

# Generic Competency Development in Vietnam Context: A Practical Research in Banking Sector

Tri Pham Minh<sup>1</sup>, Hoa Thai Anh<sup>2</sup>, Thong Le Quang<sup>3</sup>, Long Le  
Kim<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PhD Student in College of Economics, Can Tho University, Vietnam, Email:  
minhtri0101@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Department of Agricultural Economics, Nong Lam University – Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam,  
Email: tahoah@yahoo.com

<sup>3</sup> Department of Business Administration, Nong Lam University – Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam,  
Email: lqthong@yahoo.com

<sup>4</sup> Department of Business Administration, Nha Trang University, Vietnam, Email:  
Lekimlong@gmail.com

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## Abstract

This study aims to identify the list of generic competencies essential for customer relationship specialists at a specific Vietnam commercial bank in Mekong Delta Region. Generic competencies is identified through a cluster of knowledge, skills, attitudes or other personal characteristics (motives, traits, self-image, desire, and etc) which are critical to the production of a quality output. Based on the perception of 420 customer relationship specialists working in numerous Mekong Delta provinces, the results determine eight essential generic competencies (Professional expertise, Communication, Leadership, Team work, Problem Solving, Customer Orientation, Results orientation, Innovation spirit) and they measured by 35 necessary behaviors. The relevant behaviours as well as the level of importance and necessity of each competency are discussed in more details. The analysis results also affirm that there is an existence of generic competencies towards customer relationship specialists and the essential levels of generic competencies only differ in specialized field, position, seniority and operation area.

**Keywords:** Competency; Generic Competency; Competency Approach; Human Resource Development; Customer Relationship Specialists

## 1. Introduction

Development of high-quality human resources, which focuses mainly on improving the quality and efficiency of task performance, has been an increasingly interested topic recently. The competency-based approach to quality and efficiency development of job performance is very popular all over the world. Competency approach has been strongly

developed in many countries such as USA, UK and Australia and there have been numerous research works in competencies, especially core competency and individual competency. However, there is still a lack of research works in generic competency, which could be considered as a new research direction in the competency approach. In addition, competency approach seems very suitable for human resource development in the banking sector. Currently, the determination of competency standards for customer relationship specialists (CRS) in Vietnam relies on the subjective assessments of the managers, which definitely cannot reflect fully the task requirements as well as explore efficiently the competencies of CRSs. Therefore, it is extremely necessary to have a new method to support the human resource management. This study introduces a new approach to human resource management in the banking sector. That is an approach based on generic competencies of a group of employees which is evaluated by those involving directly in work. Furthermore, several hypotheses have been given during the research phase with the expectation that there is no significant difference in the necessary level of competencies of CRSs when measured with factors such as specialized field, position, seniority and operation area.

## **2. Competency Definition**

The term “competency” has been formed very early. Since 1970s, there have been a number of definitions using a variety of approaches in different contexts. McClelland (1973) described competency as “a characteristic that underlies performance”. Boyatzis (1982) expanded the definition of McClelland and considered competencies as “characteristics that are causally related to effective and/or superior performance in a job”. Based on Boyatzis’ definition of competency, Spencer and Spencer (1993) described competency as “an underlying characteristic of an individual (knowledge, skill, motives, traits, self-concept) that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation”. Likewise, Dubois (2004) supposed that “competencies are characteristics that individuals have and use in appropriate, consistent ways in order to achieve desired performance”. These characteristics included knowledge, skills, aspects of self-image, social motives, trait, thought patterns, mindset, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Furthermore, Kennedy and Dresser (2005) provided a definition of competency with very wide implications. According to Kennedy and Dresser, competency is “anything employees have or acquire that contributes to organizational success”.

