

Communication and Linguistic Competences for Middle Management: A Content Analysis of Job Advertisements

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the provisions regarding communication and linguistic skills, excerpted from job advertisements recruiting middle management leaders in Romania. Through a qualitative content analysis, this study approaches organizational requirement information to better understand the communication and linguistic competence description of the ideal candidate in industrial settings. Scholars, teachers, and practitioners need to constantly check the transformations and requirements on the labor market and showcase the competences developed by educational programs, especially of master's degree programs. The key contribution of this paper is the presentation of "soft skills" in job advertisements, bridging the gap between academia and labor market expectations.

Keywords: job advertisements, team leader, communication competence, soft skills, language skills, recruitment

1. Introduction

Universities and organizations on the labor market are jointly responsible for the formation of the highly skilled professionals. For the initial education, efforts have been made to align university programs with the competences and needs of work life, described in catalogues for the functions and procedures of specific needs that have a direct correspondence in the existing professions. A coordinated effort in the 2010s in the European Union led to the description of university degree programs, included in the ambitious European Qualifications Framework (EQF) that was embraced larger,

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35 European countries having, so far, referenced their national qualifications frameworks to the European one (<https://europa.eu/europass/en/description-eight-efl-levels>).

The project for developing these frameworks deliberately aimed at putting behind the scenario in which universities, based mainly on the way academics see professions, adopted an education model focused on knowledge transmission instead of focusing on the development of competences (Lima et al., 2017). Active consultations with the employers and graduates complemented the knowledge accumulated in universities, and the adoption of a transparent grid, with common descriptors, reduced the much-debated gap between school and work lives and increased the employability of graduates (Lima, 2017, Cernicova et al., 2011, Yorke, 2004). Despite the criticism that such a utilitarian approach can be harmful for the understanding of the capabilities and functions that a person (graduate or otherwise) displays in life (J. Félix Lozano, 2012; Amartya Sen, 1979), the model of competences and skills is implemented world-wide, thus leveling the ground for globalization, convergence and uniformization of the way in which education outcomes and labor market expectations are presented, to name only the elements that are relevant for this research.

As a recent study on the European situation highlighted, “timely information on employers’ skill requirements (...) is scarce” and “traditional statistical methods based on surveys do not provide just-in-time and detailed data”, leaving as an alternative for information the scrutiny of job vacancies, which “offer insights into skills required and their dynamics” (Cedefop, 2019). Presumably, companies want to be effective in the recruiting process and find the best candidates. Accordingly, their job advertisements need to be as accurate as possible in the definition of a suitable candidate profile and the tasks to be performed at the workplace. In addition, the ads need to be brief, easy to read, and focus on the main required attributes of the profile. Typically, job advertisements contain sections presenting information about the job and its responsibilities, required and desirable candidate profile, company information, salary, and benefits (optional) and application process. The scrutiny of job advertisements belonging to a specific professional area makes possible the identification of the main areas of practice that are requiring new candidates, and the main transversal competences that companies are looking for when hiring (Burry, 2020; Luther, 2018). The method of treating job ads as signals for the state of the labor market is not infallible, as researchers abundantly pointed out. For instance, not all jobs are advertised externally, leaving data outside the scope of analysis. Ads may contain uncontrollable variables or elements pertaining to the pressure of legal environment, they may present a projection of the future, instead of a snapshot of the existing situation, and they do not offer a clear picture of the skills successful applicants display. Also, depending on the type of organization announcing a vacancy, not all job ads are eye-catching or explanatory of the conditions in the organization (De Cooman & Pepermans, 2012). Overall “there is a lack of consolidated guidance on the specifics of research design in studying job

advertisements (Harper 2012, p. 32). Despite the criticism, job advertisements offer ample information that can be mined, classified, researched both from the point of view of researchers and from the standpoint of practitioners. Keeping in mind the advantages and the shortcomings of analyzing job ads, we set forth on the journey to grasp the signals from the market that academics can use to improve the curricula and/or to market university degree programs as fitting the needs of society.

