



COMPANY COMPETENCIES AND INDIVIDUAL COMPETENCIES IN THE PRISM OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

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Abstract. In today's business practice, but also in academic research the aspect of competencies has gained remarkable importance. Competencies are not only a central part of the strategy process of a company. Corporate Strategy literature states that that human asset in particular can fulfil the criterion 'of a sustainable competitive advantage' (Storey, 2007). The utilization of competencies is a key target of companies, as it is important in realizing a full return on investment. The paper analyses the state-of-the-art of competence theories with a specific recognition to the aspect of social capital. The author argues that the management of company competencies is a contributor to the utilization of competencies and links these aspects to social capital. In order to achieve the main goal of the underlying work the paper is structured as follows: first, the presentation of the state of the art in the area of competencies and social capital based on literature review; afterwards, the discussion is made in order to prove the main hypothesis. As a result the author concludes with a model showing the key bond between company competencies, individual competencies and social capital. With this, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of competencies for business managers and scientist. The findings are valuable to contribute to the utilization of individual competencies especially in the prism of social capital which will pay off for industrial companies and employees in long term. This is especially valid in an environment of skilled worker shortage.

Keywords: *organizational and individual competencies, social capital, utilization of competencies, competence management, commitment and retention*

JEL code: L2, D85

Introduction

Competencies are a central part of a company's strategic management. They are differentiated in individual and organizational competencies and linked to cognitive and social sciences as well as to organizational sciences. Furthermore the discussion and research has been developed from stability oriented approaches to a dynamic capabilities approach (Schreyögg & Kliesch, 2003). As competencies are seen to be a decisive contributor, to a company's competitive advantage, the utilization of competencies in a company is of major interest. There are a number of approaches to integrate organizational and individual competencies or macro and micro levels of competencies by an effective competence management. The idea is to mobilize new or exploit existing competencies or even motivate

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employees to go beyond the boundaries of their jobs (Lindgren & Paulson, 2008). At this point management and leadership play an important role. This research paper raises the question how social capital in the frame of company competencies is linked to competence utilization in a company. Based on existing competence models the author links competencies and social capital to each other. The discussion is intended to show that the management of competencies can create circumstances in which social capital develops, which impacts the utilization of competencies on individual and organizational level. This is especially important in times of fast changing environments, insecurity and continuously changing requirements, as social capital is based on a culture of trust, giving a behavioural frame to people in companies that overcome insecurity and the barrier to utilized competencies also in new and creative fields of business. People that work within a meaningful work environment tend to be motivated, committed and stay longer in the company. This shows that human capital provides an important basis for sustainable competitive advantage (Boyd, 2001). Socially complex resources, like people, are considered more durable and less susceptible to imitation than other types of assets (Barney, 1991). Especially in times of a skilled worker shortage, these aspects illustrate the topicality of this paper, whereas the novelty is accrued through the model linking competence utilization and social capital. The paper is based on a literature review. This theoretical approach has to be deepened in terms of the development of an adequate structural relation model and proven by empirical research in a further step. The context is limited to employees that are already members of the company. It further implies that the thinkable risk of disadvantages through a constant workforce is not taken into account as it is seen to be of minor influence and furthermore as retention is regarded to be positive if it is linked with value and goal congruence being affective commitment (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007).

Research results and discussion

1. Competencies

With the purpose of strategic action to sustain competitive advantage and achieve added value a key aspect of each company must be to secure the future of the company. The scope of action of each company becomes visible in the balance between actual resources and requirements of the market combined with the defined company goals. The consideration of company resources is initially oriented towards the question if the actual resources are adequate to reach the defined goals. It is therefore essential to realize the existing resources in the best possible way and in equal measure to adapt, develop and recreate these resources. As Eberl says: 'it is no surprise that the idea of organizational competencies has a central meaning in the frame of strategic questions' (Eberl, 2009). The strategic argument begins with the individual and strives to find a system as the aggregated outcome of individual acts. Subjectively meaningful individual action is treated as a central force of organizational behaviour. (Astley, 1983) This is especially of importance as: 'All people look for enjoyment and seek to reach goals that actualize talents, skills and interests' (Holland, 1997).