McLagan (1980), whose work has contributed greatly to the human resource development field with several competency models, defined competencies as “the knowledge and skills which underlie effective job performance”. The subsequent definitions, which focused mainly on the contributions and outputs, described competency as “a personal capability that is critical to the production of a quality output or outputs”. Carrying out the research which builds on McLagan’s previous work, Bernthal et al (2004) defined competency as “clusters of skills, knowledge, abilities, and behaviors required for job success”. By gathering the suggestions from hundreds of human resource development experts attending a conference in Johannesburg in 1995, Parry (1996) described a definition which were used to develop the following definition of competency as “a cluster of related knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affects a major part of one’s job (a role or responsibility), that correlates with performance on that job, that can be measured against well-accepted standards, and that can be improved via training and development”.

Even though there are differences among these definitions, most of them lead to the similar conclusion that competency comprises a cluster of knowledge, skills and attitudes or

other personal characteristics that underline effective or successful job performance. Furthermore, These elements must be observable or measurable as well as distinguish between best and other performers.

In short, competency is considered as potential qualities of an individual as well as job requirements to work successfully. It is a cluster of knowledge, skills, attitudes or other personal characteristics (motives, traits, self-image, desire, and etc) which are critical to the production of a quality output.

*Knowledge* is awareness, information, or understanding about facts, rules, principles, guidelines, concepts, theories, or processes needed to successfully perform a task. The knowledge may be concrete, specific, and easily measurable, or more complex, abstract, and difficult to assess. Knowledge is acquired through learning and experience (Hoge & etc, 2005).

A *skill* is a capacity to perform mental or physical tasks with a specified outcome. It is usually constituted by a number of basic capabilities, related to the innate or learned capacity. Similar to knowledge, skills can range from highly concrete and easily identifiable tasks to those which are abstract and more difficult to recognize (Hoge & etc, 2005).

*Attitudes or other personal characteristics* are attributes, which often have an emotional or personality component, include work habits, ways of interacting with others, or manners of conducting oneself that contribute to effective work performance. Enabling behaviors can emerge through learning, experience, innate predisposition, or a combination of these determinants (Hoge & etc, 2005).

Each competency needs to be named, clearly defined or explained, and described in details with the relevant behaviors. These behaviors aim to define more clearly what successful incumbents showed. Most of behaviors are presented in the form related to actions.

### **3. Relationships between Generic Competencies and Individual Competencies**

According to Kroon (2006), competencies can be divided into at least three categories that are conducted in the research surveys, namely, core competency, generic competency and individual competency. However, in reality the researchers tend to approach core competency and individual competency and forget the dynamics of the generic competency. It is clear that social settings in which people operate undoubtedly have a major influence on their "successful" performance. The success of an individual depends on the level of mutual support and collaboration between colleagues. Approaches involving group activities will not create major problem since those competencies can be practised in group settings. One group will perform their tasks more efficiently if there is the correct balance of knowledge, skills, and attributes within each group. The successful strategies based on competency tend to have more advantages to be selected and developed. Up to now, the most noticeable model has been probably the development and dependencies in generic competency (Antonacopoulou & FitzGerald, 1996).

Discussing about the relationship between generic competency and individual competency, many researchers suppose that there is no connection between different organizations as well as differences between the competency needs with different functions. Stewart's analysis results (1967, 1976, and 1979) reveal that there are significant differences among the essential skills for various functions and organizations. Having similar conception, Kotter (1982) suggests that there is very low transferability of successful general managers

from one organisation to another. However, these viewpoints do not get supported since the researchers skip conducting the experiment to test the hypothesis. Following a different research direction, Dulewicz (1989) conducts a research work on competencies among the organizations. The results show that firm-specific managerial competencies represent only 30 percent of the total competencies basket, while the remaining 70 percent represent general requirements across different organizations. This leads to his declaration that “with many researchs and some unity of purpose, it should be possible to produce a universal model to explain the majority of middle and senior levels”. Similarly, Siu’s experimental analysis results (1998) in hotel industry suggest that generic competency of middle managers can probably exist in different hotels despite the differences of educational background, functional responsibilities, operation scale as well as different management bases and traditional customers. This is completely the same as competency requirements for the subordinate managers. Likewise, Sudsomboon (2010) conducts a research with the purpose of determining the list of generic competencies for automotive service technicians of 9 well-known car automobile companies in Thailand. The analysis results confirm the existence of generic competencies for technicians in these 9 automotive companies. From the above arguments, we find that factors such as functional responsibilities, expertise, operation scale, and type of organizations can impact the competency requirements. However, the differences in competencies are more likely little and generic competencies can represent all the differences and the uniqueness of the organizations and the labor force of each one.

