

MANAGEMENT THROUGH COMPETENCE AN EMERGING MANAGERIAL  
PRACTICE WITHIN FRENCH COMPANIES: FROM DISCOURSE TO PRACTICES

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**Abstract**

*For a long time and until now, the qualification model has been considered a major criterion for defining jobs. It structures training, classification grids and many other forms of work organization. But the emergence and then the recent diffusion of the "logic of competence", both within companies and in research, reveals new horizons in relation to the organization of work and the management of the workforce. This article intends to provide a large number of statistical indicators for evaluating and measuring the emergence of the "logic of competence". We have tried to establish a typology of the different personnel management practices in order to identify the real diffusion of the "logic of competence" as a new mode of workforce management at the level of the French company. Statistical processing, using the 2004-2005 REPONSE survey, is carried out. We will then see that this new practice is currently quite well established within French companies.*

**KEYWORDS:** Management, Competence, Measurement, Response survey, Typology

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Today we are witnessing a relentless wave of restructuring and transformation that has changed the face of the environment in which organizations operate. In this context of uncertainty and instability, marked by the globalization of markets and technological progress, the company is obliged to continuously adapt and to opt, if necessary, for more pronounced changes. These are generally referred to as strategic changes. According to Hafsi and Fabi (1997), these changes “affect either the content (objectives, appreciation of the environment and the availability of resources), or the process (structure, systems, culture and values), in order to increase the performance of the organization”. This changing context makes it necessary, more than ever, to introduce and develop new efficient methods and practices of work organization.

The latter should promote the increased availability of employees with new skills necessary to meet the demands of competitiveness. Organizational changes are most often characterized by the introduction of new practices such as independent teamwork, quality management or just-in-time production. Practices which for the most part decompartmentalize productive activities and lead to an enrichment of skills and increased autonomy for workers. This new framework therefore



marks the transition from a mode of organization and management based on the Taylorist bureaucratic conception characterized by a high degree of standardization, specialization and supervision of tasks and workers, to a new mode of organization. marked by the emergence of new methods of mobilizing human resources (participatory management, forward-looking management of jobs and skills).

It is in this new emerging context that "management through competence" emerged as a new mode of workforce management. Since the 1980s, it has become a topical theme that has been widely used in scientific discourse. This concept refers to a formalization of work, a capacity to represent processes and anticipate hazards, an internalization of quality and control standards which modify the level of involvement and the degree of autonomy of individuals (Dietrich, 1999).

Faced with the profusion of writings and practices which claim to be competent, since the establishment of the ACAP 2000 agreement to the abundant literature on the subject, it is today difficult to see clearly about the distribution real competence model in companies French. Studying this issue is all the more difficult since, very often, the observations and analyzes that are made are either a blind glorification of this approach, or a priori critical (Louart P, 2006). In conclusion, it is clear that there are only a few quantitative results available to assess the reality of this new "deal" as a managerial practice at the level of the French company.

## 2. LITTERATURE

To carry out this work, a brief review of the literature will allow us to better address the subject of the emergence of the competence model. The latter is giving rise to a growing number of observations and studies in the fields of management, sociology of work, cognitive science and economics. Nevertheless, this new situation remains a subject of widely criticized debate. Within companies, even if the "management by competence" approaches are still limited (Collin T and Grasser B, 2003), the advent of a post-Fordist economy, marked in particular by a great transformation of companies, has rendered obsolete a certain conception of the Taylorian model based on the logic of the post.

The Taylorian model based on the logic of position is generally associated with the shaping of the wage relationship typical of a dominant model of "Fordist" regulation, moreover abundantly described by the approach by regulation (Boyer, 1987). Associated with standardized mass production, itself articulated with standardized mass consumption, it is expressed in firms by the breakdown of productive and design functions on the one hand, and design and marketing functions. the other. Mostly.



Production is analyzed there as a summation of activities identified at the workstations, which at the same time draw the statutory hierarchy and channel professional mobility within the framework of the organization's "internal markets". In this context, employees exchange, at the end of an employment contract whose content is as much "implicit" (Azariadis, 1975) as it is explicit, subordination to work against security within the framework of internal markets (Supiot, 1999).

