



A DIFFERENT LOGISTICS MANAGER? - DIFFERENTIATION IN LOGISTICS BUSINESS PRACTISE

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ABSTRACT. Educating students to become a logistics professional, requires a certain set of competences to be attained. This study investigates which competences are required in logistics business practise, and whether a differentiation may be noticed in the actual profiles of logistics professional. It shows that educational institutions could fine tune training their students according to the required abilities, skills and attitudes.

Key words: competences in logistics, profiles of logistics professional, logistics education.

INTRODUCTION

The domain of Freight Transport, Logistics and Supply Chain Management (SCM) is much more elaborated and has much more faces now in 2007, than during the 1970's or 1980's. In fact changes in logistics are going rather fast. The diversity in business strategies, logistics strategies and positioning has grown substantially. What does that mean for any logistician working in this domain?

This question relates fundamentally for business practice. If a transport company wants to be successful in innovating its transport services, it needs to know whether its logisticians are provided with the required competences in order to be able to make this change. For example a Transport company that offers 3rd Party Logistics services (3PL), is it in a sound starting point for starting 4th Party services (4PL), from the point of view of required competences of its staff?

For Universities, educating logisticians, the challenge is the same, in fact. They have to find an answer to the question whether they do educate students according to the actual requirements in logistics business practise.

In the past, both universities for professional training of logisticians, and academic universities based their information about current logistics practice and about requirements of knowledge, abilities and attitudes, mainly on personal impressions and implicit general deductions of trend surveys. At least that counts for the Dutch situation. We think a research based approach may add a lot to our understanding of these requirements. Conclusions and recommendations for logistics study programs should be made based on empirical data.

So, our study focused on the question which competences actually are required in logistics business practice for positions on bachelor level?

COMPETENCES AS STARTING POINT FOR EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Dutch education in general and the HAN University especially are focussed on helping students to acquire well defined competences. A competence can be seen as a combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for a certain profession. Not only universities, but more and more business companies base their human resource management on this kind of framework as well.

In order to be able to perform a professional task in his later business practice at the required level, the student should possess and/or develop the required competences. Most professional tasks ask professionals to use more competences than one at the same time. In education, teachers help the student to acquire the necessary skills and tools, and coach them in order to ensure that the professional tasks are performed in an efficient manner. Next to that, in the Dutch system, a student guiding system ensures the student to reflect on his acts, and becomes conscious of his choices regarding the further development of his competences during his stay at the University.

The HAN University has developed a set of competences which a student should have acquired when leaving university with a Bachelor degree in Logistics. These competences have been translated into a study programme which enables students to acquire these competences in a logical and didactical sound manner. This list of competences for logistics was made up earlier by lecturers of the department, so not on the basis of our current research. Our research is set up in order to help our colleagues how to bring our logistic education best in line with the required competences in the actual work field.

RESULTS OF OUR EARLIER FIRST STAGE

Required competences have their framework once and for all in the strategic (re)positioning of companies. From a company's point of view, the first question is what developments can be traced in its environment, and especially, what are the forces for change - including drivers, barriers and enablers? Secondly, it is important to know what the strategic response of the company is on the changes in the environment. This altogether is the background for the competences asked from logisticians. We reported earlier about this first step of our research program [Weijers, a.o., 2005]. Our findings were that the forces for change are very strong, forcing companies to diversify and internationalize their strategies. That implies that also for companies in logistics it is very relevant to reconsider the knowledge, skills and attitudes of its staff - in order to be able to respond adequately to the new challenges to the company. Against this background we started the research stage that we present now in this paper.

LOGISTICS PROFILES

This current study is based up on in-depth-interviews in combination with study of literature. Up till now we have conducted 60 in-depth-interviews with professional logisticians in different logistics functions. More interviews will follow. In these interviews the following themes have been discussed:

- What demands do companies pose on logisticians, including graduates in logistics, in terms of required competences?
- What logistics profiles can be distinguished in current logistics practice? In discussions with the field, expressed amongst others by Ploos van Amstel, a differentiation between three logistics profiles seemed to evolve.