#### **4. Roles of CRSs**

CRSs have very important roles in the structure of a modern bank. They make significant contributions to implementing the business strategies through activities such as capital raising, credit, transaction and cash services. In order to provide the banking services efficiently, the specialists are required not only the professional expertise but also the ability to work well as an individual and a team member, support and collaboration between colleagues as well as the ability to maintain the positive attitude and give customers the special care. Therefore the assessment of quality efficiency can not be applied to separated services but the cooperation of team members to achieve the shared goals and to provide customers the best quality and reliable services. With the aim of making the list of generic competencies essential for CRSs, the important role of teamwork is promoted and applied to the research.

#### **5. Research Methodology**

The research was carried out through two main steps: preliminary studies and formal research. Preliminary study applies expert interview techniques, job description analysis, field observations and group discussions. The competencies and behaviors synthesized from previous researches are used as the basis for consultation of 07 experts.

The interviews were based on a discussion outline drafted with the direct, indirect, assumption or circumstance questions. After combing with the job description analysis, field observations and group discussions (10 experts), 12 competencies and 57 behaviors were identified.

In addition, preliminary results were further verified through direct interview method with 114 appointed typical specialists to preliminary evaluate the scales before conducting formal research. Preliminary analysis results have identified 12 necessary competencies and 51 behaviors for CRSs.

Formal study applied quantitative methods through questionnaires, the measurement was used a Likert's Rating Scale (five-point scale), with values from 1 (completely unnecessary) to 5 (absolutely necessary). Study was conducted in a commercial bank with 160 branches (including 15 branches in level 1 and 145 branches in level II, III) in 12 Mekong Delta provinces and cities.

The collected data was processed by SPSS 16.0 and AMOS 7.0 to: preliminary assessment the scale (Cronbach's Alpha Analysis, Exploratory Factor Analysis- EFA), test the scale (Confirmatory Factor Analysis - CFA level 1, CFA level 2) and test the hypothesis (Analysis of Variance \_ANOVA).

## **6. Profile of Respondents**

This research applied direct interview technique by a questionnaire sent to 4 groups of CRS (capital raising, credit, transaction and card services) in 12 provinces and cities in the Mekong Delta region. The samples were picked by stratification method and not in proportion with the size of 500. After collecting and testing, 37 samples were rejected due to too many blanks. Final sample size was 422 valid samples.

In terms of structure, the survey was distributed to 12 provinces and cities, including branches of level I, level II and level III. According to specialized field, the credit group accounted for the highest rate of 34.8%, while the card services group accounted for only 14.2%.

According to the position, 28.2% of the respondents were manager/deputy and 71.8% of the respondents were specialists.

According to seniority, the respondents were classified into five groups. In which, 27.5% of the respondents have 4 to 6 years working experience while the other 13.5% have dedicated at least 15 years in banking sector.

Analysis results showed that the collected respondents are reliable and covers all subjects with reasonable allocation rate.

## **7. Findings and Discussion**

After applying qualitative and quantitative methods to the analysis, 08 generic competencies of the CRSs were identified, measured by 35 necessary behaviors.

### **◆ Knowledge-based competencies**

**(1) Professional expertise:** Knowledge or understanding of economics, finance, commercial banking activities, legislation, relevant supporting information. Understanding of business processes, products or bank services.