Competence Management is influenced by various scientific perspectives. With a view on the historical development of the competence definition the discussion has moved from a purely individual perspective to social systems (Schreyögg & Kliesch, 2003). Furthermore for both levels of competence research has moved from a more stability oriented view to a dynamic view (Eberl, 2009). The individual perspective focusses on distinctive competencies (Selznik, 1957) and management competencies looking at the general ability to plan, organize and lead, linked with creativity and phantasy (Penrose, 1959). It furthermore differentiates between technical, human and conceptual competence (Katz, 1955). White's competence definition is based on motivation psychology focusses on the individual ability to interact effectively with its environment. In this connection he emphasizes the performance of the own activity



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(White, 1959) (Eberl, 2009). Eberl emphasizes in her research three basic bonding elements: the emphasis on action relation, the self-organization-disposition thought and the relevance of learning (Eberl, 2009). Comparable to the description of competencies by Erpenbeck and Rosenstiel this definition provides essential references also to organizational competencies. Their understanding of competencies is based on meaningful and fruitful action in open, complex, even chaotic situations that allow self-organization under theoretical and actual insecurity through self-accounting rules, norms and values (Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel, 2007). Organizational competencies emphasize the collective character and are based on a more complex and discrete context (Eberl, 2009). The success of organizations is therefore 'the product of competent individuals enhanced by the ability to use tangible and intangible resources in a way that they meet the requirements of the internal and external environment' (Eberl, 2009). Especially the research about organizational competencies opened the view on strategic questions and economic science and gives value to another way of clustering different scientific views. Reinhard and North divide the publications on competencies in so called cognitive sciences and organizational sciences. Cognitive science views competencies from the psychological and sociological perspective. (Gruber and Renkl 1997; Hänggi 1998; Erpenbeck and Heyse 1999a; Erpenbeck and Heyse 1999b) (Reinhard & North, 2003). The psychological approach analysis the individual cognitive abilities and competencies. Psychometric models understand competence as condition for goal oriented action successful learning and efficient interaction with the environment. Knowledge and Skills are acquired through information processes (Schreyögg & Kliesch, 2003). Different to the psychological perspective the sociological approach is context related and stronger focused on performance. Educational sciences or pedagogics consider the potential for action and their conditions to be the central aspect. They therefore see individual and organizational competencies depended on a specific context. (Fischer, K.W. et al. 1993, p 113; Radke, R.O. 1996, p. 63) (Schreyögg & Kliesch, 2003). On the other hand, organizational science views competencies from a strategic and process perspective (Prahalad and Hamel 1994; Freimuth 1997; Probst et al. 2000; Freiling 2001; Argyris and Schön 1996; Bellmann et al. 2002; Milberg and Schuh 2002; Reinhart et al. 2002) (Reinhard & North, 2003). A central element in strategy is the resourced based approach especially with the field of core competencies (Eberl, 2009). The founders of the core competence debate are Prahalat, C.K. and Hamel, G. They define core competencies as 'the collective learning in the organization, especially how to coordinate diverse production skills and integrate multiple streams of technologies.' (Prahalat & Hamel, 1990). Also Stalk refers to core competencies as a 'set of business processes strategically understood' (Stalk, Evans & Shulman, 1992). Organizational competence becomes dynamic if the bundle of business processes follows a continuous improvement process through the ability to learn. Although core competencies refer already to learning and integration processes only dynamic organizational competencies are able to match the requirements of a changing dynamic environment (Eberl, 2009). In the consequence not only the level of competencies has moved from an individual to a collective perspective, also the view on competencies has shifted from static to dynamic competencies. This movement entails a shift in perspective from the resourced based view to collective routines. As to Barney the resourced based approach defines competencies as material and immaterial resource bundles, arising from a complex social interaction, not being easily imitable (Barney, 1991). Organizational competencies based on the evolutionary economy focus on routines which are applied to handle insecurity and complexity in the process of decision making. Eberl summarizes collective routines as unconscious, not verbalize able and quasi automatically running ability to solve problems reliable and effective (Eberl, 2009). Teece defines dynamic capabilities as: 'a firm's ability of integrate, build and reconfigure internal and external resources and competencies to address rapidly changing environments' (Teece, Pisano & Shuen, 1997). Also in this definition the ability to recombine resources along with the ability to learn and change is accentuated. This is of special importance as the environment is affected by lack of knowledge, complex contexts and uncertainty.

