

BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS WITH EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE ERA OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: Changes in the labor market and the development of technologies also require changes in the training programs for students at bachelor's and master's degrees. There must be synchronization between education and practice in order to prepare personnel who will find successful implementation. We live in the era of digital technologies and artificial intelligence, which also requires a different set of competencies. That is why it is important to have synchronization between science and practice and the entry of business into university classrooms. Since its inception, the main mission of the university has been to generate, share and disseminate knowledge that business can invest in its activities. In the conditions of globalization, universities operate in conditions of high competition - curricula, attracting students and teachers, realizing graduates on the labor market. In today's rapidly developing and changing economic and educational environment, the successes of universities and businesses are determined by their ability to implement and adapt innovative technologies. Technological solutions not only improve efficiency, but also open doors to new markets, increase the quality of products and services and create sustainable advantages over competitors. In this article, we aim to examine the need for partnerships between business and educational institutions, the forms of their implementation, the formation of competencies and the requirements for them, the benefits for both parties. The methods by which we will support our thesis are a review of scientific literature and practice. We will defend the thesis that the implementation of new technologies changes professions, which is why interaction between business and educational institutions is necessary to prepare future personnel.

Keywords: *digitization, artificial intelligence, competencies, business, educational institutions.*

Field: Social sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Science and technology are developing rapidly, we are witnessing numerous changes and innovations, we live in the era of digital transformation of processes and the use of artificial intelligence (AI), which requires the preparation of qualified personnel for business and the economy. Partnerships between business and educational institutions are becoming a key tool for creating innovative educational programs that meet the real needs of the labor market. The use of AI undoubtedly facilitates the process of learning and finding information on a given problem, but students must be able to analyze the results and use digital resources as an aid to guide them to the content. In practice, in services, AI is increasingly being used, thus ensuring seamless connection and customer service 24 hours a day (24/7). Until now, the weak connection between education and business has always been taken into account and it has been commented that students lack practical training. The process is two-sided - on the one hand, business is not active in organizing the learning process, creating joint programs, practical classes, providing internships in a real work environment, on the other - laying the foundation for theoretical training and curricula by universities. With the advent of new technologies, digitalization and AI, continuous innovations require a responsible attitude on the part of business - its representatives to enter the classrooms to transfer practical knowledge, skills and abilities (competences) to students. On the other hand, teachers must also be aware of new technologies in the process of teaching and setting practical tasks, and students must be encouraged to use digital resources in which the sources are duly cited.

In this article, we will examine how cooperation between business and higher education institutions (universities) will organize the learning process so as to prepare future specialists for work in a digital environment and AI.

To this end, a theoretical overview will be drawn up of the required academic competencies that students will acquire after completing their higher education, and those that business requires in AI-related jobs. After a thorough study, conclusions will be drawn (where are we) and recommendations for improving existing practice.

The subject of the study is the set of competencies (academic, personal, in jobs), and the object - universities and business representatives. The topic is relevant and we believe that practical training of

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students guarantees the acquisition of competencies that will ensure their successful implementation and competitiveness in business.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To achieve the planned tasks, we will systematize the competencies acquired in education with those of business, to justify the need for joint training programs, the advantages for the countries and the forms of implementation. The methods that will be applied are an analysis of the literature on the topic, a study of practice, statistical analysis and synthesis. The research tasks that we set ourselves are:

1. To make a theoretical analysis of existing practice and new technologies;
2. Systematization of academic competencies;
3. Analysis of the required competencies from business;
4. To justify the need for partnerships between business and educational institutions;
5. To propose forms of cooperation;
6. To clarify the advantages and benefits for both parties.

For the purposes of the study, we will analyze different types of competencies that shape a person as competent and are essential for practice. We will introduce another clarification by defining competency: "a set of knowledge, skills, abilities".

For further clarity, I will examine their nature. In the dictionary of foreign words in the Bulgarian language, competence (from Latin, competence) is defined as "Awareness, experience, knowledge; quality of a competent person; legal capacity" (Милев, 1971).

According to Thomson, the concept of competence contains three components (Thompson, 1998):

- Knowledge about the relevant professional field;
- Skills, defined as the specific ability to perform a particular task;
- A gift or talent that can be added to the performance of a given task.

In the literature, the definitions of various authors for competence are reduced to a set of key skills and knowledge in a certain functional area. With the intention of introducing greater specificity and completeness, competence can be defined as: "a combination of knowledge, work skills and motivation", more precisely, it is formed by a multitude of competencies. Analyzing the types of competencies, we will also form the key competencies in the specified areas in the conditions of digitalization of processes.

