Competencies displayed by multinational corporation senior managers in critical business situations

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Abstract

Purpose – This research investigates the types of critical business situations worked on by multinational corporations' senior managers and the competencies they employ to achieve desired outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is based on a database of $N = 440$ critical success incidents obtained from semi-structured interviews with a sample of 143 senior managers during competency-based consulting projects over a 25-year period from 1995 to 2019. Content analysis was used to categorise critical success incidents, by similarity of business intent, into groups labelled as critical business situations. Behavioural coding was used to identify competencies.

Findings – Nine critical business situations were found, and 10 competencies identified, accounting for 79% of behaviours displayed by the senior managers. Five competencies were found to be used more universally and five were more dependent on the specific critical business situation.

Research limitations/implications – This research provides an overview of the initial stage of this topic. Further empirical validation including applicability in contemporary business contexts, testing of competency relationships with critical business situation criterion-referenced outcomes, and temporal and geographic usage will be presented in an accompanying study.

Practical implications – Knowledge of the specific competencies and their relative frequencies when displayed in different critical business situations provide the potential to give more targeted development suggestions to senior managers facing similar situations.

Originality/value – This study examines concurrently, both the business situations and associated competencies of senior managers, a group for whom extant research is significantly limited.

Keywords Content analysis, Multinational corporations, Senior managers, Leadership development, Leadership competencies, Talent management

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As the global business operating environment becomes more complex and uncertain the demand is increasing for a multinational corporation (MNC) to have a senior manager (SM) cadre with the necessary mix of skills to equip them to cope with such conditions and lead their organisational units successfully in the future. At the same time the availability of MNC SMs, with the requisite skills, are seen to be in short supply (Knoll and Sternad, 2021).

In the area of talent management (TM) effective SM leadership is seen to have a positive effect on organisational functioning and performance (Church *et al.*, 2021). However, as noted by Church *et al.* (2017), the published research has not provided or featured applied case study material, particularly at the senior management level in major corporations, which can be

used in TM applications. Further, there is a need to understand the impact that situation-specific conditions can have on senior leaders' roles and competencies, however, little research guidance is available which provides such contextual information (Huesing and Ludema, 2017; Kupczyk and Stor, 2017; Reynolds *et al.*, 2018). In the competency development field, Bonesso *et al.* (2020) have highlighted the need for further research into how competency development programs should be tailored to specific settings including organisational context, which can impact the learning process.

The current study therefore investigates two research questions first, what are the types of critical business situations (CBS) worked on by multinational corporation senior managers? And second, what are the competencies they display to achieve a desired outcome? The study will then provide a framework linking the (CBS) categories with their associated competencies. This will allow MNCs to compare their existing senior leadership assessment and development activities to what will be found in the current study in relation to these two areas.

Other contemporary applications
Although the current study relates to TM applications for MNC senior managers other noteworthy, contemporary applications of the competency construct have been presented in the literature. For example, competency modelling and strategy dissemination (Campion *et al.*, 2020) and; leadership competencies and effectiveness (Korzynski *et al.*, 2021; Kozminski *et al.*, 2022). The construct is also seen to be relevant to the identification of future workplace competency needs (Voss *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, Ngayo Fotso (2021) conducted an integrative literature review of several leadership theory strands and identified 18 groups of leadership competencies required for the twenty-first century. These groups comprised both traditional competencies which were still considered relevant for today's fast-paced, complex environment and several competencies that were completely new. Comparisons may be made between these proposed leadership competencies and what has been found in the current study. The competency approach has also been applied in executive education (Boyatzis and Cavanagh, 2018; Bonesso *et al.*, 2020). The current study will provide information in relation to nine enduring CBSs and associated 10 competencies which may inform the choice of content for MNC senior manager development programs.

Theoretical framework
The term "competency" has come to be defined in multiple ways, which has often caused a great deal of confusion among practitioners and scholars (Ryan *et al.*, 2009; Young and Dulewicz, 2009). The current study builds on competencies as originally defined and operationalized by McClelland (1973) and later refined by Boyatzis (1982) and Spencer and Spencer (1993). This theory of competency was developed inductively through the comparison of average and star performers across a variety of work roles. From its origins, competencies have been framed as a theory of work performance (Boyatzis, 2009; Goleman, 2001) and have been defined as a capability or ability that leads to or causes effective performance (McClelland, 1973, 1985; Boyatzis, 1982, 2008, 2018). In this tradition, competencies manifest as a set of related behaviours organized around an underlying "intent". The behaviours are alternate manifestations of the intent, as deemed appropriate by a given individual in response to situations that they encounter.