The purpose of this study is to examine the presence of transversal so called “soft” skills – communication and linguistic competencies – in the job ads recruiting middle management positions (team/group leader), which, according to the European Qualifications Framework, should correspond to level 7 of qualifications, namely the master degree level in higher education ([Description-eight-efq-levels](#)). The aim of the study is to compare the information extracted from the job advertisements with the descriptors used in the master’s degree programs provided by the Faculty of Communication studies of Politehnica University Timisoara, Romania, as part of the effort to enhance the employability of the graduates of these programs.

2. Materials and method

The job advertisements collection was carried out during 6 month, November 2017 – April 2018, using the public most popular recruiting websites in Romania: [www.bestjobs.eu](#), [www.ejobs.ro](#), by using the keywords ‘manager’, ‘team leader’, ‘group leader’ and relevant for the labor market in the Western part of Romania. To be selected for analysis, the job ad needed to contain at least two references to communication and/or linguistic skills. The ads on recruitment websites could not be downloaded unless responded to, so students of master’s degree levels were asked to contribute with CVs and information. Ultimately, one of the students employed as an HR specialist for a major company in the Western part of Romania was asked to provide additional ads, to create a corpus of 50 valid, real-life job advertisements, corresponding to the minimal set of criteria (at least two references to the skills of interest). The information regarding communication skills and the recruitment criteria was extracted manually and introduced in a table, to facilitate the content analysis (Appendix 1). A contextual factor is important for this study: the Western part of Romania is dense in multinational companies, a variety of languages being used as work languages (English, French, German, Italian, letter from Timis Chamber of Commerce concerning the necessity of two foreign languages taught in higher education, 2017; Regional innovation monitor). The presentation of these languages was also considered for the study.

3. Results and discussion

In the investigated period the largest number of ads recruited team leaders (68% of the corpus), followed by managerial positions (30%) and group leaders (2%).

The required communication skills are presented with a variety of intensities and qualifications. ‘Excellent communication skills’ (10 ads) and ‘communication skills’ (10 ads) are requirements explicitly formulated, the difference between the two sets of data being that the first category contains only ads published in English, while the second contains also ads in Romanian (‘abilitati de comunicare’). A third group of ads (8) contains references to ‘good communication skills’ (two of these ads are in Romanian and the reference is to ‘bune abilitati de comunicare’). Other ads, all posted in English, refer to ‘strong communication skills’ (7), and to ‘outstanding communication skills’ (2) respectively. Other references to the same group of skills, given in the language in which they were posted in the ads, list as follows: Comunici clar și asertiv [(you) communicate clearly and assertively]; Bun comunicator, asertivitate [good communicator, assertiveness]; Communicative and assertive; Great communicator; Highly effective written and oral communication skills, excellent interpersonal skills and experience dealing effectively with a wide range of people; Exceptional communication skills; Abilitati de comunicare deosebite [outstanding communication abilities].

The results with exact formulations are presented in Figure 1:

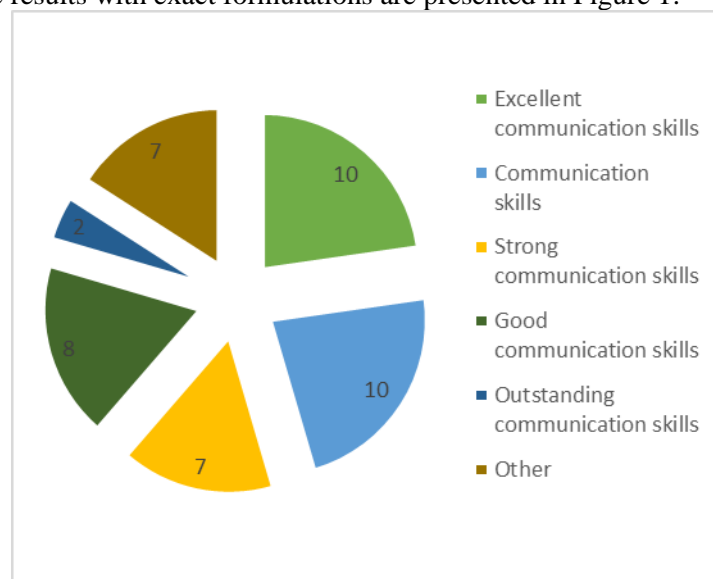


Figure 1: Required skills visible in the ads

In addition to the requirements that relate strictly to the communication skills required for the function, the analyzed job ads contain other requirements that implicitly relate to communication competences, such as: ‘(s)he is responsible for staff relations, manages the work relations within the organization’; ‘(has the) ability to influence and convince others’; ‘(task of) ensuring effective communication within the team or/and with other teams’; ‘provides the drafting of the KPI (key performance

indicator) report'; 'communicates to each employee the general and specific objectives pursued by the organization'.

40 out of the 50 job advertisements contained explicit reference to linguistic competencies expected of the applicants, one of which giving also details concerning the professional context: 'Ability to use English as second language during EU multinational meetings (for performance evaluation and training purposes)'. However, out of the ten not referring to levels of foreign language mastering seven are posted in English, and only three in Romanian. We can assume that for the seven ads in English at least an intermediary level is tested during the actual recruitment process. To return to the 40 ads, again the wording displays a variety of views on the level of English expected from the applicant, as presented in Figure 2 below:

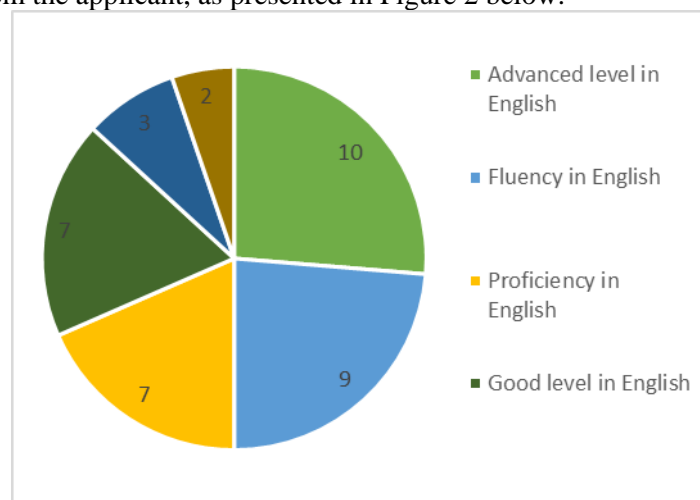


Figure 2: Required levels of English

17 out of the 40 ads require an additional language, some of the choices being surprising. The exact wording in the ads is as follows: 'German or French is a plus'; 'German language skills are beneficial'; 'German language knowledge is a plus'; 'A second language (French, Italian, Spanish, German) would be a plus'; 'Spoken and written Greek or Polish language skills to native standard (including business correspondence)'; 'Russian at native speaker level'. Some of the language combinations hint at the fact that although the local context is taken into consideration, Romania (and the Western part of it included) is treated in the larger "Central and Eastern Europe" space, where apart from the international languages (English, French and German) other rare combinations are expected (Polish, Greek or Russian at native level). Another comment goes towards the European Union provision, that higher education graduates master two foreign languages, as specified in the Council recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages. The assessment of foreign language proficiency is explained down to details in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages:

Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR), drafted in 2001 and embraced in many countries of the world for teacher education, the reform of foreign language curricula, the development of teaching materials and for the comparability of qualifications. It uses descriptors on 6 levels, from A (the beginner level) to C (native speaker level). However even if some of the analyzed job ads contained descriptors like the ones in CEFR, none evoked the A-B-C levels present in the European document.

