Competency of Successful Professional Trainers in Thailand in the Disruption Era

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Current disruption era necessitates ongoing skill development for HR through training. Competency of professional trainers is key to training success. In-depth interviews with training managers, professional trainers, and training attendees revealed three components of competency - traits, knowledge, and skills. Traits comprised attitude (i.e., great heart and growth) and personality (i.e., passionate, accessibility, signature, and suitable to audience). Knowledge comprised expertise (i.e., content expertise and company/industry expertise) and experience (i.e., work experience and life experience). Skills comprised learning design skills (i.e., application of appropriate techniques and stakeholder-centered design), delivery skills (i.e., application-oriented and persuasive and inspiring), and developing business skills/entrepreneurship.

Keywords: professional trainer, corporate trainer, successful trainer, competency, soft skills training, disruption era

INTRODUCTION

The disruption era has been characterized by constant and drastic changes resulting from unexpected events and evolutions of existing phenomena (Lubis, 2019; Muljawan, Sulaeman, & Bahri, 2023). These changes are happening at the rate where many businesses and organizations find themselves struggling to keep up and adapt. The disruptive factors such as emerging new technologies and changes in consumer behaviors dictate to businesses and organizations the importance of ongoing skill development for their human resources. Professional trainers with expertise in various areas are in demand and commissioned by organizations to help them achieve the goal of strategic human resource development. Desired knowledge, skills, and attitudes could result from the trainings, leading to employees' improved performance (Bradley University, 2023). Consequently, professional trainer becomes a well-respected profession that has gained much interest because of its potentially rewarding financial compensation and possibly freelance flexibility (Kaine & Josserand, 2019; Stewart & Stanford, 2017). Professional trainers themselves also need to adapt

and continue to develop new skills for the very same reason, to keep up with constant changes, especially, with technology in the digital disruption era. Moreover, freelance professions such as professional trainer are competitive. Intense competition necessitates continuous professional development in order for professional trainers to maintain the competency required of their jobs and employability.

Hiring a professional trainer may be a sizable expenditure but it could also be a justifiable investment that creates value if outcomes of the training were successful and met the expected goals of strategic human resource development. It cannot be overemphasized that only with the competency of professional trainers will the trainings be successful.

The study of competency of successful professional trainers can provide practical guidelines for organizations in determining a suitable trainer. In addition, findings from such a study can be applied to professional development for those who aspire to become professional trainers as well as current professional trainers who wish to continue improving their performance and enhance their competency.

However, there have been few studies that focused on professional trainer as a profession and particularly addressed the competency of successful professional trainers as the construct under investigation. Further, some of these research studies were conducted over a decade ago (e.g., Brinia & Kritikos, 2012; Garrick & McDonald, 1992; Hodge, 2010). Circumstances have changed. The current digital disruption era has extraordinary influences on organizations because of the turbulent business environment that results. Continuous human resource development becomes necessary to equip employees with useful knowledge and skills in adapting to constant changes and challenges. Services of professional trainers are increasingly in demand. These professionals also need to continue professional development to stay current with new technologies and emerging needs of the learners (Brentwood Open Learning College, 2023). These conditions serve as a distinctive context that is worthwhile for the current study of competency of professional trainers. Therefore, this research study was aimed to answer the question, *"What defines the competency of successful professional trainers in the disruption era?"*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional Trainers and Their Roles

A professional trainer can be defined simply as a teacher in a corporate setting. Hence, the terms professional trainer and corporate trainer are used interchangeably to refer to experienced individuals who provide education to employees and managers at all organizational levels (Brentwood Open Learning College, 2023; Munsey, 2023). Professional trainers work closely with managers in human resources and business groups to identify training needs and strategies on a range of work-related topics (Bradley University, 2023). They develop training materials and plan activities for organizing and running a variety of workshops. A professional trainer may also observe performance issues to share with managers and senior stakeholders as well as collect feedbacks to improve on future training sessions (Brentwood Open Learning College, 2023)

Workplace trainings can range from orientation and onboarding to product, quality, and safety trainings (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023). Though, trainings now have expanded beyond corporate policies and procedures and standard technical skills and been purposed for career, team, and organization developments as well as performance improvement (McArdle, 2015).

Some professional trainers work exclusively for a single company. It is not uncommon for large corporations to have in-house trainers due to the number of employees and various trainings needed. Many professional trainers work for a consulting firm that offers training services to companies. Finally, professional trainers may work independently as freelancers (Munsey, 2023). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts that the field of training and development specialists (i.e., professional/corporate trainers) will grow by 9% by 2028. Its growth rate is reported to be above average of all occupations (Munsey, 2023). Similar trend has been observed in the Thai labor market. Professional trainer, as a freelance profession, has gained much interest as an alternative career choice that promises worthwhile compensation and flexibilities. Thailand's labor statistics coincide with the global trend in that more and more active workers have become self-employed, which include freelancers in the different fields. In 2021,

out-of-system labor in Thailand at 19.6 million or 52% of all labor exceeded in-system labor at 18.1 million or 48% (Thailand's National Statistical Office, 2021).