In particular, within the framework of this organization, they must comply with the instructions defined by their position, without having their own knowledge of being, neither upstream nor downstream of the situation in which they find themselves, as simple performers. of a plan fixed elsewhere. In return, the obedience of the employees is rewarded by the perspectives included in an objectified classification system. Staff management is then reduced to flow management standardized by professional classifications: the wage policy consists of the payment of an exchange value for the use of a fraction of the "social labor force", designed implicitly as a collective reality.

As Salais (1989) points out, the macroeconomic and social viability of such a model rest on the establishment and respect of two conventions: an ex-ante productivity convention, which is based on the contractualized and objectified commitments of firms and their employees; an ex-post unemployment agreement which relies on the collectivity for the redistribution of labor power and the guarantee of a counterpart to the "right to work".

This standard model of the "job logic" also converges with a "qualification" logic, where professional skills are summed up in a qualification to be filled in a "job", a qualification recognized in a system, also objectified, of certification, and ensuring the link between the training system (generally initial) and internal labor markets: "qualification therefore appears as a stable relationship between use value and exchange value of the labor force, identified by two types variables: individual capacity, conventionally identified by the title (recognizing the formal incorporation of knowledge and know-how through initial and continuing training) and / or seniority (validating the irreversible gains of experience) and the position (described by the presumed exhaustive content of the prescribed tasks) (Lichtenberger et alii, p.35).

The legitimacy and effectiveness of the "job logic" model depend on the fact that it is therefore largely produced by collective bargaining, which adjusts compromises



organizing convergence of the crossed expectations of firms and employees, under the supervision of a third party guaranteeing the right to work.

Until the 1970s, the system of “job logic” was applied without major modification, but during this decade it became a weakened model, like all the institutional forms and social mediations with which it made sense. with the general disintegration of Fordian regulation, swept away by the reorganization of the sources of productivity and competitiveness (Aglietta, 1997).

The mechanisms that formed the productivity agreement then gradually hybridize, with the adoption, in the 1970s of conventional grids with ranking criteria, and the emergence of new methods of mobilizing human resources (participatory management, forward-looking management of jobs. and competences): all the rules negotiated until then and which made sense within the framework of the virtuous circle of Ford's growth, are then gradually denounced as so many rigidities, hindering the necessary adaptation of actors and markets under new conditions.

<b>Management by "station logic"</b>	<b>Management by the "logic of competence"</b>
Companies that comply with this management method very strongly supervise their employees. These firms could be characterized by low difficulties in recruiting, little training expenditure, work defined by specific tasks to be performed, permanent recourse to the hierarchy, lack of versatility of employees, permanent control of work,.	Companies that comply with this new managerial practice offer more flexible work supervision by emphasizing versatility, employee motivation, cooperation between employees, by devoting a large part of the payroll to training, by encouraging employees to be autonomous and responsible and by carrying out only occasional checks of the work ...

### **3. MANAGEMENT THROUGH COMPETENCE A PRACTICE WIDELY WIDE IN FRENCH COMPANIES.**



Equipped with all the descriptive variables presented above, we endeavor, within the framework of this part to answer the following questions: what is the proportion of companies offering more “flexible” work supervision by favoring autonomy, responsibility and cooperation between employees, by devoting a large part of the wage bill to training and by carrying out only occasional work checks? In other words, what is the percentage of companies practicing the skill-based management mode, in the sense in which we have heard it above?

### **3.1 DESCRIPTION OF THE DIFFERENT MODES OF MANAGEMENT OF RESPONSE SURVEY STAFF: TYPOLOGY TEST.**

The descriptive variables are deduced from the information on employee supervision policies, and on the work organization policy actually adopted by companies, as provided in part n ° 5, n ° 3 and n ° 6 of the questionnaire. RESPONSE survey “management representative” (Appendix A).

Among the variables available in the RESPONSE survey and referring to the practice of management by competence, we retained the five variables already identified in the literature review (which we consider a priori characteristic of the mode of management by competence). These variables are: training expenses, responsibility, autonomy, evaluation and control. It seems to us that the emergence of this new managerial practice is positively associated with these forms of work organization (descriptive variables).

#### **Training expenses.**

The implementation of a logic of competence seems to be accompanied by a real training policy, which we propose to capture, in the RESPONSE survey, from the level of training expenditure. Training expenses therefore represent an interesting indicator for identifying the management mode adopted by the company and more precisely the management mode by skills.