Our starting point was the hypothesis that the profiles of logistics managers seem to diversify into three different directions. Ploos van Amstel suggests that some logistics manager focus just on process management, while others focus on designing and redesigning the logistics chain; and again others in

fact work as an entrepreneur, looking for any new business in logistics [Ploos van Amstel, 2005]. For our research we have asked the respondents to grade the various aspects which are part of the logistic function. We grouped these aspects in the three profiles inspired by Ploos van Amstel, and four focuses in order to be able to get a clearer picture about the precise content of the new profiles.

Altogether we asked the respondents to grade their own logistics function according to the following profiles and four focuses:

- Profiles: Is the profile of the function best described by being a process manager, an entrepreneur in a logistic service company, or a value/supply chain manager/designer?
- Focus 1: Is the job focused on managing staff and processes? Or on external, or on internal communication?
- Focus 2: Is the job focused on commercial knowledge? Or on knowledge and experience with either soft, or hard logistics?
- Focus 3: Is the job focused on drawing back on existing routines and - in case new services are required - just creating new routines? Or is it focused on meeting all kinds of customer demands? Or on the creation of new methods and services?
- Focus 4: Is the job focused on a strategic, tactic or an operational level?

The respondent was asked to award a maximum of 6 points to all three aspects. If he considered an aspect to be very important he could give this aspect 3 points, if he considered an aspect important 2 points, just 1 point for aspects which were occasionally important, and 0 if the aspect was not important or not applicable for him in this situation. In this way we obtained a personal view how a respondent judges his role from various points of view.