There are a number of approaches to integrate organizational and individual competencies. This is of importance as all perspectives of organizational theory and the strategy theory agree that if an



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organization is to survive it must induce a variety of participants to contribute their time and energy to it (Scott & Davis, 2007). The commitment of employees to the company's values and goals is essential for sustainable success. Although workforce is not the only basis of success it is evaluated as a very important dimension of determining corporate performance. As Pfeffer states the common sustained advantage is based on how the companies manage their workforce. It is the organization, its employees, and how they work that is the crucial differentiating factor. So competitive advantage based on productive, motivated workforce is hard to be imitated (Pfeffer, 2005). The models of North and Reinhardt, Lindgren based on Orlikowski, Boyatzis and Erpenbeck and Rosenstiel are summarized below in table 1.

Table 1

Different models of competence utilization

North and Reinhardt (2003)	Model of integrative competence management
Lingren et.al.(2004) / Orlikowski (1992)	Model of competence in organizations on macro and micro level
Boyatzis, R.E. Goleman, D., Rhee, K. (1999)	Contingency model of management effectiveness
Erpenbeck and Rosenstiel v. (2007)	Model of competent action

Source: author's collection

Although all perspectives have different approaches, the general idea is to utilize existing competencies, to mobilize new competencies or even motivate employees to go beyond the boundaries of their jobs. The target is to 'constitute the foundation for a synchronization of individual and organizational competencies (Reinhard & North, 2003), 'the smooth interaction between competences at the macro and micro level of an organization and therefore the alignment of organizational core competence and individual level job competence as well as between company needs and employee interests (Lindgren & Paulson, 2008), and to establish a possibly high 'degree of overlap between the individual and the organizational environment (Boyatzis, Goleman & Kenneth S. Rhee, 1999). Furthermore they all strengthen the importance of competence management to establish the opportunity for competent action (Erpenbeck & von Rosenstiel, 2007). Consequently all refer that at this point management and leadership play an important role with the intention to 'provides a way of connecting the various individual practices into a coherent whole and also to enable people in the organization to persist and experiment when things don't work out immediately'. An overall management philosophy is essential to communicate the company goals in a way that a deeper understanding in the importance and meaningfulness is aroused (Pfeffer, 2005).

2. Social capital

There is a basic consensus that social capital derives from relationships (Adler & Kwon, 2002). The understanding and definition of social capital has been developed over the last years from a sociology perspective to a social and economic perspective followed by a geographic and nation's perspective (Sumilo & Bauman, 2007). The term social capital has also been conceptualized at individual, group, organization, community, and even national levels of analyzes (Steinfeld, DiMicco & Ellison, 2009). Table 2 shows a summarized view on some basic approaches and definitions.