The information concerning the expenditure devoted to training is obtained from the answers to question n ° 5.4a of the section representing the management: "in 2004, what is approximately the percentage of the total expenditure of training compared to the mass? company salary?

The variable corresponding to the training expenditure is entered by interval in the RESPONSE survey, which requires choosing a bound from one of these intervals as a threshold. In this case, we have chosen the 2% threshold which makes it possible to distinguish companies that go beyond the legal obligation (1.6%).



### Responsibility and autonomy.

To study the degree of responsibility of employees vis-à-vis their work in the REPOSE survey, we refer to the responses of companies to question 5.6: "within your establishment, is the work to be accomplished defined? rather by a description of precise tasks to be carried out or by setting overall objectives?"

Descriptive statistics: analysis of groupings

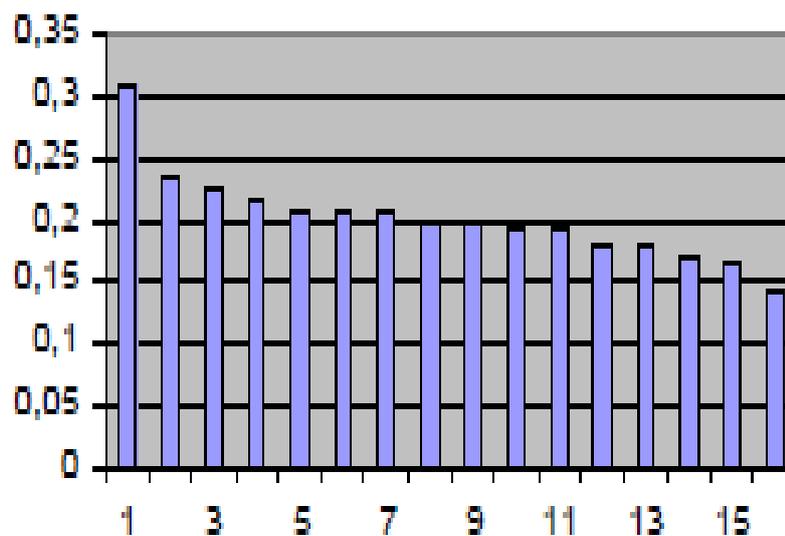


Fig. 1. Own Values

By being based on the examination of the curve of decrease of the percentages of inertia explained (here the eigenvalues, cf. Figure above), we notice that the percentages are very close except for the axis  $n^{\circ} 15$ . This look of the graph representing the eigenvalues of the axes does not allow us to reject one axis or another, which is why it is better to keep all of the axes (the 16 axes). It is about making an Ascending Hierarchical Classification (CAH) from the 16 axes of the ACM. The objective is to find the two closest classes at each step, we merge them, we continue until there is only one class. It consists in providing a set of more or less fine partitions obtained by successive groupings of parts.

In our case we do not find this jump but we can see that  $n^{\circ} 6$  is compared several times (6 successive times) with other class numbers. We have therefore chosen to stop at the number of 6 groups (by examining the dendrogram to visualize the different jumps, we notice that we cannot do this because of the too large number of our data) . We will therefore retain the partition in six groups for the rest of our study.

Table. 2. below shows the distribution of groups.

Variables	Modalités	Groupe 1	Groupe 2	Groupe 3	Groupe 4	Groupe 5	Groupe 6
Dépenses de formation	-1.5%	*	*			*	
	1.5%à2%	*	*		*	*	*
	2.1%à3%				*		*
	3.1%à4%						
	4.1% à 6% + 6%			*			
Responsabilité	Non	*	*				
	Oui			*	*	*	*
	Ne sait pas						
Autonomie	Oui					*	*
	Non	*	*	*	*		
Contrôle	Permanent	*	*	*	*		
	Intermittent					*	*
	Occasionnel					*	*
	Ne sait pas						
Evaluation	Oui tous les salariés		*	*			*
	Oui certains	*			*	*	
	Non	*			*		
	Ne sait pas						
<b>Fréquences</b>		<b>523</b>	<b>366</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>431</b>	<b>446</b>	<b>763</b>

Table 2 below shows the distribution of groups according to the descriptive variables. The table represents a synthesis of the 6 cross tables resulting from the results of Chi-square calculations.