By the somewhat broad definition of competency as an ability or capability "causally related to effective and/or superior performance in a job" (Boyatzis, 1982), more stable personality variables could technically be viewed as competencies. Implicit motives measured via projective techniques have also been shown to be useful for predicting performance in the workplace. For example, power motive has demonstrated a correlation

with managerial success (McClelland and Burnham, 1972; Jacobs and McClelland, 1994; McClelland and Boyatzis, 1982) and achievement motive (McClelland, 1961, 1985) has consistently been associated with entrepreneurial success (McClelland, 1961). However, in contemporary competency research and practice these implicit motives are typically conceptualized as forming the "intent" with competencies, as assessed in this study, being more limited, specific and work-related than is the case for more broad-based personality variables such as implicit motives (Boyatzis and Kelner, 2010). In the current study, following the competency causal flow model of intent-action-outcome proposed by Spencer and Spencer (1993) competencies have been defined as the behaviours intentionally displayed by a senior manager to achieve a desired outcome in a specific critical business situation. See Table 1 for an example of how intent is combined with behavioural indicators in the case of achievement orientation when conceptualized as a competency.

Methods
Sample
The convenience sample comprised 143 MNC SMs, consisting of 121 males and 22 females. The positions held by SMs ranged across several senior levels, with 71 at executive management level, and 72 SMs from the functions of finance, operations, procurement, supply, logistics, production, information technology, human resources, sales, marketing, research and development, service, quality and business development; having responsibilities at the level of whole organisation, business unit, division, country, region or globally. The SM country national composition was parent country national 30.7%, host

Achievement Orientation	An intention to surpass a standard of excellence; or to do a task better or improve performance; set challenging goals or pursue profitable innovative activities

Achievement Orientation was coded when the above intention was inferred from the interview and one of the following behaviours was demonstrated

Level	Behavioural indicator description of level
A. 1	*Wants to Do Job Well.* Works toward implicit standards of excellence. Tries to do their job right or well. May express frustration at waste or inefficiency
A. 2	*Works to Meet Others' Standards.* Works to meet a standard set by more senior managers
A. 3	*Creates Own Measures of Excellence.* Uses own specific methods of measuring outcomes against a standard of excellence (not imposed by others)
A. 4	*Improves Performance.* Makes specific changes in the system or in their own work methods to improve performance (e.g. does something better, faster, at lower cost, more efficiently; improves quality, customer satisfaction, morale, or revenue), without setting any specific goal
A. 5	*Sets Challenging Goals.* Sets and acts to reach challenging goals for self or others. "Challenging" means ~60% chance of actually achieving the goal – a definite stretch, but not unrealistic or impossible. Or cites specific measures of baseline performance compared with better performance at a later point in time
A. 6	*Makes Cost-Benefit Analyses.* Makes decisions, sets priorities, or chooses goals on the basis of calculated inputs and outputs: makes explicit considerations of potential profit, return-on-investment, or cost-benefit analysis
A. 7	*Takes Calculated Entrepreneurial Risks.* Commits significant resources and/or time (in the face of uncertainty) to increase benefits, improve performance, reach a challenging goal, or innovate
A. 8	*Persists in Entrepreneurial Efforts.* Takes numerous, sustained actions over time in the face of obstacles to reach entrepreneurial goals; or successfully completes entrepreneurial endeavours

Source(s): Adapted from Spencer and Spencer (1993), Competence at Work: Models for Superior Performance

Table 1.
An example of how intent and behavioural indicators combine to form the competency of Achievement Orientation

country national 48.4% and third country national 20.9%. The geographic areas of SMs operational responsibility covered; North America and Canada 36%; Europe 25%; Asia-Pacific 15%; global 15%; Middle-East and Africa 6%; and Latin America 3%.

The 12 MNCs in the sample conducted their operations in several industry sectors, for example, aviation, computers, pharmaceuticals, fast-moving consumer goods, industrial manufacturing, automotive components, industrial controls, banking and professional and business services. Ownership was primarily European and North American with a smaller percentage of Asian origin. All the MNCs were large, well established and among the top ranks in their respective industry sectors.