Professional Trainers in the Disruption Era

The disruption era can be defined broadly by the fundamental changes in all aspects of life (Lubis, 2019). Several associative characteristics are explained through the acronym VUCA – Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity. The disruption era is driven by massive and rapid changes having unpredictable patterns (i.e., volatility) causing uncertainties. There is complexity of relationships between factors that cause these changes. Further, the direction of change could be unclear causing ambiguity. Depending on the context of discussion, the impacts of changes or disruptions and the responses by individuals in certain situations and conditions may vary (Muljawan, Sulaeman, & Bahri, 2023).

In the business context, disruptive technology and innovations like 3D printings, electric vehicles, Internet of Things (IoT), virtual reality, and artificial intelligence have been witnessed to shake various industries worldwide. It has been predicted that more than 50% of the workforce will have to learn new skills due to human-machine collaboration. Over one-third of companies will increase their innovation related investments by over half. Spending on technology and services has been forecasted to reach trillions of dollars. Migration to even more technologically disruptive era is evident based on these statistics (Baum, 2019).

It was estimated that 44% of companies are highly susceptible to disruption. Digital disruption is a threat to a firm's security and longevity in its structures and business models. Reinvention becomes necessary for the business models including processes and technologies and especially people to align with the organizational goals (Stonehouse & Konina, 2020). One study found that external factors such as changing market dynamics, competition, and shifts in consumer behaviors could significantly influence disruptive business model innovation of firms. Success of such innovation depends on effective technology management strategy, suitable organizational structure, compatible organizational culture, and devoted corporate governance (Gamage & Gnanapala, 2023). Of these, compatible organizational culture requires that the organization's workforce reinforce and practice the culture that supports the organization to stay viable and effectively respond to disruptions.

Disruptions in business environment create evolving demand in the work environment. Employees experience and respond to disruptions in different ways and may elicit discrete emotions such as frustration and pride. These emotions can motivate employees to respond to the challenges by engaging in job crafting behaviors to maintain their performance and well-being. Understanding how they deal with challenges is critical for effective human resource management in order to provide support and manage employees in all phases of environmental disruptions (Barclay, Kiefer, & Mansouri, 2022). With regard to support, providing trainings to meet the emerging needs of employees and to help them cope with the challenges becomes necessary. In addition to technical or hard skills, soft skills trainings can help employees to stay motivated and successful in their job as they respond to inevitable changes. Soft skills can even be considered key success factors as they complement hard skills (i.e., knowledge and occupational skills) and allow the workforce to adapt more quickly and easily as the future of work continues to evolve (Kenton, 2023; Lau, 2021). Soft skills are qualitative attributes and refer to an employee's workplace behaviors, character, and personality traits (Kenton, 2023; Knowledgehut, 2023). Some of the pertinent soft skills include empathy and emotional intelligence, integrity and ethical responsibility, adaptability and resilience, and mindfulness (Lau, 2021).

Emotional intelligence creates competitive advantage, especially, in a team setting. Empathy and emotional intelligence require self-awareness and enable better listening. Improved communication among team members in turn increases productivity. Integrity and ethical responsibility is critical for long-term success of an organization. In today's fast-paced world, shortcuts and short-term gains are desirable. Having the integrity to do things right to ensure long-term success thus is even more critical. As important is to have ethical employees who have a strong sense of accountability for the outcomes of their actions. They represent a valuable workforce as they also project humility and respect for others (Lau, 2021).

Agility and flexibility go hand in hand with adaptability and resilience. These qualities and skills are especially needed to deal with rapid technological advances. Employees have to keep their mind open, be ready to take on new responsibilities, and adapt their behaviors to suit team members' needs. They also have to be able to manage the uncertainties by implementing new ideas and not feeling discouraged when things go wrong. It is believed that mindfulness is the amplifier of all other soft skills as it allows a person to maintain their center and balance in responding to diverse situations. Mindful people tend to be more emotionally intelligent and adaptable. They are better able to stay focused in difficult situations (Lau, 2021).

Digital disruption drives changes in people's behaviors with regard to the use of technology as it becomes an integral part of every process. There is no exception in education. In a traditional sense, educational institutions must adapt to stay up-to-date to achieve quality learning management (Osodhapiruk, Jenkwao, Deekawong, & Taweesintisut, 2022). Conventional teaching pattern is transformed to digital. Innovative applications emerged making it easier to seek knowledge regardless of geographical boundaries and time. Social media and online tutoring applications allow the reach of a wider and more equal audience (Lubis, 2019).