Table. 3. : The characteristics of the existing management methods in the REPOSE survey

Les modes de gestion existants	Les variables descriptives				
	FORMATION	RESPONSABILITE	AUTONOMIE	CONTROLE	EVALUATION
M1	faible	n'est pas encouragée	n'est pas accordée	permanent	pour certains/non
M2	moyenne	n'est pas encouragée	n'est pas accordée	permanent	pour tous les salariés
M3	importante	encouragée	n'est pas accordée	permanent	pour tous les salariés
M4	moyenne	encouragée	n'est pas accordée	permanent	pour tous les salariés
M5	faible	encouragée	accordée	intermittent/occasionnel	pour certains
M6	importante	encouragée	accordée	intermittent/occasionnel	pour tous les salariés

### 3.3. MANAGEMENT BY COMPETENCE AND THE ASSOCIATED DESCRIPTIVE VARIABLES: MAIN RESULTS

The identification of this typology of the different manpower management practices of the REPOSE survey enabled us to identify the most appropriate management mode for management by competence (group n ° 6) such as we defined it in the first part. We now try to analyze successively the links between the practice of management by competence and the associated

descriptive variables. Our analysis will be focused on group 6, which corresponds to the mode of management by competence. Our choice of group n ° 6 which best corresponds to the mode of management by competence is justified by the results of the Chi-square tests on the variables that we considered to be distinctive of this new managerial practice.

### **The training policy: increased expenditure on training**

The results of the analysis show that Group 6 (763 establishments) gives a decisive role to employee training. These results support the hypothesis 1. Management through competence does indeed seem to be associated with an important training policy at company level. It becomes an instrument integrated into this new managerial practice.

### ***Empowerment and empowerment of employees: encouragement of autonomy and definition of work by objectives.***

Group 6 establishments state that in the event of a minor technical incident in the production or operation of the service, employees are encouraged to first resolve the problem themselves before referring it to the hierarchy. Likewise, they claim that the work to be done by employees is defined by objectives set in advance by the hierarchy and that employees themselves choose how to get there. These results are in agreement with hypothesis 2. Management through competence is positively associated with empowerment and empowerment of employees in their work.

## **4. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN RESULTS**

At the end of our analysis of the data from the REPOSE survey, it appears that the skill-based management method is a fairly well-established practice within French companies. The institutional representation of the company, linked to the Fordist period, is thus gradually outdated but not replaced. In fact, the variables reflecting the organization of work that we have selected, namely autonomy, responsibility, the degree of control, evaluation and the importance of vocational training appear to be very influential and thus mark a transition to a Fordist-type organization, which supervises employees very strongly (firms could be characterized by low difficulties in recruiting, little training expenditure, work defined by precise tasks to be performed, permanent recourse to hierarchy, permanent work control, etc.), to a more "flexible" organization offering more flexible work supervision by favoring autonomy, employee empowerment, evaluation and by devoting a large part of the payroll to training.

## **CONCLUSION**

This empirical study takes up a challenge that is little addressed in quantitative studies closely dealing with the subject of the emergence of the logic of competence: the measurement of the real



diffusion of management by competence within the French company and the factors influencing its adoption by the Company. This study presents our first use of data from the REPONSE 2005 survey. Through a statistical study, we attempted to measure and evaluate the real diffusion of the logic of competence as a new managerial practice widely mobilized at the level of literature. From a methodological point of view, we have tried to build a typology of existing management methods. To do this, we used descriptive analysis methods, namely ACM via the hierarchical classification which revealed six groups of personnel management methods. These groups were identified and described according to descriptive variables already selected for the implementation of management by competence. Highlighting this typology has enabled us to identify the existence of management by competence and therefore to measure the degree of its diffusion at the level of the French company. The results of our statistical analysis clearly show that the shift often announced by scientific speeches and reflections from a traditional management method based on the logic of the position to a new management method based on competence really exists in the field. In fact, between these two extremes, there is a typology of the modes of personnel which clearly shows that there is a continuity between the logic of the position and the logic of competence. Admittedly, the results clearly show the emergence of a new managerial practice which is becoming increasingly responsive at the company level, but the traditional model remains an unreplaced model and widely used in the field.

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