### **◆ Skills-based competencies**

**(1) Communication:** Communicate clearly and accurately, in accordance with the listeners. Actively listen, take notes of important information and can interpret to ensure that the information received is exactly what others are saying.

**(2) Leadership:** The ability to inspire, motivate and influence others, binding them together, encouraging them to achieve the objectives of the organization.

**(3) Team work:** The group members must have the same action, uphold the goals and interests of the group, constantly improving linkages, sharing information and seeking ideas of all members.

**(4) Problem Solving:** Compare data from different sources, find a reasonable solution or provide a number of alternatives based on the related important information.

### **◆ Attitude-based competencies**

**(1) Customer Orientation:** The ability to meet the customer requirements, ready to provide customers high quality products and services. Establish and maintain a positive collaborative relationship with customers.

**(2) Results orientation:** Follow the work order priority, responsibility and initiative in the work, always focused on performance to perform assigned work excellently, interested in the performance of organizations, groups or individuals and always trying to improve this performance. Focus efforts to meet or exceed the expectations of the target.

◆ **Other personal characteristics-based competencies**

**(1) Innovation spirit:** Try to improve themselves, actively search for and seize the opportunities to improve their knowledge, skills and ready for new challenges. Show more than what is required or expected in the job. Identify and act on new opportunities to improve results, demonstrate the flexibility and relentless persistence to achieve goals and tasks even when face with difficulties.

Measurement result showed that some scales which were set and tested on the international market in other areas can still be used for the researches in Vietnam through the adjustment or amendment in accordance with actual conditions.

The scales continue to be verified through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA level 1 and CFA level 2) to confirm that the components of CRS's competencies match practice.

Analysis results showed that the load factors from 08 components of competency concept were satisfied ( $> 0.5$ ), the model's indicators also satisfied the conditions (Figure 1). Therefore, this model is sufficiently compatible with market data.

Besides, the competency components (professional expertise, problem solving, communication, leadership, teamwork, results orientation, customer orientation and innovation spirit) were able to explain 59% of the required competencies of CRSs.

This result affirmed that the concept of CRSs' competencies were measured by 08 components and is an important basis to develop the evaluation criteria of CRSs' competencies.

