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Articles

Competencies of future-capable employees in digitalized stationary retail

Le competenze dei lavoratori del futuro nel commercio al dettaglio fisico con l'uso del digitale

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Abstract

Digitalization is permanently transforming communication and purchasing processes in stationary retail, reshaping work requirements and demanding sector-specific employee competencies. According to the resource- and competence-based view, these competencies are key to generating competitive advantages. This study develops a competency model for employees in stationary retail, addressing digitalization-driven changes in requirements. Unlike prior research focused on Industry 4.0 or cross-industry contexts, an industry-specific context of stationary retail has, to our best knowledge, received no scientific attention yet. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative approach. Based on 26 interviews with managers, employees, and human resources managers, the study shows that digitalization in stationary retail has changed demands on employees in IT, cooperation, work organization, and customer interaction. All four action competencies (professional, methodological, social, personal) are essential to cope well with these new requirements.

Keywords: competency model; work requirements; digitalization; stationary retail.

Sintesi

La digitalizzazione sta trasformando in modo permanente i processi di comunicazione e di acquisto nel settore della vendita al dettaglio, ridisegnando i requisiti di lavoro e richiedendo competenze specifiche ai dipendenti del settore. Secondo la visione basata sulle risorse e sulle competenze, queste competenze sono risorse centrali per generare vantaggi competitivi. Questo studio sviluppa un modello di competenze per i dipendenti del settore del commercio al dettaglio, che affronta i cambiamenti dei requisiti indotti dalla digitalizzazione. A differenza di precedenti ricerche incentrate sull'Industria 4.0 o su contesti intersettoriali, il contesto specifico del commercio al dettaglio non ha ancora ricevuto alcuna attenzione scientifica, per quanto ne sappiamo. Pertanto, questo studio adotta un approccio qualitativo. Sulla base di 26 interviste a manager, dipendenti e responsabili delle risorse umane nel settore del commercio al dettaglio, lo studio empirico mostra che la digitalizzazione nel settore del commercio al dettaglio ha cambiato le esigenze dei dipendenti in materia di IT, cooperazione, organizzazione del lavoro e clienti. Tutte e quattro le competenze (professionali, metodologiche, sociali, personali) sono essenziali per affrontare questi nuovi ambienti di lavoro.

Parole chiave: modello di competenze; requisiti lavorativi; digitalizzazione; vendita al dettaglio.

1. Introduction

Digitalisation has an immense impact, forcing many companies and entire industries to undergo a digital transformation (Hanelt et al., 2020) and changing the required competencies of employees (Aepli et al., 2017). This is particularly true for service-oriented industries such as retail (Biesel & Hame, 2018), as communication and purchasing processes (Wolpert & Roth, 2020), interaction at the Point Of Sale (POS) and the relationship between employees and consumers (Shankar et al., 2021) are permanently changing. In the retail context, four central categories can be identified with regard to the changing activity requirements for employees due to digitalisation, namely in relation to Information Technology (IT), customers, work organization and collaboration (e.g. Hecklau et al., 2016, Kazancoglu & Ozkan-Ozen, 2018). Due to the increasing use of digital technologies, many activities are becoming more complex (Blum, 2016), which is why it is necessary to familiarize staff with technological changes at the POS as well as changes in customer behavior (Gabriel et al., 2016). The labor market and jobs will be radically changed by the advancing integration of technologies (Aepli et al., 2017). The impact of digitalisation on employees' competences has already been analyzed across industries or with a focus on Industry 4.0 (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Oberländer et al., 2019; Wang & Ha-Brookshire, 2018). However, to our best knowledge, an industry-focused consideration of service-oriented industries such as stationary retail has not yet been the subject of intensive scientific discussion.

The use of digital technologies has specific effects on the work processes and conditions in stationary retail and thus on the work requirements, which need a sector-specific adaptation and promotion of corresponding employee competences. However, it is unclear how these effects and the necessary adjustments are concretely represented. Thus, this study pursues the goal of developing a competency model for employees in stationary retail, based on the digitalization-related changes in requirements, in order to offer added value both for stationary retail and from a scientific perspective. Competences describe individual behavior that leads to performance through certain skills and knowledge (Blanka et al., 2022).

According to the resource-based view (Barney, 1991) and the competence-based view (Sanchez & Heene, 1997), employees' competences are postulated as a central resource for generating competitive advantages. Therefore, we first identify the digitalisation-related changes in the demands on employees and the necessary competences across industries. We then test our assumptions by surveying managers, employees and Human Resources (HR) managers in the retail sector. The aim is to find out how digitalisation is changing the requirements and competences of employees in stationary retail.