Students' learning pattern also has changed. Students who were born and grew up in an all-digital environment (i.e., digital natives) find interactive learning media more compatible to their learning style than traditional books. A learning program using interactive learning media combines animation, video, audio, text, and images through a computer or smartphone device allowing users to interact with the program. Through interactivity, users can determine and choose the information they want to learn based on individual needs. Games or simulations are some examples of programs using interactive learning media (Muliyati, Putri, & Fahdiran, 2022).

In a non-traditional education setting such as corporate training, technology has become an integral part of executing quality learning management as well. Different technological tools have been used to enhance training instruction and learning. For instance, presentation becomes more interesting with infographics, video captures, and animation. Interactive media allow brainstorming and poll and other collaborative activities. Further, meetings and conferences are facilitated and virtually enabled by technological communication tools (Education Technology Development and Integration Support, 2021). Hence, professional development is necessary for professional trainers to keep up with changing technology and paradigm shift in education. Further, in a corporate setting, professional trainers are educators of a different audience, the non-traditional or adult learners. The trainer's task of adapting to the changing technology and capitalizing on the emerging innovative teaching tools could become a complex issue because of the limited receptivity of learners who are not digital natives. Thus, professional trainers must be prepared also to meet the challenges of overcoming resistance of learners as they encounter education delivery using unfamiliar format and new technological tools for learning.

The review of literature regarding the roles of professional trainers, especially, in the disruption era helped the researcher to set the parameter of the study. This research focused on *successful soft-skill freelance professional trainers*. The rationale for the stated focus was the increased importance of soft skills trainings in a corporate setting. This trend has been the result of dynamic nature of today's businesses as impacted by the technological disruptions. Also, the competitive market in which freelance professional trainers maintain their career required them to continue professional development in order to enhance desirable competency. We further defined successful professional trainers as top professional trainers who have been praised and recognized for the positive outcomes of their work of training in their area of expertise as well as having received positive referrals among SET50 organizations in Thailand (i.e., the 50 largest publicly listed companies according to the Stock Exchange of Thailand – SET). These individuals would serve as the relevant frame of reference that allows insightful findings to emerge for the research question.

Competency of Successful Professional Trainers

As educators, professional trainers need the same core skills and character traits as traditional teachers. Speaking publicly in front of audiences of all sizes is generally expected. Thus, professional trainers must possess effective communication and interpersonal skills. Advanced observational and analytical skills

together with the ability to provide constructive criticism are required in running successful workshops which could comprise attendees having diverse backgrounds. Especially in a freelancing situation, it is helpful for professional trainers to have strong self-organization and time-management skills. Other important character traits include outstanding patience and adaptability, proficiency in working under pressure, and tenacity and perseverance. More importantly, the commitment to their own continuous improvement will benefit professional trainers as well as those they train (Brentwood Open Learning College, 2023).

The Association of Talent Development (formerly the American Society of Training and Development) suggested four important skills/abilities for a corporate trainer. These include the abilities to a) design and deliver training, b) manage organizational knowledge, c) manage the learning function, and d) measure and evaluate the results of training (Linton, 2022).

With regard to the design and delivery of training, professional trainers use their knowledge as a basis for designing training sessions and programs. The right format is chosen to deliver training. Various tools and techniques are at the discretion of the trainers to appropriately use, including workshops, lectures, video presentations, online learning, training manuals, one-to-one coaching, and group role-play. Assessing specific requirements of individuals within a group setting is also needed to achieve the most effective outcomes for group training. Professional trainers need to have thorough understanding of the context for which the training was developed. This means that they have knowledge of the company's products and services to ensure development of effective training and that they can respond confidently to detailed questions during training sessions.

In managing learning, working with clients to determine their specific needs contribute to training success. Thus, collaboration skills are essential for professional trainers. Discussions and consultations with senior executives, department heads, and other key personnel such as product managers, technical staff, and subject experts in the company generally take place to solicit input for developing the overall training program. Such collaboration ensures that skills requirements and priorities expected by the company are met. Organization and time-management help to support learning management. Professional trainers must be able to schedule sessions to fulfil the company's training priorities by making efficient use of facilities and resources. Appropriate time must be allocated for individual sessions to finish the course and allow time for questions and/or discussion.

Successful trainers actively seek feedbacks from participants to monitor and evaluate the outcome of training sessions. During the training, formative feedback is also possible through interactions to obtain useful information from participants. Problems may be identified in real time and solutions can be developed to address them accordingly.

