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# FROM QUALIFICATION TO PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE

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## ABSTRACT

*The importance of the professional competence is frequently linked with periods of economic crisis. The same can be said for the process of globalisation and the transformation of production activity as a result of the continuous development in the information technologies and automation that normally come with it.*

*But, what is really the difference between qualification and competence?*

*In this essay, based on Sampaio, José João (2009), I go through the concept of professional competence in its multiple dimensions (generic, specific, transversal) as a means to establish its grounds in complex environments employability programs.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The importance of the professional competence is frequently linked with periods of economic crisis (Irigoin and Vargas, 2002). The same can be said for the process of globalisation and the transformation of production activity as a result of the continuous development in the information technologies and automation that normally come with it. Competitiveness emerged in the 1980s as one of the major development problems in a number of industrialized economies, given the huge effort made to adapt the educational system to the emerging production system (Mertens, 1996). It is with this in mind that the United Nations Development Programme (1994) states that *“new development paradigm is needed that puts people at the centre of development, regards economic growth as a means and not an end, protects the life opportunities of future generations as well as present generations, and respects the natural systems on which all life depends”*.

While it is undisputed that education is a factor in modernisation and progress, in a perspective of critical thought on reality and the building of citizenship one cannot ignore the need for a qualitative change in education, in view of the new demands of contemporary society. It is in this context that the European Commission’s White Paper on Education and Vocational Training (1995) identifies the information society, globalisation and scientific and technological civilisation as the three main challenges in modern times and proposes, in the field of education, two lines of action intended to complement each other:

- Development of general culture, as an instrument of understanding the world, i.e. capacity to
  - a) Comprehend the meaning of things
  - b) Comprehend and create and
  - c) Make decisions;

- Development of employability, as the accumulation and transfer of a set of valences acquired through formal education, the family, the workplace and the media, i.e. technical knowledge and social skills
  - a) basic knowledge ⇔ knowing
  - b) technical knowledge ⇔ know-how
  - c) skills ⇔ knowledge for living.

In this essay, based on Sampaio, José João (2009), I go through the concept of professional competence in its multiple dimensions (generic, specific, transversal) as a means to establish its grounds in complex environments employability programs.

## **What is Professional Competence?**

Irigoin and Vargas (2002) identify (while making reference to diverse publications) the world of labour and the academic or educational world as the main sources of the concept of competence.

In the following I highlight some of those references:

### Labour-related sources

- The social construction of significant and useful learning to perform in a real labour situation. It is obtained not only through formal learning but also – and mainly – through experiential learning in practical labour situations (Ducci, 1997);
- The operationalisation, in a professional context, of capacities allowing one to appropriate carry out a function or activity (AFNOR, 1996);
- A group of properties under continuous change that need to be put to the test of solving practical problems in labour situations that create certain degrees of uncertainty and have technical complexity [...] competence levels are built through social practice and are a joint task for companies, workers and educators (Gallard and Jacinto, 1997).

### Education-related sources

- The capacity to act efficiently, effectively and satisfactorily on any aspect of the personal, social, natural or symbolic reality... three types of knowledge: conceptual (knowledge), procedural (know-how) and attitudinal (being) (Pinto Cueto, 1999);
- Personal characteristics (knowledge, aptitudes and attitudes) that enable one to perform adaptively in important environments (Boekaerts, 1991).

According to Irigoin and Vargas, regardless of the source they use, one can conclude that competence is not something that one learns in order to repeat it identically forever. It is a learning that is individual capital and is used adaptively, depending on the conditions in a particular moment. The concept of competence thus includes the development of individual attitudes and that which the individual is in terms of emotions and volition, seeking an integrating note in which the individual person, on the basis of his being, brings all his knowledge and know-how into play.

Irigoin and Vargas define the concept of competence as

*“... The integrated combination of knowledge and skills that arise in action for a proper performance of a given context ...” or “integrated combination of a knowledge, a knowing how, a knowledge to be and a knowledge to be with others, put into action for an adequate performance in a specific context.”<sup>1</sup>*

However, Zarifian (1999) has taken a critical position in relation to social skills, which, in general terms, are identified with individual capacities developed in three distinct dimensions: Autonomy, Responsibility and Communication. Without challenging the empirical importance of these three dimensions, in approaching the question of professional competence, Zarifian argues that it is not ethically correct to identify them as “personal qualities” (that can be inferred from the notion of knowledge to be). He argues that here one is entering into an area that has nothing to do with professionalization in a work relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation of the original in Spanish.