2. Literature review

The digital transformation requires better strategic and organizational planning of structures, personnel competences as well as corporate and leadership cultures (Petry & Jäger, 2021). On the one hand, significant increases in effectiveness and efficiency can be observed due to digitalisation, on the other hand, new core competences are needed in a constantly evolving, dynamic world of work in order to face new requirements and act appropriately regarding uncertainties (Kauffeld & Albrecht, 2021). The necessary competences must be identified and employees trained to adapt to these changes (Laudon, 2017) in order to drive the technical progress of companies (Siebler, 2017).

The resource-based approach of Barney (1991) is based on the central assumption that the strategic success of a company depends on its specific and unique resources, especially when the demands on the company increase. A distinction is made between tangible and intangible resources. Tangible resources represent physical goods, such as machines, that are easy to obtain externally. Intangible resources describe, for example, employee competencies that are to be built up and promoted. This leads to the competence-based approach (Sanchez & Heene, 1997), that focus only on intangible resources, which alone are not enough to achieve a competitive advantage. To do so, they must be used effectively and efficiently through action-based competencies (Teece et al., 1997), which unleash the capabilities of resources and enable them to adapt to the demands of target markets (Dierickx & Cool, 1989). Action competences are generally divided into four types: (i) professional competences include job-related knowledge and understanding; (ii) methodological competences describe problem-solving and decision-making skills; (iii) social competences include all interpersonal cooperation skills; (iv) personal competences define a person's social values, motivation and attitude (Hecklau et al., 2016).

Professional competences, also referred to as "hard skills" and often to specific knowledge for a particular job, have hardly been studied in the digitalisation context. Frequently mentioned are technical skills and data processing (Da Silva et al., 2022; Schislyaeva & Saychenko, 2022). Hecklau et al. (2016) and Schislyaeva and Saychenko (2022) describe a general technical understanding as an overarching professional competence. With the increasing complexity of professions and the support of information and communication technologies, professional responsibility is rising, which requires current knowledge (Flores et al., 2020; Jerman et al., 2020). Furthermore, the increasing digitalisation of processes, machines and the maintenance of software and hardware requires a broader and deeper understanding of information technology and processes to improve the value creation process (Benešová & Tupa, 2017; Jerman et al., 2020).

Problem-solving competence as the ability to work with modern interfaces and solve complex tasks or technical problems was frequently mentioned as a methodological competence in the digitalisation context (Erol et al., 2016; Jerman et al., 2020). The need for innovative products and in-house improvements requires creativity (Blanka et al., 2022) and analytical skills (Bals et al., 2019; Hulla et al., 2021). Digital competences refer to the design, extraction, analysis, interpretation and application of digital media and data. Entrepreneurial thinking and decision-making are other methodological competences mentioned (Dhanpat et al., 2020; Maisiri & Van Dyk, 2021).

Due to digitalisation and the accompanying changes in competence requirements, *social competence* is becoming increasingly important. It turns out that communication skills are the most frequently addressed social competence and are necessary to communicate complex issues efficiently (Butschan et al., 2018; Jerman et al., 2020). In a highly globalized and interconnected value chain, networking skills as well as willingness to compromise and ability to cooperate are crucial for win-win situations and interpersonal mobilization (Labanauskaitė et al., 2021; Schislyaeva & Saychenko, 2022). Knowledge transfer and relationship skills are also required (Erol et al., 2016).

In order to adapt to technological changes and digitalisation-related work innovations, willingness to change is mentioned several times as an important *personal competence* (Da Silva et al., 2022; Dhanpat et al., 2020; Jerman et al., 2018), which goes hand in hand with flexibility, initiative and the motivation to learn in order to adapt the way of working. Self-confidence, -organization and -reflection are described as important interpersonal skills in dealing with ambiguity and integrity and describe the ability to work independently

(Schislyaeva & Saychenko, 2022; Venter et al., 2019). As a result of shorter product life cycles and time-to-markets, employees are under increasing pressure to adapt more quickly (Hecklau et al., 2016). Furthermore, lifelong learning, affinity for technology and a critical attitude towards technological developments are also important (Da Silva et al., 2022).

Soft skills, which encompass methodological, social and personal competences, are also becoming increasingly important. They describe employees' characteristics and are not dependent on scientific-technical skills, as is the case with technical competences. For a successful digital transformation, social and personal competences are most frequently addressed as future-oriented competences (Flores et al., 2020; Jerman et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

Research has so far dealt with the analysis of employee competences in the context of digitalisation across industries and with focus on Industry 4.0, but not in stationary retail. Since the topic has, to our knowledge, hardly been researched so far and as the present study aims to gain new insights into the change in work requirements and necessary employee competences in digitalized stationary retail, a qualitative research approach based on semi-structured expert interviews was chosen (Brüsemeister, 2008). The interview guide was created on the basis of the research questions and the state of research on the four action-based competencies of employees in digitalisation. The interview guideline supports the interviewer, enables deviations through new perspectives and ensures comparable information for the evaluation (Mayer, 2013).