Data collection

The critical success incident (CSI) data were collected via a semi-structured interview, of two to three hours duration, based on a critical incident interview (CII) approach (sometimes referred to in the literature as behavioural event interviewing or behavioural interviewing). Given the variability in both terminology and theoretical assumptions that influence the specific interview techniques employed in competency research, we take this opportunity to clarify how our theoretical assumptions inform our specific interview methods. The CII used in this study is originally based on Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique which was later modified (see Boyatzis, 1982; Spencer and Spencer, 1993; McClelland, 1998) to help interviewees reconstruct what occurred in a specific "incident" in the senior manager's work role. Specific modifications were informed by adapting the enquiry sequence originally used in the Picture Story Exercise (Smith *et al.*, 1992) while also encouraging a focus on specific life events as used in the biodata method (Dailey, 1971). The structure of the CII is shown in Table 2.

The initial stem question for the interview is intentionally open and allows the interviewee maximum latitude to describe a story of their choosing, provided it is related to their role at work where the outcome was successful for the organisation and occurred within the last three years. This initial starting point for the interview serves two key purposes for the current study. First, it serves to free the interviewee to talk about incidents of their choosing, unbiased by the interviewer, thus allowing for a wide range of incidents that can later be categorized via content analysis into CBSs. Second, by allowing the interviewee to choose the specific incident they will describe, interviewers get a more insightful view into what the interviewee defines as success, what they naturally pay attention to, think is important, and how they respond behaviourally in these situations, which has implications for the coding of competencies in this study.

Focus area	Question
Incident identification	"Tell me about a time when you felt effective in your role."
Incident overview	"Can you give me a brief overview of the incident?"
	"How did you get involved in the incident?"
	"What are the key things you did that led to the successful outcome?"
	"What was the end result?"
Non-directive probing of events volunteered by the interviewee in the overview	"You mentioned . . ...what was the first thing you did related to that?"
	"What did you do next?"
	"What were you thinking/feeling when that happened?"
Probing of more general statements	"You mentioned that you did an analysis before you made that decision; can you tell me what you did in your analysis?"

Source(s): Adapted from Spencer and Spencer (1993), Competence at Work: Models for Superior Performance

While no retrospective interview methodology can ensure completely accurate recall, the CII methodology is consistent with autobiographical memory research (Rubin, 1986) that has demonstrated memory is significantly enhanced when the incident is recent (i.e. within the last three years), has high salience or emotional valence for the interviewee (i.e. the incident is "critical" to the senior manager), and focuses on the recall of specific actions (e.g. what did you do or say at that point?). Thus, the CII technique itself, combined with verbatim transcripts, of 20,000 to 30,000 words, from audio recordings of all interviews used in this study, serves to enhance the descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1992) of interview data in this study.

All interviewers were extensively trained and certified in the CII methodology used in this study. This included formal training, practice interviews and in-depth feedback and supervision. In addition, each interviewer had several years of experience with this specific interview methodology, post certification.

Data analysis

An analysis of the CSIs proceeded in two stages. First, content analysis was conducted to identify categories within the 440 CSIs to investigate the first research question. A CBS was defined as a situation requiring some form of action because of the potential for substantial impact, either positive or negative, to some part of the organisations' operations or functioning.

In the first stage, the first author used an inductive approach to identify emerging categories within the sample of CSIs. The first step was to examine a sample set of CSIs from a single organisation and to read through the overview descriptions obtained at the beginning of the interview, to identify words or phrases that indicated the type of situation that formed the subject of the CSI. A category label was then given to each emerging situation type to convey its subject, focus or nature.

Next, the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965; Olson et al., 2016) was used with further sets of CSIs from other organisations, which allowed the use of a more deductive approach. Each time a CSI was assigned to a previously identified category it was compared to the other CSIs already in the category to check the extent to which it was similar and to ensure that the categories were mutually exclusive. Definitions were developed for each category and a set of rules applicable to the categorisation of a CSI to a specific, defined category, following Schilling (2006). Both of which were revised as required as the categorisation proceeded until no new categories emerged from the data. Reliability of the categorisations was evaluated by having the second author, after training by the first author, as principal investigator, categorise a sample set of CSIs. Some of the category definitions and rules were then revised, based on discussion. A further set of CSIs was then categorised by the two researchers with an inter-rater agreement of 80%, calculated as the extent to which the independent categorisations for the set of CSIs were the same. Once the categorisation of all the 440 CSIs was complete then a count was made of the numbers of CSIs allocated to each independent CBS category to establish the percentage frequency distribution of the CSIs across the nine CBS categories.