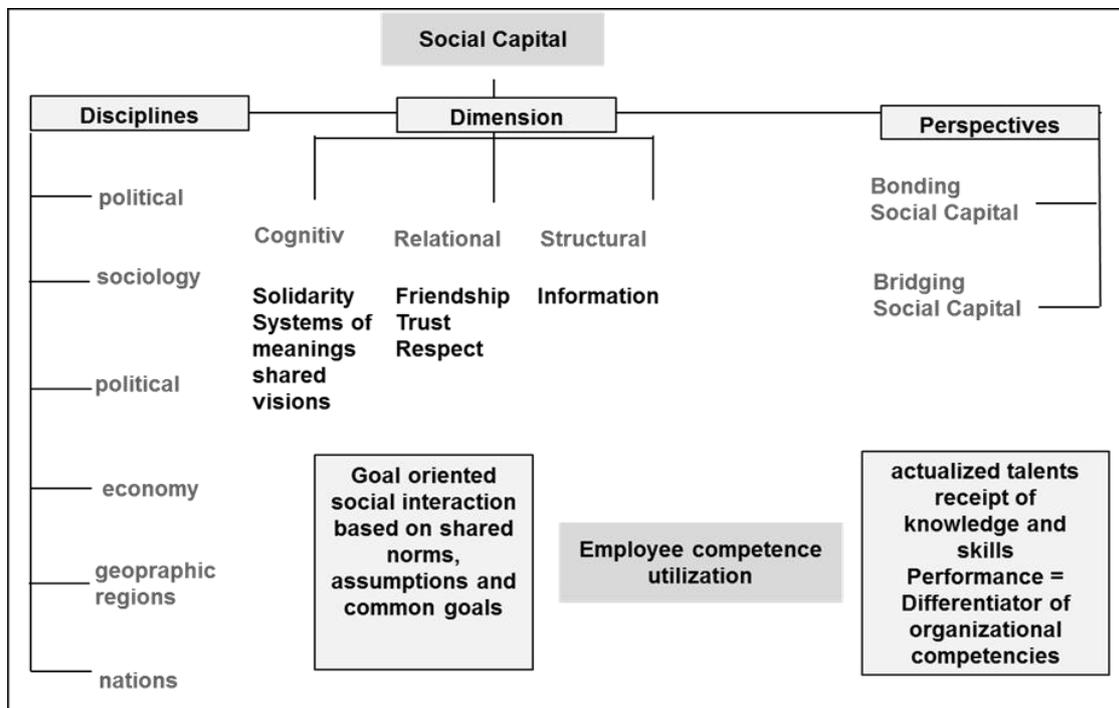
Table 2

Basic approaches on social capital

Jacobs (1961)	Sociological analysis of cities
Coleman (1989)	Puts social capital in a wider theoretical frame, refers to Loury (1977), Resources approach and collective goods aspect of social capital
Bourdieu (1972)	Individual resource integrated in a capital theory, prospect diversity of people is reduce- able through network memberships
Putnam (1993)	Refers to Jacobs (1961) and Coleman, Social capital in the frame of political culture, society, related to political values and participative behaviour
Lin (1999)	Reciprocity as a key mechanism for explaining how social capital functions among individuals
Burt, Flap, Lin, Faist, Portes	Social capital as individual resource, related to its position in social networks

Source: author's summary based on Haug (1997)

Like competence, social capital can be described in different dimensions, perspectives and disciplines. Fig. 1 refers to an overview given by Sumilo/Baumane (2007), including the different aspects of the main contributors to social capital.



Source: author's construction based on (Sumilo & Baumane, 2007)

Fig. 1. Overview on social capital



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Theorists debate whether social capital is a private good or a public good. Referring to Sumilo/Baumane the most appropriate definition is the integration of all three perspectives: 'Social capital as determined investments in social relations that give actors an opportunity to use and activate resources otherwise not available or available at greater cost and may positively or negatively affect the wellbeing of society' (Sumilo & Baumane, 2007).

As to Putnam 'Social capital refers to our relationship with one another' (Putnam, 1995b: 665). People that know each other directly build a two-way or reciprocal relations based on commitment. A cooperation based on reciprocal relations reinforces trust. Social capital is therefore strongly linked to networks, trust and reciprocity (Hellmann, 2008). The network notion is also pictured in the discussion about bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is positioned on the micro level based on the interrelation of individuals within a group strongly driven by trust and reciprocity. Bridging social capital is defined as the crosslinking between networks which opens the view to the macro perspective (Hellmann, 2008). The constructs of bonding and bridging are both relevant in organizations. Bonding social capital in an organization implies that there is trust and sense of obligation that encourages reciprocity, while bridging social capital is associated with the kind of weak ties that facilitate access to non-redundant or innovative information (Steinfeld, DiMicco & Ellison, 2009).