Other practical perspectives describe similar skills and abilities that are helpful for professional trainer to be successful in their role (e.g., Brentwood Open Learning College, 2023; Munsey, 2023; New York State Association for Education of Young Children, 2012; ProProfs Training Maker, 2023). As expressed by industry experts and practitioners, the relevant set of skills and abilities ensure that professional trainers meet the current and future needs of those being trained as well as the organizational objectives. As important, the professional trainers themselves would be able to advance in their career.

From the theoretical perspective, competency of successful professional trainers may be explained by McClelland's Iceberg Model (1973). McClelland suggested that one's skills and knowledge are only part of the iceberg above the surface that can be easily observed but they do not entirely make up one's competency. Skills represent what one can do. Knowledge is what one knows, including one's experience of things and situations. Not only are these characteristics visible to others, but the individual himself is aware and conscious of them. Skills and knowledge, however, only make up around 20% of a person's competency. The other 80% is accounted for by the other individual characteristics including social role, self-image, traits, and motives (Ghosh, 2020). They are part of the iceberg below the water surface, not visible to others, more difficult to assess, and could even be unconsciously present. However, their influences could determine whether the person fits the job role and contribute greatly to their success. Social role refers to the specific role one plays in a social context, such as teamwork or leadership. Self-image is the perception of one's own abilities and self-confidence. Traits include personal qualities such as

adaptability, creativity, and initiative. Motives drive one's behaviors. The driving factors may include achievement, affiliation, and power (Pacific Executive Search, 2023). The underlying assumption is that these implicit and inherent characteristics are the core element to determine the person's behavior and work performance (Zhao, 2013). The Iceberg Model provides a useful framework for comprehensive understanding of competency. It has been effectively applied by organizations in assessing individuals for decisions regarding hiring, training, and development (Pacific Executive Search, 2023).

A successful professional trainer requires both knowledge and skills that are generally expected by the hiring organizations. These characteristics could be readily observed and assessed. However, the more complex issues relate to determining the hidden characteristics that critically influence the performance of a professional trainer. The specifics such as attitude, values, personalities, and drives that belong to the characteristics of social role, self-image, traits, and motives need to be defined to fit the context and situation of interest. The purpose of this study and its research question thus addressed this need.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants for the study included stakeholders in three distinct groups: 1) training managers, 2) successful professional trainers in Thailand, and 3) training attendees. The data source triangulation approach being used allowed data robustness from varying perspectives and helped to assure trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Group 1 comprised training managers who were in charge of selecting professional trainers and responsible for monitoring the trainings. Purposive sampling was used to obtain individuals who fit this description. A total of 22 training managers from 16 organizations listed in the SET50 of Stock Exchange of Thailand were recruited and agreed to participate in the study.

Group 2 comprised successful professional trainers in Thailand. Purposive and snowball sampling approach was employed in recruiting the participants in this group. Training managers in Group 1 were asked to identify the top three successful professional trainers that they had hired. From the training managers' perspective, successful professional trainers were those who produced desired results from the training they conducted. In addition to meeting this operational definition and to meet the purpose of the study, those identified must also meet two other criteria. First, the trainer must not be full-time employee of the selected organization. Rather, they were invited speakers, freelance trainers, faculty members of educational institution, or affiliated with an external consulting/training firm. Second, the expertise and training areas of the identified trainers shall relate to soft skills. Only trainers who fit these two additional criteria were maintained for interviews as the second source of data. A total of 16 professional trainers were included in this group.

Group 3 comprised of training attendees. Purposive and snowball sampling approach, again, was used. Each of the 16 eligible professional trainers in Group 2 was asked to identify three training attendees who had completed their training course or program and made memorable impression on them. All of the training attendees identified were contacted. Only 16 agreed to participate in the study.

The number of participants in each group allowed the researchers to conduct interviews sufficiently to obtain targeted data and to reach the saturation point where no significantly new data could be obtained.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted with qualified participants. The semi-structured interview protocol was used with a pre-determined set of questions to guide the interview. These questions allowed the interviewees to delineate pertinent characteristics pertaining to the competency of a successful professional trainer. Experts in the qualitative research methodology and subject area experts assessed validity of the interview questions in the use of language and content relevance. The approval (# ECNIDA 2020/0031) for this research project involving human subjects was received from the Ethics Committee in Human Research at National Institute of Development Administration.

Each interview lasted one to two and a half hours. There were three different stages to the interview – introduction, body, and conclusion. In the introduction stage, participants were informed of the study objectives, the confidentiality of their participation and responses, and informed consent. The researcher asked the participants for permission to audio-record the interviews. Participants were explained that only the researcher and the researcher's team had access to any identifying information of the participants. Transcribed responses would be reported as aggregate results. Any quotes used in the report would be referenced to the individuals using aliases. At the participants' discretion, they may opt not to answer any question. Their responses and/or refusal to respond would not affect the evaluation of their work performance in any way.