The second stage of analysis investigated the second research question. All 440 CSIs had been coded by certified and experienced coders, including the first and second authors, which required two to three hours analysis per CSI, against the set of competencies defined by Spencer and Spencer (1993). This well-established set of competencies has validated relationships with objectively-measured performance outcomes, for example, profit growth in an MNC setting (Ryan et al., 2012). Each CSI competency coding had been reviewed by the principal investigator to ensure consistency, and to meet the desired standard of 85% inter-coder agreement for competency coding as noted by Spencer and Spencer, page 105.

To help ensure coding decisions were accurately captured and stored, the researchers imported verbatim interview transcripts into a customised macro within Microsoft Word

which allowed for the highlighting and labelling of specific text passages. Each coded passage was assigned to a specific competency and competency level. In addition, a brief annotation was made by the coder to summarise their justification of that specific coding decision. This data was then exported to an Excel database for storage and further analysis.

The coding process applied in this study has been described in detail by Spencer and Spencer (1993) and their coding scheme comprising 20 competencies; 186 behavioural indicator levels, was used to code SM behaviours in the current study. Each CSI was reviewed by one of the coders to search for words or phrases, related to the actual intent of and action taken by the SM, that could be matched to one of the competency definitions and behavioural indicator descriptions. This process was continued by the coder until all recorded behaviours in the CSI transcript had been matched to a competency and specific behavioural indicator.

The completed coding allowed for each CSI within a CBS category to have its own associated set of individual competencies with their frequency of occurrence. Then, for each of the CSIs within a specific CBS category the frequencies for each of the associated competencies were tallied. Next, the frequency tallies were summed across all the CSIs to give a total frequency count for each competency associated with the specific CBS category. This process was repeated for each CBS category and associated set of competencies, which were ranked by their frequency of occurrence in relation to the specific CBS category.

Results
CBS categories
In the first stage, an analysis of the CSIs was conducted to investigate the research question of; what are the types of critical business situations worked on by MNC SMs? Nine categories of CBS types emerged from the content analysis of CSIs, shown in Table 3 in order of their relative frequency in terms of the percentage represented by the CBS category of the total of 440 CSIs.

CBS category	Frequency percentage
Sustained profitable growth	25
Situations where the SM's intent was to select and engage in appropriate types of growth, given identified opportunities and available resources	
Human capital or organisational development	18
Situations where the SM's intent was to engage in development activities at the level of individual, team or organisation-wide, to maintain effective functioning	
Implementation or execution	16
The intent to successfully implement or execute elements of a chosen strategy, includes implementation of key programs, initiatives, or projects of a strategic nature or importance	
Continuous improvement	15
The intent to introduce changes to improve the organisation's operations in selected areas, includes the development and deployment of disruptive technologies or approaches	
Turnaround or transformation	8
The intent to turnaround a declining or failing organisational unit, country, or region, or major project, operation, or acquisition. Transformation additionally involved some elements of cultural change	
(continued)	

Table 3.
CBS categories by
frequency within CSIs

CBS category	Frequency percentage
Restructure or reorganise	7
The intent to conduct major re-structuring or re-organisation to be more in-line with the demands of changing business conditions	
Customer	5
Situations in which the SM's intent was to develop and/or maintain productive working relationships or to improve operations from the customers' perspective	
Strategy development	3
Situations where the SMs intent was to develop a strategy for their area of operational responsibility	
Manage boundaries or interfaces	3
Situations outside the SMs area of responsibility related to where the SM's intent was to work effectively with either external or internal parties or stakeholders	

Table 3.

Source(s): Authors' own work

In summary, the frequency distribution percentage of the nine CBSs within the 440 CSIs ranged from 25% for sustained profitable growth to 3% for manage boundaries or interfaces. The top five CBS categories ranked by frequency of occurrence, accounted for 82% of the total.

Competencies displayed
In the second stage, an analysis of the coded competencies was conducted to investigate the second research question. In the course of working on the nine CBSs and achieving positive outcomes the MNC SMs displayed multiple competencies. Twenty competencies, as defined in detail, with behavioural descriptors, by Spencer and Spencer (1993) were coded for their presence in each CSI. However, following recommended practice, Campion *et al.* (2011), that a maximum number of around 12 competencies should be used in competency models, only the top 10, based on frequency of occurrence, and accounting for 79% of the total number of behavioural indicators, were used in the initial stage of the study. The top 10 competencies in order of frequency over all nine CBSs were; team leadership, conceptual thinking, achievement orientation, analytical thinking, impact and influence, teamwork and co-operation, initiative, information seeking, interpersonal understanding and developing others. These competencies are defined in Table 4.