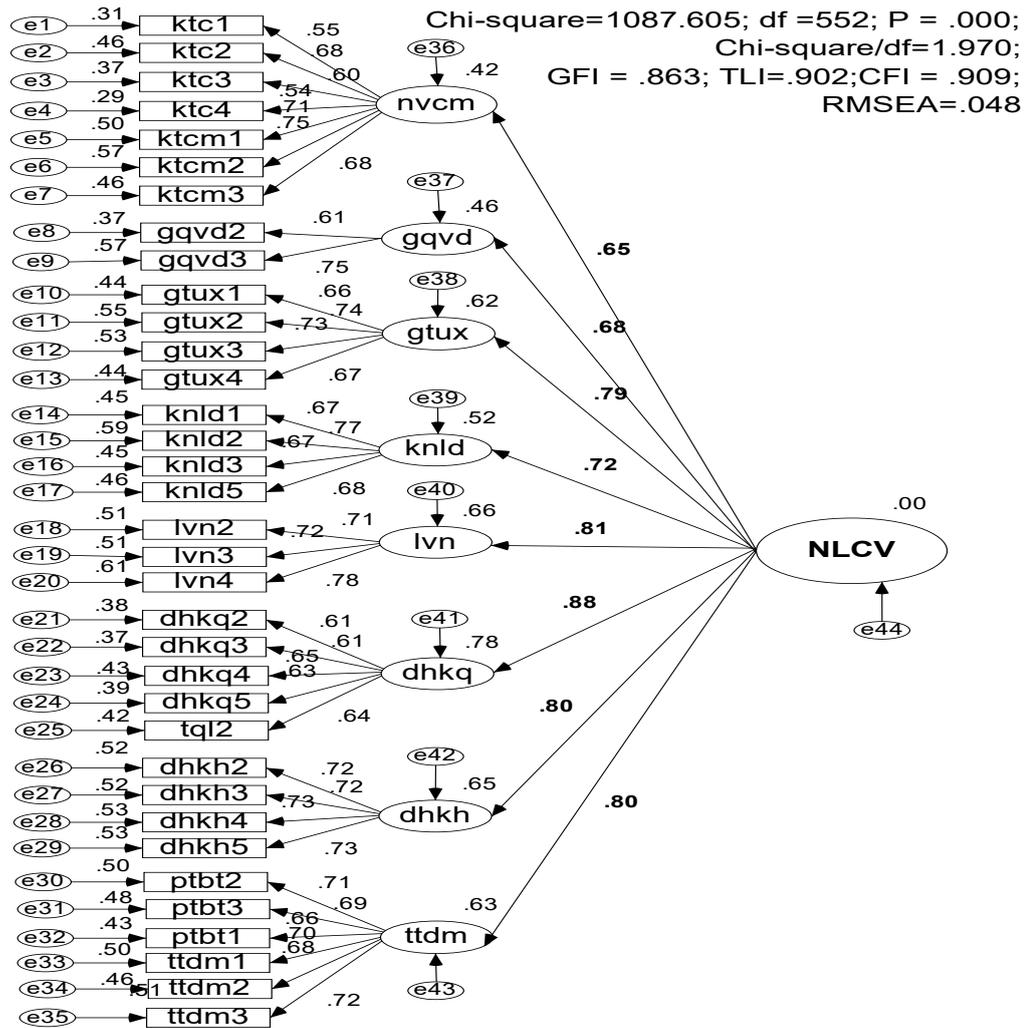


Figure 1. Results of the confirmatory factor analysis - level 2 (standardized)

CFA level 2 analysis result has contributed 02 important issues: verified that components have actually been collected into a group constituting the competencies of CRS; critical level of each individual components (results orientation (0.88), teamwork (0.81), customer orientation (0.80), innovation spirit (0.80), communication (0.79), leadership (0.72), problem solving (0.68), professional expertise (0.65)).

This result has overcome the limitations of the previous studies: Sudsomboon (2010); Hong-hua and Yan-hua (2009); Siu (1998).

In addition, the bootstrap method used to estimate the parameters of the CFA level 2 model was estimated using the optimal estimation method (ML), done by repeated sampling size N = 1200.

Table 1.

*Results of bootstrap with N = 1.200*

Parameter			Estimate	SE	SE-SE	Mean	Bias	SE-Bias	Bias/SE-Bias
Nt4	←	NLCV	0.724	0.037	0.001	0.723	-0.001	0.001	-1
Nt7	←	NLCV	0.804	0.028	0.001	0.803	-0.001	0.001	-1
Nt1	←	NLCV	0.645	0.042	0.001	0.644	-0.001	0.001	-1
Nt8	←	NLCV	0.796	0.031	0.001	0.796	0.000	0.001	0
Nt3	←	NLCV	0.788	0.032	0.001	0.787	-0.001	0.001	-1
Nt2	←	NLCV	0.678	0.057	0.001	0.677	-0.001	0.002	-0.5
Nt6	←	NLCV	0.882	0.029	0.001	0.881	-0.001	0.001	-1
Nt5	←	NLCV	0.810	0.034	0.001	0.810	0.000	0.001	0

Note: SE: Standard Error

The estimation results presented in Table 1 shows the existences of deviations (Bias) but not large and the standard deviations (SE-Bias) have small and stable values. On the other hand, the absolute values of [Bias / SE-Bias] are much smaller than 2 and should be able to say no significant deviations, not statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Thus, the test results allow us to conclude that the estimations of the CFA level 2 can be trusted.

Another important issue is to determine the necessary level of each competency to support the evaluation of job performance. According to the competency approach, the assessment criteria must be linked to outputs and the requirements of necessary competencies.