The semi-structure interview protocol using pre-determined questions, based on appreciative inquiry (AI) principle, guided the main body of the interview. The principle of AI emphasizes the implicit nature of the dialogue as encouraged by asking positive questions, allowing data to be obtained from the best experiences of the participants (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008).

For the conclusion of the interview, member-checking was performed. This process involved summarizing the preliminary results with the interviewee, asking to ascertain the accuracy of the interpretation of their responses (i.e., data trustworthiness). The researcher also solicited any additional input at this stage and thanked the interviewee for their participation.

Of the total of 54 participants, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with 40 of them. The remaining 14 participants were interviewed in pairs. During the data collection period, Thailand was experiencing the uncertainties of Covid-19 pandemic and changing restrictions. Therefore, both in-person and online (Zoom) interviews were conducted, as allowed by the Thailand's Health Authority. In-person interview was possible only for seven participants. After the restriction for in-person gathering was in place, interviews with the remaining participants were conducted online.

Data Analysis

Data were transcribed from audio-recording. The procedures for thematic analysis were used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006): 1. knowing the data, 2. initial coding, 3. searching for themes, 4. reviewing themes, 5. defining and naming themes, and 6. reporting. This process was repeated multiple times by four individuals, including the principal researcher and three research assistants. To determine inter-rater reliability, we aimed to achieve the consensus by all four raters. However, in cases where discrepancies in interpretations occurred, the acceptable criterion used was the agreement by three out of four raters or 75% agreement. As a result, distinct themes emerged to define the competency of successful professional trainers in Thailand in the disruption era.

RESULTS

Summary of Participants' Backgrounds

For training managers in Group 1; there were 15 females, six males, and one non-specified. The average age was 39 years. Nine out of 22 were between 31-40, seven were 41 and older, and only two with less than 30 years. Regarding the type of organization, six of the training managers worked for a bank and equal number of two training managers in each area of communication technology, energy and utilities, food and beverages, and transportation and logistics. Other business areas represented were petro-chemicals, financial funds, construction, and real estate.

Professional trainers in Group 2 were those receiving at least 20,001 baht to more than 100,000 baht per one day of training. Of the 16 of them, nine were females and seven males. The average age of this group was 46 years with five aged between 41-50, five between 51-60 years, three between 31-40 years, and three non-specified. The associated expertise and areas of soft skill training included, from the most to the least as identified by the following numbers; leadership (5), innovation (4), communication and presentation (4), learning development (2), and mindset (1).

Of the 16 former training attendees in Group 3, there were nine females and seven males with average age of 47 years; seven were between 51-60, six were between 41-50, and only three were between 31-40

years. Positions and associated occupational areas included, from the most to the least as identified by the following numbers; top executives and upper management (6), human resources management (5), engineering (1), sales (1), education (1), marketing (1), and logistics (1).

Components of Competency of Successful Professional Trainer

Interviews with the three distinct groups of stakeholders revealed three pertinent components that define competency of a successful professional trainer in Thailand: Traits, Knowledge, and Skills. In the following, each component and corresponding themes and sub-themes are explained in details. Selected quotes from the interviews are provided to further illustrate the corresponding sub-themes.

Traits

Attitude. Attitude consists of Great Heart and Growth.

Great Heart. Great Heart refers to a professional trainer's generosity and their nature of giving. The benevolence as the authentic soul of a teacher can be perceived in both work and non-work settings. Monetary reward is not the primary motivator for such individual. Positive thinking and confidence in the ability of self and of the learners (i.e., can-do attitude) as well as willingness to listen and acceptance are representative of this sub-theme of attitude.

Kolkai (alias, training manager) talked about a trainer who dedicated their physical and emotional energy and even money. *"(Name of a trainer) is an authentic teacher who doesn't expect anything less than a real change for their students. They didn't focus on the pay. If it wasn't enough or we didn't get the result, they would come back without charging extra. It was to the point where I thought I couldn't bother them anymore. This trainer wasn't fixed on the 6-hour agreement and went beyond what was required. And for instance, when we launched a new company's project, this trainer would spend money out of their pocket to experience our service to give us feedback on our process. They were more than a trainer but a truly dedicated teacher in that sense." (Kolkai)*

Growth. With regard to growth and self-improvement, a professional trainer acts as a change agent who is always ready to adapt. They continue learning to improve their own skills as well as advancing knowledge in the area of expertise and in new technology to incorporate in their training.