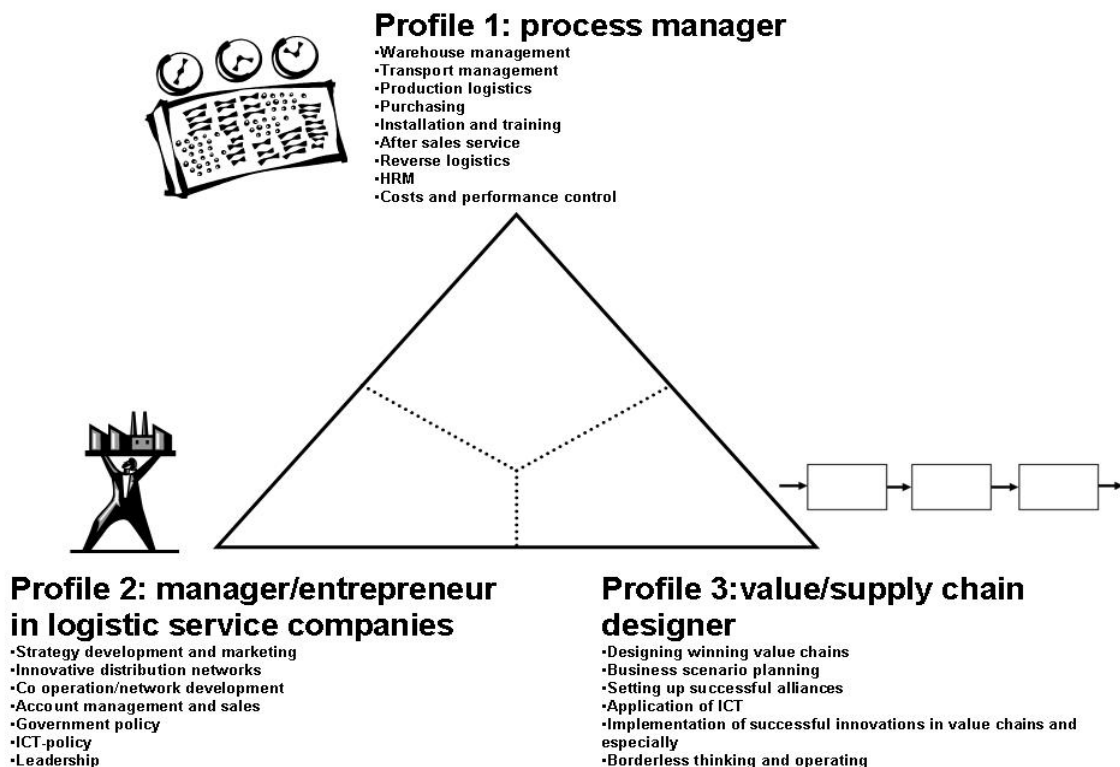


Fig. 1. Three alternative profiles of a logistics manager
 Rys. 1. Trzy alternatywne profile menagera logistyki

Table 1. Characteristics of the three profiles
Tabela 1. Charakterystyka trzech profili

| | | | |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Focus 1: | External contact | Internal contact | Management |
| Focus 2: | Hard logistics | Soft logistics | Commercial knowledge |
| Focus 3: | Routine | Customer specific | Development |
| Focus 4: | Strategy | Tactics | Operations |

MOST IMPORTANT COMPETENCES

With 60 respondents, the present database is still too small to derive statistical proof conclusions from. But we can derive some indications. The starting point was a list of 28 competences which form the basis of the logistic programme of the HAN University - quite comparable with lists of other universities. The respondents were asked to select the 8 most decisive ones which they require for their own job. The top 10 of the most decisive competences which were mentioned in order of importance are:

- Planning and organisational skills
- Verbal expression skills
- Flexibility
- Problem analytical skills
- Taking Initiative
- Co-operational skills
- Customer orientation
- Persuasiveness skills
- Creativity
- Target directive skills

If confirmed by additional research, this list will be a good tool to develop purposeful these competences for our students. If we focus on this top 10 competences, we must conclude that attitudes are considered to be decisive for a logistics manager, but to a lesser degree than skills. In our earlier research we had focussed on the required knowledge; that is the reason we now play less emphasis on knowledge aspects in this research project; so in this list knowledge features only indirectly as in "analysing problems" (rank 4) and in (surprisingly low rated) "expertise" (rank 13). Oral expression appears to be more important compared to written expression. Our University, as other universities in The Netherlands, at present puts more attention in the curriculum on the ability to write reports and memos, than on the ability to perform well with oral presentations. So, our findings question this historical practice. The remarkably low rates of many attitudes - social sensitiveness for example - must not immediately be interpreted as being not important. Apparently social sensitiveness is not considered by logistics managers as being decisive. That could mean they consider it as being a qualifier. Whether their superiors agree with them, we do not know yet.

Based on the first five competences we can create the following image of the logistician. He or she:

- organises and plans processes,
- communicates and cooperates often in order to achieve this,
- is flexible,
- recognises and analyses problems and
- takes initiative in order to solve these problems.

More than expected this confirms the traditional image of a logistics function.

Is this overall picture equally valid for a process manager, an entrepreneur or for a value/supply chain manager?

LOGISTIC PROFILES

We expected that the required competences will differ at per profile and focus of the logistics function. Our findings show that in part this is the case. Overall planning and organisational skills are the most decisive competences. By far this is the case for the process manager. But for a supply chain designer the pattern is more diversified: not only planning, but also customer orientation, taking initiative and problem analytical skills appear to be decisive.

We also differentiated between shippers (producers, retailers, wholesalers) and Logistics Service Providers (LSP). For a LSP flexibility appears to be more decisive than for shippers.

We will incorporate these findings into our curriculum. Next to that, these differences could help making students aware what kind of jobs would suit their personal attitudes and skills best.