The requirements of necessary competencies are presented in Table 2. They are significant for the development of assessment criteria, help the banks get final outputs associated with common goals.

Table 2.

*The necessary and critical level of competencies*

Rank order	Competency	Necessary level (Mean score)	Critical level (Standardized deviation)
1	Results orientation	4.11	0.88
2	Team work	4.02	0,81
3	Customer orientation	4.19	0.80
4	Innovation spirit	4.10	0.80
5	Communication	4.09	0,79
6	Leadership	3.91	0.72
7	Problem solving	3.77	0,68
8	Professional expertise	4.00	0,65

Note: Respondents used a 5-point Likert scale which ranged from 1 (completely unnecessary) to 5 (absolutely necessary)

**Results of Hypothesis Testing**

According to the results of hypothesis testing, there are different assessments of necessary levels of several competencies, based on factors such as: specialized field, position, seniority and operation area.

According to specialized field, credit group was required higher level of competencies than transactions and card services group about professional expertise, communication and results orientation competency (Table 3).

The reasons are that the credit specialists need broader knowledge, more flexible communication skill to be able to exploit efficiently and receive full information from customers. By contributing to the bank the main portion of revenue, credit specialists are always considered the important part.

Table 3.

*Different levels of competency requirements by specialized field*

Specialized field	Competency			The greatest level of difference
	Professional expertise	communication	Results orientation	
Credit	4.10	4.15	4.12	6.5%
Transaction	3.88	4.05	4.08	
Cash services	3.90	3.88	3.97	

According to the title, there are differences of necessary level of competency between leadership positions (Manager/Deputy) and staff (Table 4). This result is consistent with the actual situation, the leaders are always required of administration, the ability to handle the job efficiently and accuracy, the ability to work independently and to motivate employees.

Table 4.

*Different levels of competency requirements by position*

Position	Competency								The greatest different level
	Professional expertise	Problem solving	Communication	Leadership	Team work	Results orientation	Customer orientation	Innovation Spirit	
manager/deputy	4.25	4.06	4.34	4.25	4.30	4.34	4.47	4.34	9.5 %
specialist	3.96	3.76	4.07	3.85	3.97	4.05	4.13	4.06	

According to seniority, there are differences of competency requirements between experienced specialists (seniority  $\geq 16$  years) and the less one (seniority  $\leq 6$  years) about professional expertise, communication, results orientation and customer orientation competency (Table 5). This result implies that over the time of training, learning and striving to do the job, the specialists gradually accumulated knowledge, work handling skills and attitude adjustment to match with the work environment.

Table 5.

Different levels of competency requirements by seniority

Seniority	Competency				The greatest different level
	Professional expertise	Communication	Results orientation	Customer orientation	
1 - 3 years	3.94	3.99	4.04	4.09	8.3%
4 - 6 years	3.99	4.05	4.06	4.17	
16 years onwards	4.18	4.24	4.30	4.43	

There are also differences about the requirements of necessary level for 08 essential competencies between operation areas. This can be explained by the fact that different operation areas have different activity patterns with different well-planned tasks. The important thing is that the staff at every place need to satisfy the capacity required to complete their tasks.

Table 6.

Different levels of competency requirements by operation area

Operation area	Competency								The greatest different level
	Professional expertise	Problem solving	Communication	Leadership	Teamwork	Results orientation	Customer orientation	Innovation spirit	
Hau Giang	3.93	3.65	4.10	3.95	4.13	4.15	4.28	4.07	28.2%
Can Tho	4.07	3.84	4.14	3.91	3.92	4.09	4.08	4.24	
Soc Trang	3.99	3.61	3.98	3.76	3.94	4.06	4.11	3.87	
Tra Vinh	4.12	3.58	4.10	3.89	4.00	4.25	4.29	4.18	
Kien Giang	3.97	3.74	3.97	3.90	3.82	3.95	3.99	3.97	
Vinh Long	4.14	3.60	4.25	3.83	4.23	4.16	4.10	3.98	
An Giang	4.17	3.98	4.29	4.21	4.21	4.42	4.48	4.34	
Dong Thap	4.30	4.07	4.35	4.08	4.18	4.25	4.25	4.36	
Ben Tre	4.22	3.92	4.39	4.05	4.35	4.33	4.77	4.33	
Tien Giang	3.77	3.84	4.06	3.82	3.94	4.12	4.25	3.98	

