



What do they need to succeed? Development of an apparel merchandising competency framework

Keywords: merchandising skills, knowledge, competency framework

Background. To execute strategic and operational tasks across the complex apparel supply chain, merchandising professionals need specialized knowledge, ranging from product development to forecasting, assortment planning, sourcing, distribution, retail, and marketing (Howse, Hines & Swinker, 2000). Moreover, it has been established that various skills (such as communication, leadership, teamwork, creativity, etc.) are just as important as knowledge for professional success (Robles, 2012). For educators, it is critical to know what skills and knowledge their graduates should have when they enter the industry (Jackson, 2010). Further, there is a need to organize and classify the multitude of merchandising knowledge and skills to facilitate curriculum development. The purpose of this study was to: (a) identify a comprehensive list of merchandising knowledge and skills through an analysis of extant research; (b) categorize these knowledge and skills to create a classification matrix; and (c) based on this matrix, develop an apparel merchandising competency (AMC) framework.

Method. Content analysis was used to identify a comprehensive list of merchandising knowledge and skills. A total of 32 studies that examined knowledge and skills required for business, retail, and merchandising professionals were collected and examined. Articles published in peer reviewed journals such as *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, and *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management* were included. To develop a systematic classification schemata for merchandising knowledge and skills, four competency frameworks (Frazier & Cheek, 2016; Pellegrino & Hilton, 2012; Power, 2010; Yorke & Knight, 2003) were analyzed. Pellegrino and Hilton's (2012) competency domain framework was the most comprehensive, and was therefore used in this study to classify knowledge and skills. The classification procedure consisted of these four stages: (1) differentiation between knowledge and skills *constructs* were made; (2) *categories* of skills and knowledge under each construct were identified; (3) *types* of skills and knowledge were established and classified into each category; and (4) *dimensions* of each type of knowledge and skill were identified and classified accordingly.

Results. Four main *constructs* were identified for the AMC framework: (a) explicit and tacit knowledge, and (b) soft and hard skills. Next, the knowledge and skills identified from these four constructs were divided into the following seven *categories*:

- soft skills: interpersonal (people-related) and intrapersonal (personal traits);
- hard skills: technical (numeracy and technology) and conceptual/thinking;
- explicit knowledge: general apparel knowledge and merchandising knowledge;
- tacit knowledge: professional experience.

Following that, various *types* of knowledge and skills under the seven categories were identified. A total of 16 distinct knowledge and 23 skills *types* were identified. Finally, each type of

knowledge and skill included between 2 to 7 *dimensions*, which were individual skills and knowledge. For example, under the interpersonal *category*, one of the skill *types* was communication, with the following four *dimensions* identified from previous research: written, verbal, listening, and presentation skills. Based on this classification matrix, an apparel merchandising competency framework was developed. The framework presents an integrated and systematic approach of various merchandising knowledge and skills and explains how they relate to each other with respect to identified constructs, categories, and types.

Conclusions and Implications. The results of this study indicate that extant research identified a multitude of knowledge and skills needed for merchandising professionals. In this study, we have compiled a comprehensive list of merchandising knowledge and skills and then systematically classified them into: four constructs, seven categories, 39 types, and a total of 140 individual knowledge and skills dimensions. Based on this classification, we proposed an apparel merchandising competency (AMC) framework that is discipline-specific and outlines the important knowledge and skills required for merchandisers to be successful in the apparel retail industry. Higher education institutions might utilize the AMC framework for identifying learning outcomes and developing curricula for apparel retail and merchandising programs. For retail companies, the framework might be useful when planning various training programs for interns or new employees, as well as assist retailers in increasing their competitiveness within the industry by installing the necessary skills and knowledge into their workforce. In addition, the AMC framework makes an important theoretical contribution by clarifying and organizing merchandising related knowledge and skills to guide future research in identifying most important merchandising knowledge and skills and validating the proposed framework.

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