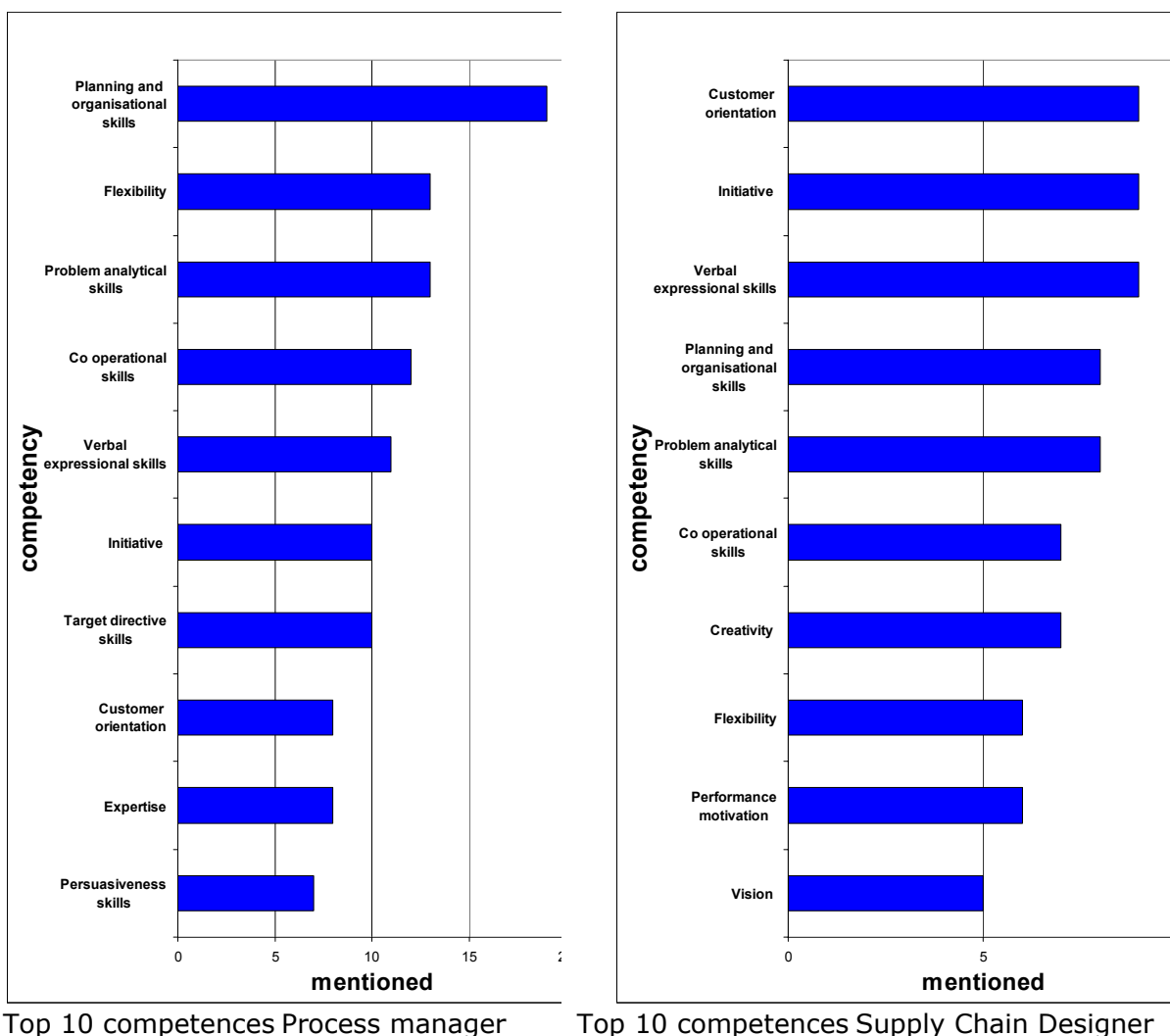


Fig. 2. TOP 10 competences per profile
 Rys. 2. 10 najważniejszych kompetencji w obrębie profilu