The quote from Feemeu (alias, professional trainer) illustrated a professional trainer who is ready to adapt. *"Most course designs get good amount of feedbacks whether it is ok, if anything needs adjusted. Sometimes if learners can't visualize, we have to try to fine-tune so they could. Say, if we had already drafted the workshop for about a month and a half and the organization felt there needed to be a re-emphasis on certain concept, we would not object adding another session in between to make sure they understand it. For instance, we took them to conduct field-interviews with clients which was somewhat intensive and thorough training. But we got feedback that they understood the concept but still weren't confident in the actual practice. They wanted more guidance for what would be correct or incorrect. They requested for more session to allow them practical training. So, we added coaching session that was needed." (Feemeu)*

Personality. Personality consists of Passionate, Accessibility, Signature, and Suitable to Audience.

Passionate. Passionate refers to a professional trainer displaying energetic personality and dedication during and outside of the training. They sacrifice their time so the training attendees are truly able to improve their learning.

Kosana (alias, training attendee) explained about a dedicated professional trainer who sacrifices oneself inside and outside of class. *"She's not one who teaches only in class and ends it there. She's also dedicated to coaching me afterwards......she understands that it's not possible to only teach in class and get every student to learn and be able to apply the skills. It would be possible only with coaching. And if the entire team wanted time outside what was scheduled, it would be possible also." (Kosana)*

Accessibility. Accessibility refers to a professional trainer being approachable. Contact and communication with them are possible via various channels. They are also modest, brainy but not bragging.

Nae Naew (alias, training manager) talked about an approachable trainer. *"The thing about Trainer Sungsom (alias) that I observed during their teaching is that they're very informal because they need to*

relax the learners' behaviors….starting from the body language. They walked in with a smile, greeting the students like 'Oh, you got here early, didn't you?' It's greeting that's not robotic but human." (Nae Neaw)

From a training attendee's perspective, Feukfonn talked about an accessible trainer. "*Why I respect and like Pi Mee Ong so much is the sincerity. Some trainers are business first. While they make you feel good when they teach and being informal but there's still barrier. Like Pi Mee Ong, they're sincere and that can be perceived and winning our hearts. During lunch break, Pi Mee Ong sat and had lunch with the training attendees and talked about everything. Most other trainers I observed had lunch separately with their team, not mingling with attendees.*" (Feukfonn)

Signature. Signature refers to a professional trainer being unique, serving as a role model, and becoming an influencer.

Rubb Rue's (alias, training attendee) quote illustrated a professional trainer who serves as a role model. *"I met the role model in personal development and continuous learning. Sensei said to me one thing 'when we do something, don't bring up example, condition, or criteria that is different.' Like Sensei having two kids, working full-time but how is it that she's able to continue her personal development. I came to realization. Yes, Sensei could do it and assured you and everyone that they too can do it."* (Ruub Rue)

Suitable to Audience. Suitable to audience refers to a professional trainer having the personality that aligns with the area of teaching, the learners, the human resources, and the organization.

Kosana (alias, training manager) illustrated the compatibility of a professional trainer with the organization. *"We have to look at the style of teaching in addition to proven knowledge of the trainer. If the style is not compatible with our business context, they may not be selected. Before we hire them to teach, we need them to do an 'align contact' with our executives to determine if our chemistries align whether we talk the same language and how much they understand our identity."* (Kosana)

Knowledge

Expertise. Expertise consists of Content Expertise and Company/Industry Expertise.

Content Expertise. Content expertise refers to a professional trainer having knowledge in the area of teaching and being able to select credible content. They have both breadth and depth of up-to-date knowledge. They have credentials and are regarded as an expert in that area.

Kosana (alias, training manager) said *"Trainer Feemeu (alias) teaches Design Thinking. They're truly a guru in this area because they directly studied and practiced design thinking since their college years at Stanford Design School. After graduated, they opened a consulting firm specializing in design thinking."* (Kosana)

Company/Industry Expertise. Company/industry expertise refers to a professional trainer's knowledge and understanding of the context of the organizational condition and of the learners. They are prepared by educating themselves about the industry, organization, and learners so training can be adjusted per the basis of needs identified.

Karnklai (alias, professional trainer) talked about a professional trainer doing their homework before teaching at a bank. *"When I go a bank, I take all the brochures to study at home. I do this at every bank."* (Karnklai)

Experience. Experience consists of 2.2.1 Work Experience and 2.2.2 Life Experience.

Work Experience. Work experience refers to a professional trainer drawing from past work experience to share and to give relevant real-life examples. Doing so enhances credibility, understanding, and practical solutions for learners.

Mee Ong (alias, professional trainer) explained how work experience had helped them in understanding the inner-working of an organization. *"It's probably because I'd worked in the industry for 27 years so I understand their language in this type of organization. Why do I know that sales and finance departments always argue?....it's my industry's business experience that helps me to connect with what the learners are experiencing."* (Mee Ong)

Life Experience. Life experience refers to a professional trainer sharing and exchanging personal experiences to help the learners to achieve desired learning outcomes.