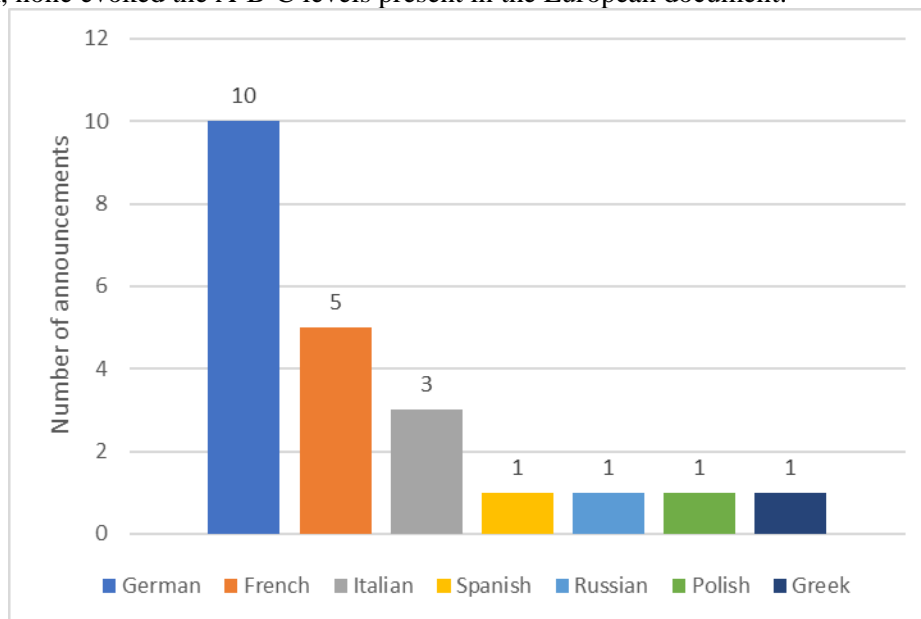


Figure 3: Additional languages mentioned in job ads

The wording in the job ads shows that there is a variety of practices and experiences in advertisement writing. For instance, various ads refer to „good / strong / excellent communication skills”, the exact meaning of which is tested differently in each organization. Also, when mentioning the mastering of a foreign language, some ads indicate that ‘fluency’ is expected, others – that ‘proficiency’ is a must. A few examples in the sample offer details concerning the level of language expected (native level, for instance). This means that while at the European Union level such an instrument as “the linguistic passport” is recommended, in the economic sector the recruiters use a variety of references to describe expected linguistic competence.

The corpus taken into account for this research shows that there is a large variety in the style and wording of job advertisements, from factual presentation of the job to the direct, seductive style of inviting applications, from standardized presentations, recommended in international practice for successful recruitment, to free presentations, let at the inspiration and skill of the HR department. Our attention went only towards highlighting the presentation of communication and linguistic skills expected of team/group leaders, and left aside other information in the job

descriptions, because each company, according to the area of practice and the specific organization of employees presents differently the tasks to be carried out by the middle managers.

Unlike job advertisements, descriptions of linguistic and communication skills in university degree programs are more factual. The linguistic component (in terms of mastering two foreign languages) is presupposed as ensured, though there is a large variety of practices (at least) in Romanian universities concerning the number of classes of foreign languages and the number of taught languages. When reference is made to mastering a foreign language, in Romania universities use references to CEFR. However, because of the templates recommended for study programs descriptions, neither the foreign language, nor the communication components is highlighted distinctively (apart from the programs directly dealing with the two areas of study). The communication competence is described in the master programs offered by the Faculty of Communication Studies at Politehnica University Timisoara linked to specific areas of manifestation – either in technologically mediated situations, or in the business relations (sc.upt.ro). This is due to a large extent to the higher education practice, to consider competence as manifested in actions, behaviors and decisions in particular situations or contexts (Lozano et al., 2012). However, competence as an embedded feature of the specialist's identity can only be inferred through observation of these actions, behaviors, and decisions over time – in practice. Discussion with graduates of these programs revealed that at the workplace the competences acquired in school, though useful, are seldom discussed about even in the performance evaluation.