CBSs and associated competencies
The final step in analysis was to investigate the relationship between the individual CBS category types and their associated competencies. To illustrate how the 10 competencies were applied in practice in relation to the CBSs, the top five CBSs representing 82% of the total of all CBS content are shown with their associated competencies, ranked by frequency of occurrence, in Table 5.

The matching of associated competency data with the CBS categories in Table 5 shows the usage frequency patterns of the top 10 competencies in relation to each of the five most frequently occurring CBSs.

Differences in individual competency usage
Table 5 shows how the percentage frequency of use of the competencies varies depending on the CBS, which was to be expected. According to Kupczyk and Stor (2017) competencies are

Competency	Definition
Team leadership	The intention to take on the role as leader of a team or other group. It implies a desire to lead others. Makes efforts to improve team composition and functioning; ensures that key tasks are completed. At a higher level, leaders set direction and may lay out a compelling vision for the group
Conceptual thinking	Is the intention to identify/recognise patterns or connections between situations that are not obviously related, and to identify key or underlying issues in complex situations. May include the creation of new concepts or approaches
Achievement orientation	An intention to surpass a standard of excellence or to do a task better or improve performance in a specified area of the business; sets challenging goals; may pursue profitable innovative business activities
Analytical thinking	Is the intention to adopt a methodical approach to break down problems or situations into their constituent parts; identifies cause and effect relationships; may use various existing techniques to analyse problems/situations to develop an appropriate solution
Impact and influence	The intent to persuade, influence or gain support of others for organisational purposes; uses a range of tactics and strategies in pursuit of an influence attempt
Teamwork and collaboration	Implies the intention to work cooperatively/collaboratively with others, involves others in decisions and seeks input; acts to build team spirit and identity and recognises others contributions
Initiative	Is the intention to look well ahead to identify problems or opportunities not always obvious, and take self-initiated action to address these effectively
Information seeking	Implies an intention to collect information relevant to the specific situation, problem or opportunity and use this to guide decisions
Interpersonal understanding	Implies an intention to understand and respond to the expressed, or non-spoken, feelings and concerns of others, and to also predict peoples' likely reactions to situations
Developing others	Involves an intention to provide personal guidance and feedback to help others improve their job performance, or to foster the long-term learning or development of others with an appropriate level of need analysis and matched training or learning experiences

Source(s): Adapted from Spencer and Spencer (1993), Competence at Work: Models for Superior Performance

Table 4.
Competency
definitions used in the
current study

not universal. Additionally, according to Campion *et al.* (2011) competency requirements can change over time. It was decided therefore, to investigate these differences in usage of each competency in each CBS to identify which competencies usage requirements were more contingent upon the CBS as opposed to those whose usage was more universally required across all five CBSs. One-way ANOVA tests were conducted using the percentage frequency of occurrence for each of the 10 competencies separately, over each of the five CBSs over five time periods, each of five years.

At the individual competency level, several statistically significant differences were found in their percentage frequency of use in the five different CBSs over five time periods. These are shown, in order of magnitude of the effect size (ES), in Table 6.

The results of the individual competencies analysis presented in Table 6 were grouped into two categories, to show their degree of dependency on the situational context, as suggested by Kupczyk and Stor (2017). Using a median ES of 28.5% as the cut-off point five competencies above the median formed a group where substantial amounts of the variance from the average were explained by the CBS category, this group was labelled as situational to reflect their usage being largely dependent upon the situation. A second group of five competencies below the median, characterised by lower percentage variances from the average explained by the CBS categories was labelled universal, to reflect their more common presence in each of the five CBSs.