The author further suggests that what is happening is a selection on the basis of personalised psychological bases, invading the personal life of each individual in an attitude that patently contradicts the civic rights of each person. Indeed, it is not easy to evaluate forms of being or life and social skills without the danger of invading the privacy of the individual and the possibility to issue value judgements on the personality and action of those being assessed. According to Zarifian (*Op. Cit.*, p. 30), it is, in the final analysis, a question of social attitude that allows one to conveniently leave Taylorism behind, so that the emergence of the concept of competence and professional competence does not represent, in itself, a change resulting directly from the work contents. It rather results from a profound change in the work and social relationship organisation within the company, which entails moving from the prescribing of work contents to the definition of missions and objectives that are transmitted to and accepted by the workers. This is the true concept of competence as competency refers to changes made in professional contents. In examining the theses that emerged in the 1980s on the impact of computerisation and automation on work environments – concentrating on specific areas such as the technical mastering of the new tools and a more in-depth knowledge of the work process and the equipment directly associated with it – Zarifian, concludes that the dominant thesis is the need to comprehend the process and the specific equipment, as opposed to the new tools and automation. He argues that this is a consequence of the trend for organisations to expand the responsibility of the workers, which must adapt to operating in increasingly more ample and integrated processes, in a team work and/or network perspective, which plays the role of an “osmosis” between the individual competence and collective competence, in a work “not expertise” dynamic, in relation to the process.

Although concentrating on a more pragmatic dimension – that of operationalisation of competence – Istria (2002) argues along the same lines stating that one should not seek competence only in the personal dimension, for the concept of competence indicates a certain movement of joint action and cooperation, which, in a modern acception, comes from the confidence that can be placed in an individual that has the necessary experience and

knowledge to judge and decide – i.e. “*all competence is recognised and confirmed by a third party*” (Wittorski, 1998).

Bellier (2002) points out that despite the ongoing theoretical debate, there is some consensus as to the concept of competence, which centres around five key ideas:

- Competence is individual and not centred on the workplace or organisation;
- Competence always results from an action, therefore it is linked to an activity in real time;
- Competence is highly contextualised; being competent in Universe A does not mechanically guarantee competence in Universe B;
- Competence is assumed at different levels, from instrumental to cognitive or behavioural;
- Competence is always the result of a combination of actions: it cannot be reduced to specific knowledge or an isolated action.

After discussing each of these points, and pointing out that, as far as the exclusive centring of competence on the individual is concerned, one must seek some balance, Bellier goes on to argue, in relation to the notion that competence does not exist outside a specific context (be it material, relational, organisational, cultural...) that this discrimination necessarily raises the question of the mobility of competencies. In answering this question, Bellier suggest that, on the one hand, the context must be understood in a comprehensive perspective (e.g., the industry sector, the size of the company or the type of production) and, on the other, one must taking into account that the contextualisation is not uniform. There are different degrees of contextualisation, meaning that some competencies – specific competencies – are more contextualised than others – generic and transversal competencies. Thus, as confirmed by the ILO (2002), **specific competencies** are acquired through professional specialisation. They are only transferable indirectly with acquired abilities that can be readapted. The contents, however, are very closely linked to a defined speciality. The same document defines **generic competencies** as those that are acquired during school and work practice, can be used in any professional activity and are founded on scientific and

technological bases and human qualities such as creativity, intellectual conditions and capacity to transfer knowledge skills to new situations. Finally, **transversal competencies** are common to all or most professions. They can be transferred from one job profile to another or from one set of curricular modules to others.

As for the internal structure of competence itself, despite the general consensus that it is made up of a set of abilities (intellectual, physical, behavioural, relational, leadership and group work capabilities, amongst others) that the individual must have and use depending on the operational needs, the truth, in Bellier's opinion, is that we still have not found a scientifically validated process that allows us to determine the nature and dimensions of competence – in other words, to know why and how individuals manage to mobilise, in differentiated ways, certain resources/capabilities that they transform into effective performance.

Mertens (1996), on the other hand, is not very concerned with the issue of scientific validation, in a perspective of paradigmatic rationalisation. He argues that what is important is to understand that competence identify, above all, concrete work results, which can be the result of different functions. It does not refer to specific job descriptions or to sets of operations, but to concrete work situations. Accordingly, the structural elements of a competence must not be confused with the structural elements of an operation.

Gonçalves (2000) also warns of the decharacterisation introduced by some job seeking, assertive training, problem solving training and other programmes based on employability strategies that presuppose the existence of a lack of various competences and the need to combat ignorance through information. For Gonçalves, this rationalist view leads to the choice, as competences to be developed, of a set of specific skills (knowledge, capacities, abilities, routines) to be mobilised in a specific professional situation, not contemplating the knowledge and comprehension of the mechanisms underlying that realisation and, thus, reducing competence to “know-how”. Arguing that competence is a complex concept, at times used wildly, plurally and ambiguously – in management literature, the business world, in education and training –



Gonçalves concludes, citing Coimbra (1991), that the instrumentalisation resulting from this approach to the concept of competence ends up reducing it to a repertoire of capacities and behaviours.