Konkai (alias, training attendee) talked about a professional trainer whose life experience was extraordinary. *"Somebody who can be here needs to succeed first in life and being able to share their tacit knowledge. (Name of a trainer) has disability with Polio but they are an associate professor teaching supervisory skill. They told us story since they were in school and how they became successful. That story provided a connection to the course content. If you're book-smart but never practice, that's no good."* (Konkai)

Skills

Learning Design Skills. Learning design skill consists of Application of Appropriate Technique and Stakeholder-Centered Design.

Application of Appropriate Technique. Application of appropriate technique refers to a professional trainer using a variety of teaching methods and tools in correspondence to the content. Creativities and innovations are also introduced such as design of the physical classroom, design of online delivery, establishing ground rules, and use of helpful technologies. All of these help to facilitate learning.

Jettana and Pattana (aliases, professional trainers) described how tools and technologies are used in consideration to the learners in an online setting. *"(Jettana shared how to use technology for the most impact.) We told them don't worry if you feel comfortable turning on camera and mic, do that. Many times we receive positive feedback for this flexibility that it doesn't create pressure. They could lose the enjoyment and not get good outcome. (Pattana added.)" (Jettana and Pattana)*

Stakeholder-Centered Design. Stakeholder-centered design refers to a professional trainer designing the instruction by giving consideration to the stakeholders including supervising personnel of the training curriculum, learners, and organization. Such consideration allows the training outcomes to meet the goals of the client. Understanding of the learners' diversity also guides needed adjustment. Further, value can be created from the organizational perspective.

Triamprom (alias, professional trainer) talked about the instructional design with the stakeholders in mind. *"For instance, if the team used a lot of reports, we'd find out what types of reports, for what purposes, what issues are there, and what they feel is ideal. Asking series of questions until we have some understanding as well as looking at their actual cases to identify any issue. The teaching of design is not one size fits all. Like for banking, it's not the same 'less is more' style like a start-up. There are lots of information. The report then has to be easy-to-read, easy-to-understand." (Triamprom)*

Delivery Skill. Delivery skill consists of Application-Oriented and Persuasive and Inspiring.

Application-Oriented. Application-oriented refers to a professional trainer effectively communicate in their teaching, resulting in learner's understanding. They use relatable examples to clarify the application aspect of what is learned.

Mee Ong (alias, professional trainer) talked about instructional delivery that guides understanding and application. *"When I teach, in the morning, I'd tell them to think of a coach that's close to their heart. When they told me, I asked them about the qualities of this coach and I remember them. When I teach about trust later in the day, I say 'when X talked about Z (X's favourite coach) this morning, there's trust in Z.' The example refers to the theory we're learning. Say if someone's favourite coach is their mother because she never judges them. When I teach about listening to our 'coachee' without prior judgement, I'll refer to how Y talked about their own mother whose mindset is that of a coach." (Mee Ong)*

Persuasive and Inspiring. Persuasive and inspiring refers to the delivery skill that inspires. A professional trainer is able to retain the learners' attention and focus, to encourage, to inspire, and to create a learning atmosphere and energy that is positive.

Nae Neaw (alias, training manager) talked about an inspiring trainer. *"Trainer Sungsom (alias) knows what to say to encourage you. Each person to come up and present is nervous, some more than the others. She figures out each person's strengths and potentials. She pep-talks and encourages you like nervousness in fact is important for presentation or teaching. Nervousness helps us to be alive and alert." (Nae Neaw)*

Sueksa (alias, training attendee) explained how inspiration results from feedback received. *"I feel like I can submit my works multiple times and the teacher will not be bothered. That's because they want me to get it right. The teacher gives feedback to correct any found mistakes and to assure you if you already got*

it right. They're excited and happy for you and even wanting to share your work with other students."
(Sueksa)

Developing Business Skills/Entrepreneurship. Developing business skills/entrepreneurship refers to a professional trainer being able to capitalize on the marketing opportunities for their work by expanding the business. The expansion may be for the existing training services or into related areas such as book publishing or YouTube channel talk show.

Tuumjing (alias, professional trainer) talked about business skill in creating communication channel like webpage or book for marketing purposes. *"We have to create our own brand so we're not seen as a rookie. Making yourself known is important because it helps you get jobs. People know what you're good at, without bragging. We use the webpage or book as supplements to let people know more about you and your area of expertise." (Tuumjing)*

DISCUSSION

Results revealed components that characterize the competency of a successful professional trainers in Thailand in the disruption era. These components include 1) traits, 2) knowledge, and 3) skills.