Associated competencies	CBS categories				
	Sustained profitable growth	Human capital/ organisational development	Implementation or execution	Continuous improvement	Turnaround or transformation
Team leadership	Rank 5 8.82%	Rank 3 10.29%	Rank 1 14.25%	Rank 1 11.06%	Rank 3 10.96%
Conceptual thinking	Rank 7 6.81%	Rank 4 9.92%	Rank = 3 7.76%	Rank 3 9.3%	Rank 1 12.2%
Achievement orientation	Rank 2 9.7%	Rank 9 5.38%	Rank 7 7.22%	Rank 4 8.97%	Rank 2 11.75%
Analytical thinking	Rank 3 9.47%	Rank 6 6.99%	Rank 6 7.4%	Rank 6 8.05%	Rank 4 8.25%
Impact and influence	Rank 1 10.83%	Rank 8 6.14%	Rank 5 7.64%	Rank 8 7.12%	Rank 9 6.44%
Teamwork and co-operation	Rank 8 6.29%	Rank 5 8.31%	Rank 2 10.28%	Rank 2 9.64%	Rank 6 6.89%
Initiative	Rank 4 9.05%	Rank 7 6.89%	Rank = 3 7.76%	Rank 5 8.72%	Rank 5 8.02%
Information seeking	Rank 6 7.65%	Rank 10 5.29%	Rank 9 6.31%	Rank 9 5.95%	Rank 8 6.67%
Interpersonal understanding	Rank 9 5.71%	Rank 1 12.94%	Rank 8 6.55%	Rank 7 7.21%	Rank 7 6.78%
Developing others	Rank 16 2.08%	Rank 2 11.71%	Rank 14 2.77%	Rank 13 3.52%	Rank 13 2.82%

Note(s): Ranking is based on frequency of occurrence of the competency, as a percentage of the total number of competencies associated with the CBS category
Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 5.
Framework linking top five CBS categories with associated top 10 competencies

Competency	F Statistic	p-value	Effect size
Situational			
Developing others	36.42	0.00001	88%
Conceptual thinking	4.35	0.01	47%
Achievement orientation	3.92	0.02	44%
Impact and influence	2.78	0.05	36%
Interpersonal understanding	2.18	0.11	30%
Universal			
Information seeking	1.83	0.16	27%
Initiative	1.63	0.21	25%
Analytical thinking	0.97	0.45	16%
Team leadership	0.93	0.47	16%
Teamwork and co-operation	0.71	0.59	12%

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 6.
Percentage of variance explained by CBS category for each competency

Discussion

This study asked two research questions, First, what are the types of critical business situations worked on by MNC SMs? Nine, discrete categories of CBSs were found to be present. Second, what are the competencies they displayed that contributed to achieving a desired outcome? Ten competencies were identified which were displayed in varying percentage frequencies, depending on the type of CBS. Four individual competencies, whose usage differed at statistically significant levels plus one approaching significance, were labelled situational.

The remaining five competencies whose usage did not differ across CBSs at statistically significant levels were labelled universal. This is consistent with the literature that while some competencies may be universally applied others are related to specific situations. For example, the opportunity to display achievement orientation at high frequencies may be limited by the lack of resources to take advantage of opportunities identified. Similarly, information seeking is more likely to be required in all business situations.

Therefore, it is necessary as a first step to have in-depth knowledge of the situations likely to be faced by MNC SMs before trying to determine the required competencies for their respective job roles. The need to understand the nature of senior managers' work has been noted as an area requiring investigation (Huesing and Ludema, 2017; Reynolds *et al.*, 2018). The nine CBS categories, i.e. what MNC SMs chose, or were required, to do, provide empirical information to inform an investigation of the actual work carried out by SMs.

Several of the CBSs that emerged from the current study have been recognised and investigated in the extant literature, four of which are now discussed. For example, sustained profitable growth, which is seen as important to ensure long-term survival of the organisation (Baghai *et al.*, 2007). The study lends empirical support to their claim in that growth was the most frequently occurring CBS.

The CBS category of human capital or organisational development, where the MNC SMs either initiated or took a leading role in is under-researched in the extant literature. The focus of research in the MNC human resource management (HRM) area has been mainly at higher organisational-level issues. For example, executive staffing (Lakshman *et al.*, 2016); global TM (Chatterjee *et al.*, 2023). Investigating MNC HRM and organisational development (OD) from the perspective of SMs active involvement could provide research opportunities, as called for by Kehoe and Han (2020), given that this was the second most frequently occurring CBS category, lending support to the agentic role of SMs as Kehoe and Han have proposed.