Zarifian (1999) also adopts this argument and goes on to introduce the concept of service competence, which he identifies as being essentially and opening and an internal transformation of the positioning of each individual in relation to his or her work. He points out that it is not a question of asking people to cease to be the professionals they always have been. The question is being professional in a different way, although he does recognise that it is not possible to give a clear and global definition of what exactly he means by this concept. However, further according to Zarifian, the essence of the development of a service competence is the successive questioning of the usefulness and effectiveness of professional actions directly and indirectly to those for whom we work. In this perspective, the development of a service competence will tend towards valuing the civic conscience of the worker in his or her relations with others and subsequent reciprocity. Thus competence emerges as a complex concept that cannot be reduced to a specific context, isolated knowledge or a single action. It is rather the interaction between different individual qualities and the context in which the action is carried out, whereby it is established that it is not possible to determine in advance how this “alchemy” works.

As Imaginário (1998) states, there are almost as many definitions of competence as there are investigators in the field. While not wishing to put forward yet another definition of the concept, and because my interest here is more one of comprehending than one of explaining, I think it is possible to conclude that professional competence results from the synergy established between the individual and the work situation in a perspective of systemic interaction of a cybernetic nature. In other words, a competent worker is one that is concerned with the impact of his or her actions beyond the limited dimension of the function performed or the work place, thus assuming a position of responsibility and overall involvement in the objectives and strategies of the group of which he or she is a part.

## **Validation of the Concept of Professional Competence**

Whenever a certain function requires the concrete and formal explanation of a set of tasks and capacities/competencies that are indispensable for correct performance of that function, the need arises for its identification and autonomisation in terms of the general tasks that are inherent to the normal performance of further simple functions. This process normally results from a participation between representatives and specialists of the employers, workers and the entities that legally determine its validation, be it at the national level and international level, by multidisciplinary groups that seek to obtain as universal as possible a consensus as to the prominent characteristics of performance.

These criteria, once identified, generally give rise to a process of standardisation, which consists of converting each competence into a set of standards with a common reference framework. This makes it possible that a certain professional competency can be attributed, in a generalised way, in different activity areas/sectors at the national or international level, as is the case, for example, in air traffic control, where the professional competence is internationally standardised by means of set of provisions in Annex 1 to the Chicago Convention on Civil Aviation. The formal recognition that a certain person has or that demonstrates a professional competency, consists of a process of assessment and certification that guarantees the knowledge and capacities necessary to perform a specific task or set of tasks that characterise a profession. Certification of professional competencies thus, on the one hand, allows for greater transparency in the labour market while enabling, on the other, greater and easier worker mobility and exchange of workers, as is frequently the case with airline pilots.

Professional competence is, thus, understood as a form of operationalising work contexts in a triple dimension of labour, management and education/vocational training. Thus, the national legal certification systems for certain competences are defined in a systemic perspective of integration of these three dimensions, such as professional licences or permits for the operation or execution of a specific activity. In the case of commercial pilots

or air traffic controllers, these certifications are the aeronautical licences that certify the professional skills/competencies necessary for carrying out these professions.

One must point out here that some professional competencies are acquired in a strict sectoral context or one that it is frequently peculiar to a certain area of production and/or services. This is the case for air traffic control services under the responsibility of the different national administrations, which have gradually come to be identifying, standardising and certifying, at the national level, the professional competencies for exercise of the profession of air traffic controller, although within the global parameters and regulations established in ICAO Annex I, as stated above. In line with this, the OECD, despite establishing a set of common factors identified in a competence certification project carried out in several countries, recognises that there is no one single way of understanding competences, nor an ideal method of certification and that, “states should take their own particular context into consideration, to identify that which is most suited to their concrete reality” (OECD, 1996).

The “United Nations Competencies for the Future” document (UN, 1999) emphasises that experience has shown the importance of identifying key competencies, adapting the existing competencies and/or developing new competencies in accordance with assessment carried out by the organisation in its own particular case. Nevertheless, as borne out by Descy and Tessaring (2001), it is true that demand in the labour market requires a set of contradictory competencies: on the one hand, individuals with great capacity and ability to adapt (generic/transversal competencies) are sought after but, on the other hand, they should be immediately operational (specialised competencies). However, the need for this symbiosis of transversal and specialised competencies does not seem to prejudice the Zarifian approach, if we take into consideration the above-mentioned distinction between competencies and competence. In this understanding, it would appear to be safe to conclude that employers indeed seek competence, i.e. the capacity to take on a work project in all its dimensions and interactions in a certain

context, which would, according to Descy and Tessaring, validate the need for a redefinition of vocational education and the replacement of the notion of qualification by the concept of competence.

