaboration.

Examining competencies such as the possession of professional knowledge, organizational skills, entrepreneurship, strategy implementation, and project management, it is evident that there are no statistically significant differences among the responses. This finding applies to both human resource managers and top management within the categories of career advancement and long-term employability ($p > 0.05$). This conclusion is based on the self-assessment method.

In the case of empathy related to career advancement, the second null hypothesis (H02) is rejected. This rejection occurs because there is a significant difference in perceptions between HR managers and top management. This indicates a divergence in valuing certain social competencies. For all other competencies assessed, including empathy in the context of long-term employability, the second null hypothesis (H02) is accepted. This acceptance is due to no significant differences being found. It means that HR managers and top management largely agree on the importance of these competencies for long-term employability.

Third Null Hypothesis (H03): The mean importance rating of teamwork (social competency) is not significantly different from the mean importance rating of possession of professional knowledge (professional competency) across all economic sectors for career advancement and long-term employability.

Third Alternative Hypothesis (HA3): The mean importance rating of teamwork (social competency) is significantly different from the mean importance rating of possession of professional knowledge (professional competency) across all economic sectors for career advancement and long-term employability.

Table 5. Display of importance of “teamwork and professional knowledge” competencies across economic sectors

Employee competencies	Economic sector	N	Mean	Standard deviation	F-value	p-value
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teamwork_career advancement	primary	3	3.67	0.58	0.45	0.72
	secondary	27	4.22	0.89		
	tertiary	60	4.20	0.94		
	quaternary	23	4.04	1.11		
Teamwork_long-term employability	primary	3	3.67	0.58	2.21	0.09
	secondary	27	4.41	0.75		
	tertiary	60	4.13	0.83		
	quaternary	23	3.78	1.24		

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Possession of professional knowledge _career advancement	primary	3	4.33	0.58	0.17	0.91
	secondary	27	4.41	0.84		
	tertiary	60	4.33	0.91		
	quaternary	23	4.22	1.09		
Possession of professional knowledge _long term_ employability	primary	3	4.00	1.00	0.16	0.93
	secondary	27	4.30	0.87		
	tertiary	60	4.23	0.70		
	quaternary	23	4.30	1.06		

Source: own elaboration.

Table 5 depicts a comparison of teamwork, as social competency, and possession of professional knowledge, as professional competency, across four economic sectors (based on the self-assessment method). Regarding the results, it is evident that there are no statistically significant differences in responses across different economic sectors. This applies to both categories of career advancement and long-term employability ($p > 0.05$). Based on the findings, teamwork and possession of professional knowledge are equally important across all economic sectors. This importance is crucial for achieving career advancement and long-term employability; thus, the H03 is accepted, and the HA3 is rejected.

2.4. Results

Examining employers' opinions regarding the difference in the importance of social and professional competencies for career advancement and long-term employability within the organization, it was concluded that there are no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$) in the category of long-term employability. This indicates that social competencies are equally important as professional competencies for achieving long-term employability. However, there are statistically significant differences in the category of career advancement, indicating a greater importance of professional competencies over social competencies.

Considering the overall results and employers' perceptions of competency importance, it is evident that human resource managers, on average, rated all competencies higher than top management. Additionally, higher ratings were given to the career advancement category compared to the long-term employability category. Empathy, which belongs to social competencies, received the lowest rating. A statistically significant difference in responses exists only for empathy within the career advancement category. This indicates a divergence in the perception of empathy's importance between human resource managers and top management.

Examining the overall results and evaluating competency importance from the perspective of different economic sectors, it cannot be stated that a specific sector attributes greater importance to any type of competency. This includes teamwork or the possession of professional knowledge for achieving career advancement or the long-term employability of employees. Considering the very small sample of the primary sector, its results are not sufficiently relevant to be singled out. There are no statistically significant differences in responses for teamwork, as social competence, and the possession of professional knowledge, as professional competence, regarding career advancement and long-term employability. This indicates that different economic sectors perceive their importance equally. All results were obtained and interpreted based on the self-assessment method.

Conclusions

The current state of the labor market is characterized by a significant number of emigrations. This trend primarily involves young and educated individuals leaving for better opportunities elsewhere. The main research problem is to answer questions about what employers in the Republic of Croatia expect from potential employees. It also focuses on identifying the key competencies that will satisfy employers and how to retain educated individuals. This study highlights certain employee characteristics that contribute to career advancement and long-term employability. Ultimately, the goal is to reduce unemployment rates and workforce turnover. Numerous professions are present in the labor market, thus necessitating an analysis and development of their social competencies. This is essential to better align with employer demands and achieve optimal business results. In the 21st century, social competencies have significantly gained importance. Although employers' perception of the importance of social competencies is not yet fully defined, the results of this research indicate a growing recognition. It is undeniable that social competencies are becoming an indispensable advantage for every employee.

Examining key competencies from the perspective of employers reveals a multitude of them. The list of competencies varies depending on the type of research conducted. However, what all competency lists have in common is the combination of professional and social competencies. No research solely focuses on one group of competencies; rather, it is the combination of both types that is instrumental in a company's success. The implementation and development of competency management systems in companies over the last few decades

have become crucial strategic issues. This process is vital in the ongoing system reorganization within organizations.

Social competencies play a significant role in career advancement and long-term employability. Developing soft skills has become an integral part of many training programs attended by employees sent by companies. These programs share the same goals: to enable or enhance employees' competencies to improve social relations with colleagues and clients. They also aim to increase social sensitivity, reduce conflicts, and enhance teamwork, all aimed at achieving better business results.

This paper contributes through a theoretical analysis of the listed research. It indicates the presence of social competencies in all aspects of employment. The contribution lies in recognizing that social competencies are important to employers. However, preference is still given to professional competencies. A combination of professional and social competencies yields the best success for a company. Indeed, the presence of both is necessary for a company's efficiency.

As a limitation of the study, it is possible to mention the use of parametric tests as well as the self-assessment method by employers. Although the questionnaire's reliability for employers is very high, a recommendation for future research would be to conduct employer surveys based on specific examples. For instance, these surveys could be based on assessments of their employees' competencies. Utilizing competency management systems could provide a clearer picture of the prevalence of social competencies and assess their importance accurately. Such an analysis would most accurately reflect employers' opinions. Furthermore, besides the aforementioned, research could be structured in a way where employers evaluate desirable employee behaviors. This evaluation would focus on achieving long-term employability and career advancement. There is a significant difference in assessing the concept itself, such as "being socially competent" versus "behaving socially competent."

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