According to R. Antova, "By integrating AI into education, educators can optimize communication methods, meet individual learning needs, and create a more engaging and effective learning experience (Антова, 2024)." Iliyan Kostov emphasizes the content of digitalization: "It can be said that digitalization is based on three components: Technological - includes building a digital infrastructure; Educational - training to work with digital technologies; Communication - accessibility to digital technologies" (Kostov, 2023).

3. RESULTS

In order to analyze them and highlight the importance of competencies, we will arrange them into three groups:

1. Personal competencies. Competencies are personal qualities that are essential for all roles in life. They are defined as "soft skills". This type of personal effectiveness skills are acquired in the family, society, personal perceptions and value potential and are improved in the process of training and education, possibly also in the workplace or participation in personal development seminars;

2. Academic competencies. These are knowledge, skills, abilities acquired mainly in a school environment, which help to achieve personal fulfillment and at a later stage find a job and participate in civic initiatives. They help in the personal, social and professional expression of modern man. They include cognitive functions and thinking styles. Academic competencies relate to all industries and professions and are determined by the professional direction of learning. For the purposes of the study, we will form key competencies that students acquire in the process of studying in the specialty "Business Administration";

3. Workplace competencies. They represent a set of knowledge (acquired in the process of education), key skills and abilities in a certain functional area. In order to bring greater specificity and completeness, we can define them as a combination of knowledge, work skills and motivation. They are usually applicable to a large number of professions, but we will analyze the key competencies in the field of business administration.

The main goal of training in this professional direction is to provide competencies in various

disciplines in order to provide modern training and good practices to students, to prepare qualified specialists in administration and management for all industries and sectors of the economy.

The main focus is on providing and mastering competencies in a wide profile of academic disciplines, in which students acquire professional competence that meets the requirements of practice and users of personnel in the field of management and the growing need for managers, with competencies for effective management of business organizations and company activities in a dynamic economic environment. Specialized literature on management needs to formulate an applied approach and toolkit for problems related to the analysis and assessment of the culture of communication, ethical principles and norms of behavior, values in communication, digital transformation of processes and trends in communications. The set of academic competencies and competencies acquired in the training process and those required by practice for certain positions, which must be possessed when occupying them, and those that must be acquired subsequently through on-the-job training, has not been identified and unified. The presence of such requirements in turn implies the development of requirements regarding the personal qualities and competencies for behavior and communication (culture, ethics and values) of specialists in this profession. The unification of the requirements and the type of competencies will facilitate the training process, and subsequently the realization of graduates and their career development.

According to the NEAA, 20 universities have received accreditation under the PN 3.7. Administration and management. From the review of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the Level of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), we have systematized the following set of competencies and competences in the educational degree "Bachelor", Level 6, Sublevel 6B (National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Bulgaria):

Table 1. Academic competencies according to the NQF

Practical and applied skills	Personal competencies
1. Independence and responsibility: Possesses extensive and in-depth theoretical and factual knowledge in the field, including related to the latest achievements in it;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possesses the ability to administratively manage complex professional activities, including teams and resources; • Takes responsibility for decision-making in complex conditions, under the influence of various interacting and difficult to predict factors; • Demonstrates creativity and initiative in management activities; • Assesses the need for training others to increase team effectiveness.
1. Learning competence: Independently interprets acquired knowledge, connecting it to the application of facts and through critical perception, understanding and expression of theories and principles;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently assesses their own qualifications by assessing the knowledge and skills acquired to date and plans the need to expand and update their professional qualifications
2. Communicative and social competences : Possesses methods and tools that allow solving complex tasks;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formulates and presents ideas, problems and solutions clearly and understandably to specialists and non-specialists; • Expresses attitude and understanding on issues by using methods based on qualitative and quantitative descriptions and assessments; • Demonstrates a broad personal worldview and shows understanding and solidarity with others; • Communicates fully in some of the most widely spoken European languages;
3. Professional competencies : Applies logical thinking and demonstrates innovation and a creative approach when solving non-standard tasks;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collects, classifies, evaluates and interprets data from the field in order to solve specific tasks; • Applies acquired knowledge and skills in new or unfamiliar conditions; • Demonstrates the ability to analyze in a broader or interdisciplinary context; • Uses new strategic approaches; forms and expresses own opinion on social and ethical issues arising in the work process.