Having considered the different density and configuration of networks also different dimension of social capital have to be mentioned in its implications on individual and organizational behavior and performance. The pattern of connections between people being pictured by network ties and configurations are positioned as structural social capital. These network ties help individuals within a group to acquire information which at the same time supports innovation. The focus on personal attitudes towards friendship, respect, trust, norms and sanctions describes the relational dimension. Relational social capital is important to create knowledge, especially in ambiguous and uncertain situations. The cognitive dimension refers to shared visions, representations, interpretations and systems of meaning. It is closely interrelated with the relational dimension through a reciprocal to shared values. Cognitive social capital promotes solidarity (Sumilo & Baumane, 2007).

3. Competencies in the prism of social capital

This research paper raises the question how social capital in the frame of company competencies is linked to competence utilization in a company. The discussion on this question is based on analysis of literature and existing models. It also is intended to filter out common factors of influence for both competencies and social capital and their impact on the utilization of competencies.

Organizational competencies and social capital are seen as decisive elements or contributors to the competitive advantage of a firm. As Modaschl states; '...efficiency and competitive advantage have gained importance also in the social capital debate. 'The utilization of unused potential counts' (Moldaschl, 2008). Underlining the importance of social capital in the competence debate Stark states: 'The collective actions of employees as human capital may well be continually underutilized until all understand the linkage between human capital to firm performance is predicted to adequate levels of social capital.' (Stark & Jeffries, 2011). In both statements social capital is seen as a contributor for the utilization of competencies in terms of successful performed action. It furthermore shows that human commitment and capability is what sets successful organizations apart. (Walton, 1985). Referring to Armin Falk, social capital is an 'asset of mutual trust' and plays an important role in the company competence field. If the 'homo reciprocans' feels to be treated fair his own willingness to cooperate increases (Falk, 2002).

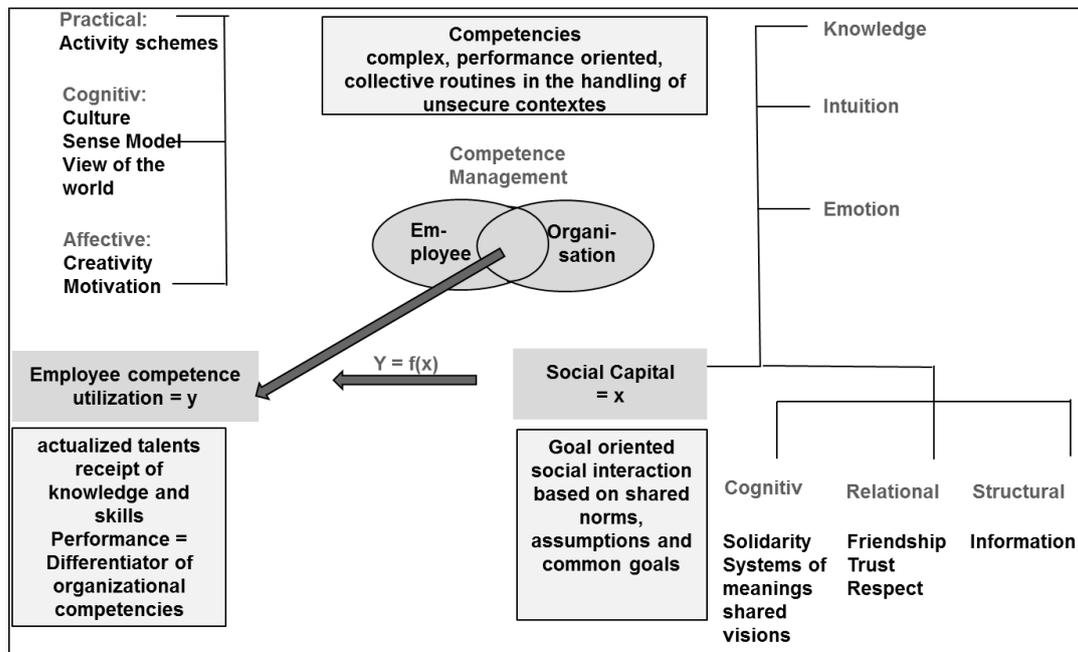
The discussion of the prior models shows that theories of individual and organizational level of competencies and social capital have a notable overlap or interaction field. Not only that both fields have its justification in their definitions especially in times of high change and insecurity, they both seem to be