## **From Qualification to Professional Competence**

Mertens (1996) distinguishes between qualification and competence, arguing that qualification takes on the comprehensive nature of the success achieved by a person in the socialisation process relating to a profession or job, as reflected in a set of diplomas and/or certificates obtained in academic and/or vocational training schemes throughout life. Competence, on the other hand, refers only to certain aspects of this body of knowledge – those that prove to be necessary to achieve certain results demanded in specific circumstances.

For Istria (2002), qualification is the set of resources and capacities necessary for performing a certain profession, whereby the course from qualification to competence is that which corresponds to the passage from potential to a concrete achievement.

Apropos clarification of the notion of qualification, Jean-Michel Joubier (2001), Secretary of the CGT (France), adopts the distinction between competencies and competence already suggested by Zarifian. For Joubier, qualification is a “tool box” that each individual adds to through formal education, vocational training (initial and ongoing) and also through acquired social and professional experience. Competencies are the elements that make up the tool box; competence is the way in which each person uses his or her tool box. The tool box metaphor is appropriate here, as it transmits the social and socialising dimension of the concept of qualification. In an integrative perspective at the national level, one can say that it is the education and vocational training programmes as well as the dynamic established between these and the labour market, the labour relations and the different forms of work organisation that make up the national tool box. In other words, national competence is the result of the way in which these programmes – national competencies – are linked and operationalised, at the individual level, in the

labour/employment market. Depending on the way these relations develop, individual qualification can mean an academic diploma or the characteristics of a specific sector of the labour market or job descriptions within a company or combinations of all of these (Grootings, 1994). But this social and integrative dimension of the professional qualification is currently being confronted by a new model, which, while questioning the fragmentation of tasks and specialisation associated with qualification, favours team work, interactivity and communication, with the behavioural dimension taking on a decisive role in employers' options. Thus, the conditions are created for the formation of groups of workers highly qualified in areas of strategic importance to the organisation, thus favouring situations of social exclusion (Arruda 2000). Noting that academic certification ceases to be a factor of excellence in the working world, Arruda places the new contents of qualifications on the capacity of each person to generate knowledge from the information available and place it at the service of the company. The work organisation, in turn, promotes greater distancing from the notion of the work position, favouring functional flexibilisation and all round capabilities. The result, further according to Arruda, leads to a weakening of the pre-existing relationship between salary and professional qualification as a result of employers preferring to invest in the absorption of tacit knowledge by workers.

Citing Stroobants (1997), Arruda (p. 143) notes that everything that is not automatisable will be an element to be valorised in the formation of workers' tacit knowledge and that, in the world of labour, organisations will increasingly seek capacities that complement those of the machine: "*The non automatable characteristics, are transformed into specific human attributes (e.g., managing the uncertainty). [ ...] The machine] and its limitations made unsuspected qualities visible and trivialized skills*"<sup>2</sup>.

As Coriat (1992) points out in Arruda (2000), the increase in abstract work is not directly proportionate to greater complexity of the work, establishing two distinct groups of workers as far as professional qualification is concerned.

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<sup>2</sup> My translation of the original in Spanish.

The first group, despite the fact that it performs tasks with a greater degree of abstraction, neither has its work content enriched nor does it have greater autonomy in carrying out its work, as it remains subordinate to a timing, that maintains the essence of the Taylorist work organisation. The second group, on the other hand, includes workers that carry out functions demanding greater capacity of intervention, entailing greater abstraction and complexity in terms of work content. These workers are an integral part of the flexible organisation, which includes them in incentive, motivation and lifelong vocational training projects.

## **CONCLUSION**

The concept of professional qualification liberates itself from the Taylorist logic of task specialisation that is bound to a specific work post and presupposes autonomous and solitary performance, to assume a new dimensions in which the human element is increasingly called upon to perform cognitive functions, from the capacity to supervise the machine and intervene in problem solving to the work organisation itself. The latter moves from an instrumental task execution dimension to a conceptual dimension of the articulation of the overall corporate objectives with the different operational scenarios. This liberation from the Taylorist logic as far as work organisation is concerned, corresponds, at the individual level, to liberation from instrumental rationality, in the direction of activities/tasks that are conceptually richer, in a perspective of integration and responsabilisation in a joint project at the company/organisation level. One should, however, assess this passage with a certain amount of discernment.

It is with this rupture with the prior work organisation forms and commitment to a production logic based on individual capacities to achieve set objectives in an effective manner that the concept of professional competence needs to be founded and developed.

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