Traits

The image of a "teacher" was reflected in the competency of a professional trainer. The stakeholders referred to sacrifice, dedication, commitment, selflessness, and non-monetary motivation. The mentions of these qualities were unique findings, not previously reported in literature. Asian culture, specifically Thai, may have exerted its influences on the evaluation of the role and image of professional trainers. They are regarded as teachers who possess not only the knowledge but the benevolence of a giver. The latter is even more important trait and expected of a competent professional trainer.

With regard to growth, continuous learning and personal development is important to the competency of a successful professional trainer. By keeping abreast with the development in their subject area of expertise and in technology, professional trainers are able to apply current knowledge in their teaching and improve the effectiveness of their instruction. Especially, incorporating innovative technologies into quality education management allows professional trainers to competently respond to changes in the digital disruption era.

In addition to the determination and passionate energy that drive professional trainers, their signature or the individual's uniqueness gives them the charisma to be a role model and influencer. It is possible that in the past, personalities were not as prevalent as the teaching ability for professional trainers to succeed. However, the current age of social media necessitates professional trainers to develop a signature or a unique persona to be memorable. In addition, creating a differentiating curriculum could also serve as a signature for a professional trainer to stand out.

The compatibility with the subject area, the context of the organization, and the audience further contributes to the competency of successful professional trainers. This finding may suggest how personal characteristics such as years of professional experience, age, or gender could determine perceived suitability of a trainer with the training subject area.

Knowledge

As reported in literature, being an expert in the subject area provides credibility and likely success for the professional trainers. Our findings similarly showed that area expertise relates to competency. Moreover, continuous development of that expertise and even innovations could prove worthwhile for professional trainers. Intellectual works could result. Their reputation and recognition among the general public as well as associated credibility would enhance. Closely related to knowledge and expertise perhaps is the professional experience of the trainer. Our study showed that experiences of professional trainers, in the profession as well as in personal life, contribute to their competency.

Skills

One important skill for a successful professional trainer is application of knowledge, incorporating it into the training. According to our findings, such skill relates to the design of the training using various tools and technologies with the stakeholders in mind. Further, the transfer of knowledge, to be effective, requires applicability and inspiration.

In the digital disruption era, the skill of a professional trainer in using online media such as YouTube Channel or social networking platforms is further highlighted. They are important tools that could enhance training instruction and delivery as well as enable entrepreneurial activities. For organizations, these tools serve as communication channels to contact and recruit trainers.

The components of competency of successful professional trainers we uncovered in this qualitative study were in line with the perspectives reported by Lolo and Sudira (2018) in that there were three types of competencies required of educators – professional, personality, and social. As educators; knowledge, skills, and unique characteristics are prominent to the competency of professional trainers. Professional competency relates to knowledge and skills that contribute to the subject area expertise in both theories and applications. Continuous learning and professional development are necessary to maintain currency of knowledge and to enhance various skills needed for performing their role. Personality competency provides professional trainers with credibility and potential to serve as inspirational role model for the learners. Further, social competency allows professional trainers to have effective communication, collaboration, adaptability, and meaningful relationships with those they work with.

CONCLUSION – IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

This study contributes to the body of the knowledge in some unique ways with regard to the content, context, and methodology. In terms of content, the study provided comprehensive view, with concrete examples, on the competency as key success factor for professional trainers in the disruption era. The components, associated themes and sub-themes, as well as examples shared by the interviewees could be the focus for the development of training program for current and future trainers. Current professional trainers could use findings from this study for their own improvement. Enhanced competency would secure their relevance and employability in this profession. Future professional trainers may use study's findings as the guidelines for their own development of competency needed to succeed. For training managers in identifying qualified trainers, the similar guidelines may be used in completing this task.

In terms of context, the study addressed the disruption era where turbulent business environment creates demand by organizations for continuous human resource development. To competently provide training services, professional trainers also need to continue professional development to stay current with emerging needs of the learners.

In terms of methodology, data source triangulation (i.e., three different data sources) allowed robustness of data and enhanced data trustworthiness. From these varying perspectives, we were able to capture the comprehensive characterization of competency of successful professional trainers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

The qualitative nature of this study limited the sample size. Future studies may employ this study's initial findings to develop a survey instrument to administer with a larger sample. Such quantitative manner of investigation will provide greater data and allow statistical comparisons on various aspects of the study. As a result, generalizability and applicability of results could increase also.

The study focused on established professional trainers of soft skills. Future studies may explore similar perspectives of the stakeholders but toward professional trainers of the hard skills area of training (e.g., data analytics, product design and development, accounting) as well as novice trainers. Similarly, this study only focused on "external" professional trainers to the organizations. Future studies of in-house trainers, full-time corporate trainers of the organization could uncover practical findings that guide internal development of the organization's own successful in-house trainers.

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