26 experts from Western Europe (16 managers, five employees and five HR managers in stationary retail with several years of professional experience, with an average of 11.3 years) were selected, who are familiar with the requirements of digitalisation and the necessary employee competences in stationary retail, whereby the criterion of theoretical saturation was followed, according to which so many interviews were conducted until no more new insights could be gained with regard to data collection and analysis (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2014). The selection of respondents was narrowed down based on specific criteria: all three expert groups (managers, employees, HR managers) share core characteristics but differ in details. Participants must have several years of experience in stationary retail, qualifying them as experts with relevant knowledge on retailisation 4.0 (Döring, 2023). This ensures diverse responses and a heterogeneous study field (Kelle & Kluge, 2010). Additionally, the level of digitalisation in retail companies was considered to assess necessary skills for retailisation 4.0. All interviews were conducted between June and September 2022, recorded and then fully transcribed.

The analysis was based on a qualitative content analysis using the structuring method according to Mayring (2022). The categorisation was carried out deductively based on the results of the literature analysis: the requirements were divided into the four categories (IT, customers, work organisation, cooperation) (e.g. Hecklau et al., 2016; Steinlechner et al., 2021), as were the four action-related competences identified during the preparation of the state of research on employee competences in digitalisation (professional, methodological, social, personal) (e.g. Hecklau et al., 2016). In addition, an inductive categorisation with a focus on action-related competences with regard to retailisation 4.0 was used, in which the categories were derived directly from the transcripts (Mayring, 2022).

4. Results

The results show digitalisation-related requirements in stationary retail as well as a competence model for employees.

4.1. Digitalisation-related requirements in stationary trade

In terms of *IT requirements*, the most frequently mentioned was the handling of digital tools and their efficient use. The experts named numerous digital devices and systems that employees are confronted with, such as tablets, Virtual Reality (VR) glasses, various checkout systems or packaging machines. In addition, there are retail-specific technological tools such as devices for measuring eyesight at opticians. The use of these technologies requires a corresponding understanding of IT, and employees must be trained in their efficient use, as they simplify many work steps and enable an efficient way of working.

The *needs of customers* were most frequently mentioned and especially service orientation, according to which it is important to offer customers an easy and trusting shopping experience through digital options, fast delivery, a greater product variety and individual advice that is not primarily about price. Service-oriented customer advice is a unique selling point of stationary retail and must be used as an advantage over online retail. Through digital networking and devices, employees can react flexibly and agilely and offer customers more than is normally possible in stationary retail. Due to the increasing digitalisation, many work steps have to run alongside normal shop operations, but the employees still have to keep an eye on the customers. They also have to take on new tasks that arise from the use of new digital tools, such as ordering apps, networking with the online shop and additional back-office tasks, which can lead to additional workload and stress.

New tasks bring demands on *work organization*. Employees are confronted with many changes that require lifelong learning and affinity for technology. Innovative technological developments lead to increasing responsibility and the assignment of new tasks with more strategic, coordinating and creative activities. At the same time, everything should be easy for employees to implement and understand.

Digitalisation in stationary retail is also changing the requirements for *cooperation*. Everything moves very fast, there is less consistency and employees have to accept short-term changes in their daily work, which requires an increasing willingness to cooperate and compromise. Knowledge transfer takes place digitally. Digitalisation leads to increasing networking within the organization, e.g. through the online shop. But networking among employees via various communication channels, such as WhatsApp or Outlook, also takes place, leading to shorter communication channels as well as changes in cooperation and information transfer. Therefore, the flood of information and constant accessibility increase.

As the results show, digitalisation in bricks-and-mortar retail is leading to changes in tasks, complexity of work and new roles, so that new employee competences are required to be able to deal with it.

4.2. Competences for the digitalized stationary trade

Regarding necessary *professional skills*, knowledge of the latest technologies and products is important. Technical understanding is especially important in order to use digital

functions in a stress-free and profitable way, but also to advise customers in the best possible way and to meet sales standards:

"[...] that is something where the employees simply have to be up to date, what can the work equipment, with which I perhaps make orders or simply look at how my stocks look, what else can it perhaps do? [nda]" (Human Resource Development Manager, Interview #4).