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an essential source of sustained competitive advantage. To summarize on competence, competent actions needs execution of action, self-organization and the relevance of learning. On organizational level the aspects of collective action and complexity are accrued. Competencies are understood as bundles of resources arising from complex social interaction (Eberl, 2009). To summarize on social capital, it is the ability that needs to be provided, used and activated based on a framework that promotes a social network, an atmosphere of mutual trust based on reciprocity, and the motivation to cooperate and be involved in beneficial exchanges. This all is based on shared norms and goals leading to committed and meaningful action (Sumilo & Baumann, 2007). Based on this description and the reflected synergies and overlaps of the existing models a combined model is proposed by the author. Fig. 2 is based on the structural basic logic and the contextual basic logic Eberl suggests in her model of drivers for organizational competencies (Eberl, 2009) and combines it with the parameters and dimensions of social capital described by Sumilo & Baumann, 2007).



Source: author's construction based on Eberl (2009) and Sumilo/Baumann (2003)

Fig. 2. A combination of competencies and social capital

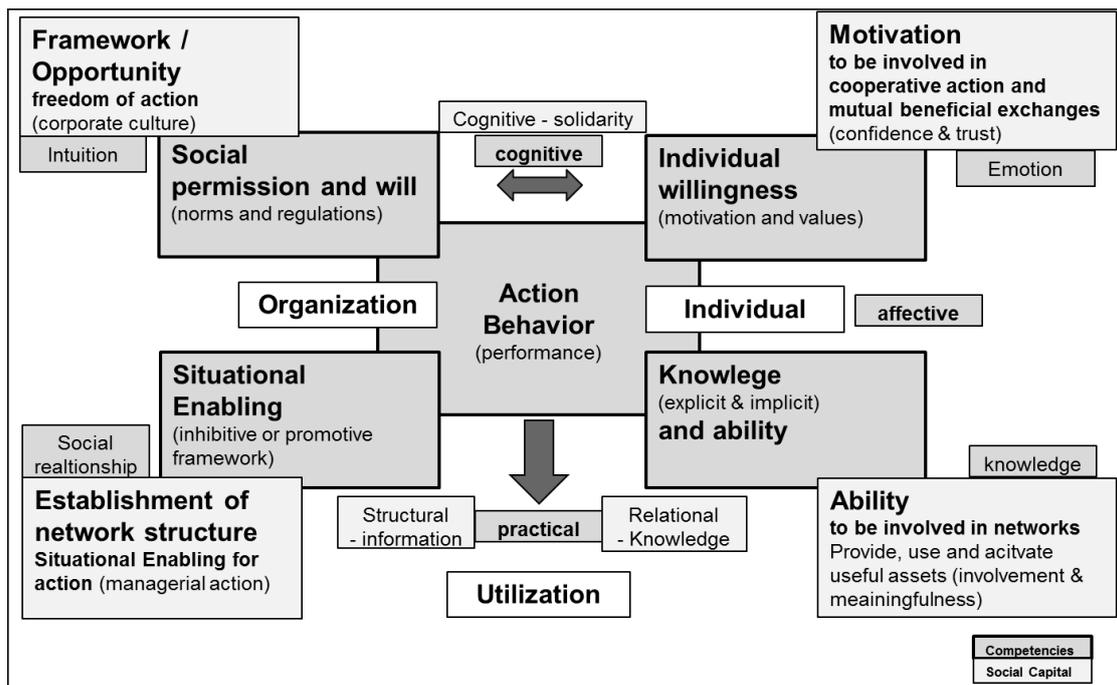
Eberl specifies organizational competencies based on three dimensions: cognitive, practical and affective (Eberl, 2009). The cognitive dimension refers to so called 'sense models'. This dimension implies the 'world view' or in other words the culture of the organization. The practical dimension refers to 'action relation' and is defined by collective, complex schemes of action. The affective dimension refers to creativity and motivation in unsecure environments (Eberl, 2009). Following Eberl there are four dominant factors relevant for the contextual aspect of competencies. These are: social relationships, knowledge, intuition, emotion. Social relationships are also named social capital. The knowledge factor refers to the ability to recombine resources. The intuition aspect describes the internal logic on the basis of experience and sub-consciousness. The emotional aspect is behaviour orientated, based on value judgment and affective processes (Eberl, 2009). Especially the cognitive dimension of both competencies