The CBS category of implementation or execution has been extensively investigated. For example, in strategy implementation (Candido and Santos, 2015) or, organisation-wide systems implementation (Crawford and Nahmias, 2010). According to Silenskyte and Smale (2021), MNCs' need to implement strategy calls for more research related to real-world organisational problems and situations. The current study has provided a framework which links actual examples of implementation CBSs with associated competency behaviours of SMs, to inform this need. For example, SMs displayed team leadership to maintain task focus, and teamwork and co-operation to ensure that cross-functional and/or cross-regional working was conducted effectively by the different organisational units involved. Impact and influence was displayed to persuade others of the need to support, or provide resources for, the implementation of strategic initiatives as also found by Lameijer *et al.* (2021b) in their study of the implementation of operational excellence initiatives.

The CBS category of continuous improvement has been investigated and found to have a high failure rate according to McLean *et al.* (2017). Senior leadership impact was identified by McLean *et al.* (2017) as an important element and they called for research in this area. The current study has identified several competencies displayed by SMs, when engaged in continuous improvement activities, which contributed to their achievement of significant, positive outcomes for their organisations. For example, SMs displayed team leadership to emphasise the need to improve performance, and teamwork and co-operation to solicit input from others, at different hierarchical levels, to ensure their involvement in decisions and plans related to improvement.

The current study has identified 10 competencies which were employed by MNC SMs in nine critical business situations. Within the extant literature there have been few studies which report competency usage in specific situational contexts. Three of these are now

discussed. First, in the CBS growth category, Komm *et al.* (2011), employed a similar set of competencies to the current study, but with a larger sample of senior managers and found seven competencies required for company revenue growth; customer impact, market insight, results orientation, change leadership, team leadership, collaboration and influencing, and strategic orientation. The current study found five similar competencies associated with the CBS category of growth. These were; achievement orientation displayed by SMs to set growth goals; analytical and conceptual thinking to develop growth strategies and plans; impact and influence and team leadership to ensure successful execution of growth initiatives.

For continuous improvement, Lameijer *et al.* (2021a) called for more research in the area of how SMs create the motivation for change. Similarly, Rave *et al.* (2022) called for more research to understand what makes employees commit to continuous improvement initiatives and proposed critical thinking as an antecedent to rational persuasion. In the current study conceptual thinking, as a facet of critical thinking, and impact and influence were both displayed. However, rational persuasion as part of the latter competency was only one of a range of influence tactics employed which could be because the SMs determined that alternative appeals were more appropriate in some situations.

For turnaround or transformation, Spencer *et al.* (2007) in their study of public and private sector CEOs in India identified a strategic situation of turnarounds requiring adaptive thinking, which included conceptual and analytical thinking, at the highest level. A similar requirement was found in the current study with conceptual thinking ranked first and analytical thinking fourth in frequency of usage. The complexity of large-scale turnarounds or transformations suggests the need to display such cognitive competencies to correctly determine appropriate remedial actions and develop implementation plans.

The study has shown how the context of the business situation can determine the relative importance of the different competencies which allows for the development of situationally focused competency models, as called for by Kupczyk and Stor (2017). Therefore, in practice, identifying the relative importance of the nine CBSs should be undertaken before deciding which competencies are required for MNC senior manager positions. Although the usage of the 10 competencies was tested over five time periods each of five years the issue of how competency requirements may change over time, highlighted by Campion *et al.* (2011), has not been fully addressed, but will be investigated in an accompanying study.

Limitations
The limited number of industry sectors represented, drawn only from an MNC sample, limits generalisability of the findings. Validation of the applicability of the findings in contemporary situations; testing strength and significance of competency relationships with CBS outcomes; temporal stability and geographic usage variation of the competencies still needs to be undertaken.

Management implications
The study findings can be used to inform MNC activities in the selection and succession planning related to senior managers by reference to the 10 competencies displayed by a sample of MNC SMs, which contributed to significant, positive, business-related outcomes.

Development activities of MNCs can utilise the study findings to inform their choice of content from nine CBS that have been found to be of continued relevance to the SM role.

Further research could examine the continued currency of the nine CBSs and where additions or deletions are required.

Conclusion

The need for effective SMs continues to be an issue for multinational corporations and their assessment and development are seen as areas requiring further improvement.

This study has identified nine enduring CBSs likely to be encountered by MNC SMs. These should form part of the content domain of any development program for senior managers. The 10 associated competencies found in the study should be included in selection criteria and subsequent leadership competency development programs for MNC SMs to contribute to improvements in their effective performance in the nine CBS categories, as deemed by MNCs to be of continued operational relevance.

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