Technical processes also require a process understanding, according to which the employees know how the individual processes work, so that the digital systems are understood and the value creation can be improved. Through digitalization and the resulting online shops, customers are much better informed about the products before they come into the shop. It is therefore all the more important that the product knowledge of the employees is up to date.

In the context of digitalisation, *methodological competences* can be summarized as problem-solving competences that require digital competences and entrepreneurial thinking in the complex and dynamic working world of stationary trade. Problems must be approached in a solution-oriented manner in order to expand knowledge in relation to the problem:

"You also have to approach things in a problem-oriented, solution-oriented way, that you simply ask, that you somehow expand your knowledge, that you talk with the supervisor or with the division manager or so., [nda]" (sales staff, Interview #9).

Employees need digital competence to even know how to use digital tools. This will definitely be necessary in the future in stationary retail to stay competitive. Entrepreneurial thinking implies that employees do not only focus on stationary retail, but continue to think about how they can best serve the customer with the available technologies, such as with the online shop, and adapt the sales process much more to the customer in the interest of the company.

With regard to the four action competences, *social competence* can be seen as a central competence in stationary retail. Customers value personal contact despite digitalisation. The most frequently mentioned competence is the ability to communicate, be it with customers, team members or hardware and software providers. Due to digitalisation, work in stationary retail is very fast-paced and many changes are taking place. To keep all employees up to date, secure processes and avoid misunderstandings, continuous communication is important, for which digital communication tools such as headsets are used:

"Communication is the most important thing, also internally in the company, for example the people in the office want something or I want something from them or the boss wants something [...]." (sales staff, Interview #7).

Regardless of digitalisation, the basis is trust in the team and being there for each other:

"It is very important to work together as a team. We are also connected with a headset and we communicate constantly to orient ourselves, okay, who is doing this? Where are we now and what is the next step? And working as a team is a basic requirement, a foundation for our company, to function at all., [nda]" (sales staff, Interview #10).

In addition to relationships with colleagues, these are also necessary with customers, as a higher level of service orientation is required to retain them and make purchasing as easy as possible. Through relationship skills it is possible to learn much about the customers and

find out what they really need. The personal data obtained is entered into a system in order to cultivate relationships and offer needs-based products. With regard to digital tools in stationary retail, knowledge has to be passed on, which is why the ability to pass on knowledge is also becoming increasingly important. Especially employees who are not so tech-savvy need to be trained and supported by the more experienced staff:

"And of course, certain employees are not so tech-savvy. Often young people are very skilled with new things. And that is why staff training is really important, everyone helps everyone. And that's also what makes us extremely successful, especially in this industry., [nda]" (store manager, Interview #14).

Finally, the *personal competences* can be identified as central action competences in stationary retail. New digital tools, systems and tasks are constantly being added. Changes are always connected with fear, uncertainty and resistance. Finally, employees need a digital mindset and a certain willingness to change in order to deal with new technologies and to recognize the added value of the changes:

"I am very open to the whole topic because it is quite clear that with the progress of digitalisation, work can simply be made more efficient and faster. [...] for me it is very clear that this topic will be our main topic in the future as well., [nda]" (sales staff, Interview #10).

Stationary retail is becoming more and more digital, for example through the handling of online shops, social media functions for advertising, new checkout systems or devices for scanning goods. This requires organizing oneself and coordinating with colleagues. Learning and developing these things yourself requires a certain degree of self-organization, reflection and responsibility as well as willingness to learn and flexibility:

"Especially with these order processes or with all the things that I have to manage myself somehow, [...] that everything happens in the ongoing process. You have to be flexible and also somehow responsible., [nda]" (sales staff, Interview #7).