Finally, we tried to get more grips on the actual developing profiles in logistics functions. Figure 3 shows how current logisticians focus their activities. It is based on the respondents who declared themselves to be very outspoken in their logistics profile. We indeed could categorise them into three groups. So it appears that they recognise the three different profiles in their business practise. But in their day to day situation their actual focus does not seem to be that different. We must be careful with

conclusions, but must we conclude that logistician is cached between new requirements (profiles) and old competences? We do not know yet.

| Focus Profile | External Contact | Management | Internal Contact | Commercial Knowledge | Soft Logistics | Hard Logistics | Customer Specific | Routine | Creative | Strategic | Tactical | Operational |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------|------------------|----------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------|---------|----------|-----------|----------|-------------|
| Process Manager | Grey | Grey | Black | White | Black | White | Grey | White | Grey | White | Grey | Grey |
| Manager/ Entrepreneur | Grey | Grey | Grey | Grey | Black | White | Grey | White | Black | Grey | Black | Grey |
| Supply Chain Designer/Manager | Grey | Grey | Grey | White | Black | White | Grey | White | Black | Grey | Grey | Grey |

Fig. 3. Importance of a focal point for a logistic profile
 Rys. 3. Istotność poszczególnych pozycji w profile logistycznym

CONCLUSIONS

Up till now our findings show requirements on logisticians which seem to be rather conventional. At the same time, on an individual level, logistics managers appear to show sharp profiles, including several outspoken less conventional combinations. And between several individuals with similar functions we noticed remarkable similarities. This is a first sign of shaping new logistics functions.

Although the logistics functions seems to become differentiated to a certain extent, a certain 'common body of knowledge', or more precisely a certain common body of skills and attitudes, seems to fit with more than just one logistics profile.

Our earlier stage of this research project showed that the requirements on logisticians are very high. Business strategies are developed into different directions. It seems that logisticians do meet new requirements which have to do with new strategies. We must be careful to be outspoken in this conclusion, because, at this moment the number of respondents to our interviews is rather insufficient to be able to draw statistically based sound conclusions. We now work on extending our database. Many universities up till now have been hesitating investigating the ins and outs of the logistics profiles more in detail. We regret that. There is a lot to win. We are convinced about the importance to continue this research project. Eventually this will help us to redesign our logistics curricula and our logistics education.

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INNY MENEDŻER LOGISTYKI ? RÓŻNORODNOŚĆ W PRAKTYCE LOGISTYCZNEJ

STRESZCZENIE. Edukacja profesjonalnych logistyków powinna być nakierowana na uzyskanie przez nich kompetencji zgodnych z zapotrzebowaniem gospodarki. W artykule zaprezentowano przegląd kompetencji poszukiwanych przez przedsiębiorstwa oraz zróżnicowanie w obszarze profili funkcji logistycznych. Instytucje edukacyjne mogą korzystać z przedstawionych wyników badań, aby w ten sposób lepiej dostosować programy nauczania do wymogów praktyki.

Słowa kluczowe: kompetencje logistyków, profile funkcji logistycznych, edukacja logistyczna.

UNTERSCHIEDLICHE LOGISTIKMANAGER? DIFFERENZIERUNG IN DER LOGISTIKPRAXIS

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. Kompetenzen Die Ausbildung von Studenten zu professionellen Logistikern sollte darauf gerichtet sein, dass Absolventen über die von der Wirtschaft gefragten Kompetenzen verfügen. Der vorliegende Artikel gibt einen ersten Überblick welche Verhaltenskompetenzen durch Unternehmen gefragt sind und ob es eine Differenzierung gibt für unterschiedliche Profile von Logistikfunktionen. Die Resultate zeigen, dass Bildungsinstitute die Untersuchungsergebnisse nutzen können, um ihre Ausbildungsprogramme besser auf Praxiserfordernisse abzustimmen.

Codewörter: Kompetenzen von Logistikern; Profile von Logistikfunktionen, Logistikausbildung

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