Bac Lieu	3.70	3.78	3.71	3.72	3.63	3.69	3.72	3.94
Ca Mau	4.09	3.83	4.16	3.57	3.88	4.04	4.13	4.11

In summary, analysis results have made important contributions to science and practice. Compare with experimental results of Siu (1998), there are 4 coincidences among 8 identified competencies and only differs in the behaviors attached to each competency, due to the differences of research context and application environments. Author has applied effectively multimethod-oriented competency approach based on the generic competencies of a group of people.

List of generic competencies was built from the perspectives of the staff. They are the people directly involved in the work and know which competencies they should have to get the works done. In addition, the analysis results also help to clarify the issues related to the competency approach:

Firstly, the author is the first in Vietnam launched a competency concept consists of 4 components, comprehensively in the context of Vietnam. Several Vietnamese researchers have applied the concept of competency mainly consists of three components (knowledge, skills and attitudes), such as: Le Thi My Linh (2006), Nguyen Thuy Dung (2005), Nguyen Chi Thanh (2003). However, analysis results have proved that beyond three components above, the "Innovation spirit" is the 4th component contributing to the tasks.

Secondly, the results have confirmed the existence of the generic competencies between departments, between the positions or specialized parts. Although there are differences in the requirements for some competencies but the biggest difference is only 28.2%, still lower than the experimental results of Dulewicz (1989), so this difference may be regarded as negligible. Analysis results consistent with experimental results of Sudsomboon (2010) and Siu (1998).

Thirdly, the results have contributed to change the viewpoint of the previous competency approaches, where the competency components are usually predefined. When applying to the quantitative methods often lead to the abstract description, too narrow or simply, cannot fully represent for the capacity. The author has approached comprehensively towards competency, applied to quantitative methods to determine the list of generic competencies of CRSs.

Fourthly, the first time the author applied the same approach used in New York State agencies through steps such as: built a list of potential competencies from the previous studies, then applied qualitative and quantitative methods to determine the list of the generic competencies of CRSs. By a convincing research with 5 techniques in qualitative research process, the author has overcome the limitations that previous scholars often encountered in quantitative methods, such as the behaviors determined from the study could not clearly describe competencies (Fang et al (2010)).

Lastly, study results have identified all the key components for each competency, such as: the name, the behavior, the importance and the extent necessary. At the same time, study results also indicated the differences in competency requirements by such factors as: specialized field, position, seniority and operation area. These results have overcome the limitations of previous studies which have not indicated the necessary or importance of capacity to build the evaluation criteria, such as: Hong-hua and Yan-Hua (2009).

## 8. Conclusion

In the context of fierce competition among Vietnamese commercial banks, the demand for high-quality human resources in the banking sector becomes essential in the present and even future. To meet that demand, the banks need to gradually increase the competencies of existing human resources. Quality training will increase the specialist competencies.

Competency-based human resource systems could help the banks to have appropriate direction, improve competitiveness, expands vision and are the leverage for the establishment and management of cultural change. Simultaneously, competency-based approach is the basis to establish an integrated human resource management system consists of several stages, from the selection of officers, evaluation of performance, planning of human resources, compensation, reward to the education and training activities.

The results of this study will help the human resource managers have specific scales to evaluate the competencies of specialists and provide training and recruitment standards. In addition, study results also suggest new directions in human resources training for the Universities.

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