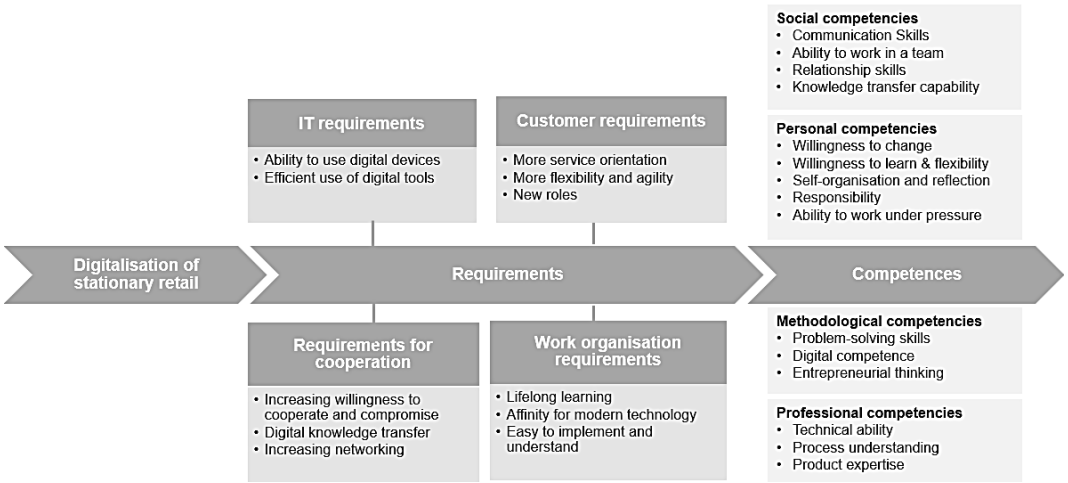

Figure 1. Work requirements and employee competencies in digitalized stationary retail.

Due to the increasing responsibility and self-organization, employees are coming under pressure. Some of the digital devices have to be learned and installed in no time at all. In addition, turnover targets compared to online retail, constant accessibility and scarce human resources require the ability to work under pressure.

The empirical results on the required competences of employees in digitalized stationary retail based on the changed requirements can be summarized in a competence model (Figure 1).

5. Conclusion

Through the explorative, empirical study, it can be determined that digitalisation in stationary retail and changed customer needs lead to task changes, complexity of work and to new competence requirements. The changed demands on employees in stationary retail concern the areas of IT, cooperation, work organization and, above all, customers.

The results show a strong orientation towards customer needs and thus towards service orientation. Service-oriented customer advice is a unique selling point of bricks-and-mortar retail, which must be used as an advantage over online retail. Customers' needs can be addressed much more strongly through digitalization, as they expect a good customer experience with fast and simple processes and expect many digital tools. Digitally well-informed customers value high-quality advice in stationary retail and expect informed and trained staff who can respond to their needs in a flexible and agile way. Due to the increasing digitalisation, employees have to take on new roles and expanding tasks with more strategic, coordinating and creative activities, which also lead to many additional burdens.

With regard to IT requirements, employees are expected to be able to handle the increasing number of digital tools and use them efficiently. The fast pace of digitalisation and permanent short-term changes demand willingness to cooperate and compromise as well as increasing networking and digital knowledge transfer.

In order to be able to cope with new tasks, there are demands on work organization that include lifelong learning, technology affinity and increasing responsibility. A central demand is that everything should be easy for employees to implement and understand.

Due to these changed demands, employee competences of all four action competences are required in order to be able to cope well with them.

With regard to the four action competences, social competence can be seen as central in stationary retail, as customers value personal contact despite digitalisation. An essential competence is the ability to communicate, for example, employees must be able to approach the customer, have a personal conversation and find out what the customer really needs, as well as build a relationship in order to bind them to the stationary retail. In terms of digital tools, the ability to transfer knowledge is becoming increasingly important, with staff who are not so tech-savvy, needing to be trained by experienced staff.

In order to recognize the added value of digitization-related changes, employees must be willing to change, and self-organization and reflection are also essential personal skills in digitalized stationary retail.

Problem-solving skills and digital competence in dealing with technical tools are methodological competences that will continue to be in demand in stationary retail in the future in order to remain competitive. Professional competences are also constantly changing due to the rapid digital transformation, which is why knowledge of the latest technologies and processes is important. Through digitalization, customers are much better informed, which is why product knowledge is essential for employees.

The changes in work requirements and employee competences have been considered in previous studies across industries or in the context of Industry 4.0. The sector-specific context of stationary retail has received little scientific attention so far, which is why the empirical study makes an important scientific contribution. It confirms the statements of the resource-based (Barney, 1991) and the competence-based view (Sanchez & Heene, 1997), according to which the increasing demands of digitalization in stationary retail require corresponding competences as intangible human resources in order to remain competitive. The results show that interpersonal skills and thus social and personal competences are becoming increasingly important and methodological and professional competences are rather basic requirements. It can be stated that the required competences are constantly changing due to rapid digital changes and that their generation and promotion are of central importance for a successful digital transformation and for competitiveness (Barney, 1991; Sanchez & Heene, 1997). For this purpose, companies in stationary retail must use the competence model as a basis for the right selection of personnel as well as a future-oriented and competence-promoting personnel development.

Typical limitations of our research are caused by the qualitative nature of the study and include possible interview bias, small sample size, and the fact that no generalized statements can be made (Roebken & Wetzel, 2020). Thus, to overcome these limitations future studies could take a quantitative approach. The empirical sample has a region-specific focus on Western Europe and could be expanded in its geographical focus.

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