and social capital refers to culture and therefore to shared visions and systems of meaning. It is closely interrelated with the relational dimension through a reciprocal to shared values. Cognitive social capital promotes solidarity. The cognitive dimension is also closely related to knowledge though a reciprocal to shared values. This is important as the creation of knowledge is a major criterion for the recombination of competencies and is at the same time triggered by relational social capital. This counts especially in ambiguous and uncertain situations.

Based on the insight that especially the cognitive dimension of both systems is linked to each other and is promoted by social relations the crucial role of leaders becomes obvious. This is because leaders teach culture and put values, mores and laws into action. Strong cultures are reinforced by top management's strong commitment to the cultural values (Ford & Heaton, 2001). In other words: Managing competencies under circumstances that build out social capital seems to fulfill a huge range of conditions for the utilization of employee competencies (Steinfeld, DiMicco & Ellison, 2009).

With emphasis on the role of competence management in building out social capital and its impact on competence utilization the author developed another model focused on the performance aspect of competencies.



Source: author's construction based on Erpenbeck & Rosenstiel (2007) and Sumilo/Baumane (2003)

Fig. 2. Competencies in the prism of social capital

The model shows that management of competencies requires a framework that allows freedom for action. This is promoted by a strong culture based on shared norms and values and builds the basis for social permission and will. To transfer the opportunity for action into successful practice, management of competencies should allow the establishments of network structures, which build a framework and enables action. Both management approaches lead to employee empowerment. As Moldaschl says: The social integration and network participation builds the action frame and the possibility to use the



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human capital resources (Moldaschl, 2008). This is underlined by the argument of Eberl saying that all three dimensions of organizational competence are based on the imagination of social connections and are in so far influenced by the peculiarity of organizational social relations (Eberl, 2009). On the individual side solidarity as well as trust and shared norms and goals are a crucial motivator for engagement in cooperative actions. Based on a strong culture that allows social interaction to build out network structures the motivation to be involved in mutually beneficial exchanges and the ability to provide resources or competences needed by other actors is promoted. In such an environment individuals feel not only as a part of the whole, they are also willing to yield their own competencies (Sumilo & Baumane, 2007).

At this point competencies will be utilized. This is especially of importance as actions will not be competent before resources are used. Competencies as well as social capital, both being viewed as a major resource of a company can only be effective if they are in use. They even can be increased by using them (Moldaschl, 2008). Based on these statements and referring to the research question of this paper social capital should therefore be a promoter of competent action in which the utilization of competence becomes visible.