Source: Author's own systematization according to the NQF of the Republic of Bulgaria (NQF _ bg. pdf)

The table shows that the NQF focuses on competencies of a practical and applied nature and professional competencies that build the professional skills of the individual. It is striking that it focuses on the formation of independence, logical thinking, language competence, responsibility, communication skills and professional realization. In our opinion, there is a lack of competencies for ethical professional behavior and emotional intelligence in communications. According to B. Borisov and others, "education

is upbringing, providing knowledge, forming skills, an opportunity for personal development and self-improvement, an opportunity for professional realization, and broadening the worldview” (Борисов, 2024)

Successful implementation also requires the formation of personal competencies (soft skills) such as motivation for achievements, a positive attitude towards the future profession, innovation, independence in making management decisions, trust, emotional intelligence in communication, social responsibility and a positive attitude, etc. In the following table we will summarize the required academic competencies:

Table 2. Academic competencies in universities

Competencies of a practical nature	Personal competencies
1. Ethics, adaptability and flexibility in decision-making	• Emotional intelligence;
2. Organizational culture	• Strategic thinking and vision for the future;
3. Communicative competences	• Teamwork and networking skills;
4. Skills for applying creative methods and generating innovative ideas	• Ethics and value potential;
5. Emotional intelligence	• Creativity and innovation;
6. Project and resource management skills	• Conflict management skills;
7. Financial literacy skills	• Formation of professional motivation;
8. Knowledge and use of software products related to the activity	• Possesses a high degree of autonomy in developing and making management decisions in the administration;
9. Language competences	• Data analysis skills, legal regulations
10. Implementing digital transformation and communications strategies with AI	• Developing key skills necessary for career development.

Source: Authors' systematization

Competencies of a practical and applied nature are of essential importance and of exceptional importance for the formation of knowledge, skills and abilities for the successful realization of a person in a professional plan, when establishing contacts and working with clients. There are some overlaps with those required by practice, but here these differences can be overcome by developing joint programs. The overlaps are in several competencies, such as: Language competence, Communicative competence; Digital competence and Innovation.

Among the personal competencies, the skills for managing emotions, teamwork, ethics and value potential, professional motivation and positive attitude predominate.

In the following table, we will summarize and review key competencies for all professions that are required when hiring and occupying a certain position in the administration:

Table 3. Key competencies in practice

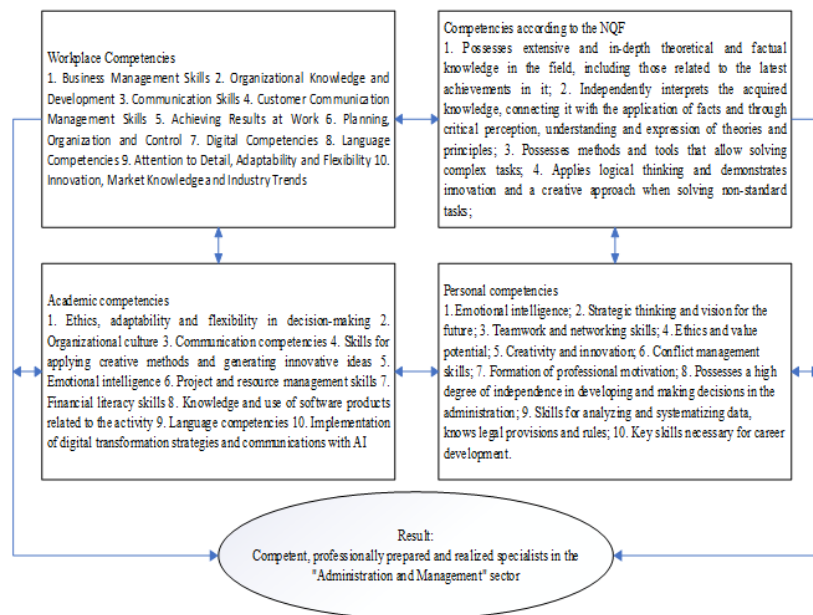
Key competencies	Specific competencies
1. Business management skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activity management: arranging meetings, developing schedules, responding to inquiries, handling correspondence, and maintaining a professional image of the office
2. Knowledge and development of the organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time management skills; • Money management skills; • Communication management skills
3. Communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive thinking and mindfulness; • Emotional intelligence; • Ethical principles of behavior, politeness;
4. Customer communication management skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills for managing relationships with customers and partners; • Telephone and social media communication skills; meeting deadlines; • Initiative and social skills in communication;
5. Achieving results at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on the end result of their work by comparing what has been achieved with the goals and objectives set; • Orientation towards efficiency through good organization, planning and personal professional development;
6. Planning, organization and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills for planning activities and organizing them in an effective manner; • Skills to perform planned tasks; • Skills for controlling resource consumption; • Competencies for responsibility and correctness.
7. Digital competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills for working with AI and digital platforms; • Design skills for creating advertising messages, text formatting;
8. Language competencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills for writing, researching and analyzing written documents - entering, recording, analyzing, storing or maintaining information in written or electronic format; • Communications in a foreign language
9. Attention to detail, adaptability and flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills for transforming walking; • Skills for responsible behavior in the workplace - accuracy and following instructions; • Adherence to work and meeting schedules; courtesy;
10. Innovation, market knowledge and trends in the sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate the ability to adapt to new, different or changing requirements; • Innovative thinking, dealing with change; • Adapting plans to new requirements