4. Conclusions and implications for education and practice

In this study, an analysis of the professionals' perspective of communication and linguistic competences was conducted, considering job advertisements for middle management positions which, according to Romanian practice, require the completion of master's degree studies. The resulting picture can be used as one possible input for educational professionals, to understand the market trends within the diversity of requirements: more than one foreign languages mastered at a good/very good/proficient level, communication skills demonstrated in a variety of professional contexts. At the middle management level, applicants are supposedly qualified in their area of activity and a distinctive, large area of evaluation during the recruitment/hiring process is allocated to the so called "soft skills" – communication in one's native language, in the working language of the employer or in the language(s) of the partners/clients. The understanding of the marketplace realities helps better select the pedagogy and content of learning and helps improve and constantly update the curricula. The exercise that students participating in this study carried out, of responding to job advertisements, showed that more emphasis needs to be placed on preparation of the school-to-work transition, on the orientation of students and on the presentation of the matching between the competences, actions

and behaviors formed and/or rehearsed in school and those displayed at the workplace. Also, the findings of this study can be useful in the marketing of the higher education programs, that can be presented in the university-companies dialogue, when discussing the state and prospects of the highly skilled workforce.

In the business sector, recruiters and HR personnel can draw lessons from this analysis, to strive for better, clearer job descriptions and a professionalization of job advertisements, to improve the content and form of such ads and to make the recruitment process more transparent and efficient.

5. Limitations and directions for further research

A first limitation of this study refers to the corpus utilized for the content analysis. We realize that our results may be time and region specific, taking account of the economic and geographical conditions of one specific country at a certain point in time. This study was limited to the visible part of the employers' offer, as posted for recruiting middle management positions (team/group leaders or managers) in the Western part of Romania, during a limited time span, and only 10% of the corpus was provided by a recruiter, from internal resources not open for the large public. However, graduates search for jobs nationally and even internationally. For a comprehensive picture of the middle management position, wider geographic areas should be included, the duration of data collection needs to be enhanced. It is also not clear whether the positions were genuinely open for the candidates on the labor market, or the recruitment targeted internal applicants, already employed in the organization, and the postage only filled the legal requirement of transparency regarding employment. We chose a feasible option for this study, because in the job offer part the available information was most coherent and comparable in all ads. We realize also that organizations may use other resources to communicate with potential candidates, especially when recruiting middle management. However, the discussion with some of the HR specialists in multinational companies in the Western part of Romania revealed that, unless posted publicly, the job ads are not open for the external public, research purposes included.

A second limitation is caused by the manual the extraction of ads and contained pertinent information, thus opening the floor for subjective interpretation. Such a procedure was used because job ads were posted in Romanian and English, mixing the key words. Also, recruitment websites do not allow importing information unless the job post is responded to.

Thirdly, this study is limited in scope. We restricted the research focus to communication and linguistic skills required for middle management positions in industrial settings. Future research could include public sector organizations and compare specific characteristics for the middle management positions between the economic and the public sectors.

To test the validity of our results, a similar design could be considered using data that compares across time. However, to our knowledge, a content analysis of

communication skills-related information in job ads had not yet been undertaken and, therefore, the current study may be considered a first step towards more studies and a more thorough analysis of how to bridge the gap between academic programs that target refining the soft skills of highly skilled laborers and the requirements in the ‘real world’ of employment. Further studies may explore how successful applicants document the required communication and linguistic skills and how recruiters perceive/read university degree documents (curricula, graduation diplomas) during the hiring processes.

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Appendix 1

Sample of rubrics for collecting and systematizing information in job advertisements

No.	Position	Industrial domain	Company	Tasks	Other	Language of ad
1	Team leader	IT	Ness Digital Engineering	Create WIKI posts and other content to support the technical team and solutions for the business Excellent communication skills in English written and spoken form	Musical project	En
2	Team leader	Financial	Conduent	Effective communication between accounting staff and the personnel Provides directions to employees according to established policies and management guidance Proficient level of English, good level of Italian – a plus	Receives guidance from the manager Problem solving	En
3	Manager	HR	Ana Human Resources	Asigură redactarea raportului KPI Susține managerul în gestionarea procedurii disciplinare, în prevenirea și rezolvarea conflictelor Limba engleză și italiană la nivel bun Bun comunicator, asertivitate.		Ro
4	...					