It is of importance that social capital promotes not only the individual competence utilization. Also the collective application of individual competencies within the organization generates sustainable success for the company. (Pfeiffer, 1994, p. 14 f.) (Eberl, 2009). Also Sumilo states that the relational and cognitive dimension of social capital creates knowledge on a collective level (Nelson & Winter, 1982, Brown & Durguid, 1991, Weick and Roberts, 1993) leading to organizational knowledge (Sumilo & Baumane, 2007). She says: 'it is more than just an aggregation of individual skills and intellectual capabilities. If social interaction resides in all directions it gears the formation of synergy leading to creation of organizational competencies' (Sumilo & Baumane, 2007). This is in line with the statement of Eberl saying that organizational competence is more than just the sum of individual competencies. Organizational competence depends on more complex and abstract correlations being exclusively an attribute on the organizational level (Eberl, 2009). Stark underlines this in saying: 'The pool or stock of human capabilities does not create value alone, but human resource management practices, facilitative organizational systems and a supportive culture must be in place to leverage the potential of individuals.' This is the reason that Stark et al, have asserted that social capital emerges from high quality LMX and may therefore be one lubricant on the track to realizing human capital. (Stark & Jeffries, 2011). In order to value the importance of human capital the management's role is seen as catalyzer for helping people to contribute meaningfully in their work roles. This is based on the understanding that people, which develop in a way that they are part of the face and living strategy of the company contribute to release synergies in a most efficient way and bind to a company on a long run.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

To summarize the findings and to refer to the research question, the answer is: yes, social capital is a strong promoter of competent action and is therefore important in utilizing competencies. This conclusion is especially based on the close linkage of the cognitive dimension of both competence and social capital. The cognitive dimension itself is closely intermingled with the relational dimension being a core of social capital and the knowledge factor being a major criterion for the recombination of resources. Based on shared norms and values and an environment of mutual trust both relational social capital and cognitive social capital promote the ability to create and recreate bundles of resources, which counts especially in ambiguous and uncertain situations.

To achieve this effect, competence management and leadership play an important role. An essential contributor to the utilization of competencies both on individual and organizational view is leadership



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accomplishing an environment that promotes social capital and is therefore a trigger for engagement in cooperative action.

In conclusion the management of competences should:

1. Clearly articulate organizational strategy & goals;
2. Establish a culture of trust based on shared norms and values;
3. Build clear structure and processes;
4. Provide the opportunity and freedom of action;
5. Offer a framework to establish network structures.

This should lead to:

1. Engagement of empowered individuals in cooperative and meaningful action;
2. Motivation and commitment to work on common goals;
3. Allocation, creation and utilization of useful assets;
4. Formation of organizational competencies on a collective level.

In the consequence it leads to a situation-adequate action, based on knowledge and experience that solves and reflects complex tasks under the usage of freedom of action which is provided by its environment. Accordingly, the appropriate management of competencies should build an environment that promotes social capital which for his part should lead to dynamic bundles of processes and routines that can be built and reconfigured related to a dynamic environment. These kinds of routines are based on complex social interactions and allow a process of decision making also in unsecure and fast changing environments. Company members that are empowered to work under these conditions feel motivated and committed and are expected not only to utilize but also to create new competencies on individual and collective level.

Nevertheless strategic management is based on different aspects. Besides culture also the structural level of company competencies is of importance, as structure and process also impact successful competent action. Therefore, referring to the need of a clear articulated strategy it is of importance that network features, promoting social capital, are in line with the organizational objectives. Still the climate of trust and social capital itself is evaluated as a basic requirement to effectively utilize the entity of available and inducible competencies in a successful way.

The findings of this paper are seen to be valuable to contribute to the utilization of individual competencies especially in an environment creating social capital which will pay off for industrial companies in long term. The utilization of competencies is not only valid for the company's sustainable competitive advantage; it is especially valid in an environment of skilled worker shortage in which retention time of company members matters, in terms of costs, efficiency, synergy, valuable resources and committed workforce. In this respect the value of diversity and regeneration of human capital might also be an important aspect to be considered.

This theoretical approach described in this paper will be further deepened in terms of:

1. The development of an adequate structural relation model and
2. The consecutively proof by empirical research in a further step.

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