Source: Authors' own systematization

4. DISCUSSION

The appointment of positions in the administration is after competitive procedures, which requires the introduction of clear criteria and a set of competencies depending on the position, which should meet Bulgarian conditions and European standards. According to S. Kostadinova, "Young people should have a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills that will help them successfully deal with challenges and transitions on the path to maturity (Костадинова, 2024). "From the academic, practical and applied and personal competencies thus systematized, we offer a set of competencies and competences to be formed in the process of training in the conditions of digitalization:

Fig. 1. Competencies in the “Administration and Management” sector



Source: Authors' systematization

To overcome the differences in the acquisition of certain competencies in the training process, the NQF and practice, it is necessary to harmonize the requirements to ensure that upon employment, graduates will possess competencies that are necessary in the workplace. The need for a partnership between business and education is also necessary because:

- Digitalization of work processes and new trends in AI ;
- Training in a real environment by representatives of practice;
- With the introduction of the practice into education, the educational institution can guarantee its image as an institution implementing an “open” model of education;

In our opinion, the forms of cooperation can be:

- Development of specialized programs with AI technologies;
- Financing of training by businesses;
- Internship and internship in a work environment;
- Joint projects;
- Thesis defense – mentors from practice.

What are the benefits for business? In our opinion:

- Attracting talented students after graduation;
- Solutions for the benefit of business (result of scientific developments);
- Achieving image and competitiveness;

The benefits for the educational institution can be systematized in the following order:

- Analyzing curricula with a practical focus;
- Improving training conditions through funding from practice;
- Technologically equipped offices with the help of businesses;
- Acquisition of practical and applied skills;
- Opportunities for international contacts beneficial to both countries;
- Career development and benefits for students from combining theory and practice.

According to Nikolova “The mistakes and shortcomings of business communication today, and the problems that arise from them, mostly stem from the inability to send and receive messages, to motivate people, to demonstrate listening skills, to follow the rules of business etiquette and company culture, from the lack of competences at work” (Николова, 2022). Borisova, L. et G. Rashkova believe that “new technologies will form new knowledge and application of digital competencies in work and communication, which requires additional training and standardization. Artificial intelligence (AI) lacks competencies such as emotional intelligence, creativity, empathy, etc., which are a factor in achieving effectiveness in communication” (Борисова, 2024). The introduction of new technological solutions can also serve as an inspiring motivator (Тонузова, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

Formation of competencies in the training process together with the requirements of the business should be valid for all who want to have a professional presence in the labor market. This set of competencies (professional and personal) should be embedded in the curricula, and it is advisable that upon graduation students also receive a certificate certifying professional competence. Certification is imposed as an indispensable requirement on the market, similar to a university diploma, which means the same thing all over the world and provides an opportunity for “professional realization and a career without borders and barriers”. Possession of certificates is a guarantee of quality for those who have accepted the challenges of practice and are ready to realize themselves in the conditions of discipline and achievements in the workplace. On the other hand, the certificate is a sign of trust.

The acquisition of a set of competencies by students can be realized by changing curricula, introducing student practices, postgraduate internships and conducting seminars for business representatives. It is time for business and universities to create joint learning consortia to achieve competitiveness and respond to the new realities of learning in a digital environment and artificial intelligence. In this sense, this report is just the beginning of an initiative by both sides – universities and business, for certification in professional competence, to achieve organizational excellence.

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