Exploring the Roles and Competencies of HR Consultants in Thailand: A Case Study

Marisa Chaopruttipong[1*]

Corresponding author email: khun.marisa1@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The objectives of this study were to describe the roles and responsibilities accepted by HR consultants in the Thai business environment and to examine the competencies of HR consultants that are suitable for the stated needs of organizations based in Thailand. The research design employed qualitative research, with a case study serving as the research strategy. The data collection methods were in-depth interviews and document analysis. 12 people—HR consultant, HR director, HR manager, vice president, board of executives, and general manager—were participants. The findings categorized the roles of HR consultants in Thailand into three groups: human developers or teachers, organization helpers or mentors, and business partners. Additionally, the competencies suitable for HR consultants in the Thai business environment were divided into four groups, each representing a body of knowledge, skills, attributes, and ethics. This research suggests implications for five groups: practitioners, clients of HR consultants, the education field, HR associations, and the theoretical domain.

Keywords: HR Consultants, HR Roles, HR Competencies, Thailand

[1] Independent Scholar

Background and Signification of the Research Problem

Since 1994, consulting services have been in high demand among business, non-profit, and governmental organizations in western countries. Every year, many experienced workers join the management consulting profession to provide consulting services (Barcus & Wilkinson, 1994). This book notes that management consulting marked the beginning of consulting firms; however, it asserts that these companies must continuously incorporate new services.

In Thailand, the consulting profession has emerged as the most challenging job for workers with extensive or moderate experience who seek a new career where they can apply their knowledge and experiences to assist individuals or organizations in resolving their problems or enhancing their operations. The number of consultants in Thailand has recently risen, as evidenced by data from the Thai Consultant Database Center (TCDC, 2024), which reports 10,115 registered consultants, including HR professionals.

A business consultant is expected to possess a diverse array of qualities. In the book "The Definitive Guide to UK Consulting Firms" by Restell & Kumar (2008), a study that included interviews with prominent business executives outlined the following characteristics of a consultant: entrepreneurial, intellectual, curious, resilient, knowledgeable in their field, academically well-rounded with diverse interests, problem-solving oriented, capable of quick thinking, proficient under pressure, adept at managing uncertainty, effective communicators, attuned to the needs of entrepreneurs, possessing emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, proactive, eager to learn, cheerful, dynamic, and flexible. The fundamental competencies that a consultant must possess, as demonstrated by Caluwé and Reitsma (2010), include the ability to create a favorable atmosphere, listening, sensitivity, communication, presentation, persuasion, integrity, reliability, loyalty, and the ability to generate a vision, as well as flexibility, analytical skills, conceptual thinking, learning orientation, creativity, balanced judgment, awareness of the external environment, and vision generation.

Research reveals that despite the recent surge in the use of consulting services, the quality of these consultations remains largely unknown. The competency of the consultants is the most important factor that influences the quality of consulting services. Some people or organizations that have experience using HR consulting services are still not confident that the HR consultants who gave them advice were qualified or had suitable competency to help them. Meanwhile, most consulting firms aim to satisfy their clients by either recruiting and selecting qualified consultants or developing their own to effectively serve them. Therefore, both parties find themselves in a precarious situation: the companies require the services of consultants, and the consulting companies require metrics to evaluate the quality of their consultants. As someone who has worked in personnel management

and HR for over 40 years and as the previous president of the Personnel Management Association of Thailand, I decided to study this issue to find solutions to these problems.

The researcher has proposed the following study questions:

1. What are the roles and responsibilities of HR consultants in Thailand?
2. Which HR consultants' competencies produce good results in the Thai business environment?

Research Objectives

1. To describe the roles and responsibilities accepted by HR consultants in the Thai business environment.
2. To examine the competencies of HR consultants that are suitable for the stated needs of organizations based in Thailand.

Literature Review

Human Resource Management (HRM)

"HRM is the utilization of human resources to achieve organizational objectives" (Mondy & Noe, 2005). As stated by Cascio (2016), the evolution of HRM has four growth stages. The first stage of HRM emphasized employee concerns such as screening applicants, conducting orientation for new employees, collecting and storing personal data on each employee, planning the company picnic, and circulating memos. The "Personnel Department" was the department responsible for these functions. The second stage of HRM began after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed. This stage was considered "the government accountability stage." HRM functions during this stage were emphasized on antidiscrimination laws, pension laws, health and safety laws, federal regulatory agencies and their interpretive guidelines, and court rulings affecting virtually every aspect of employment.

The third stage was referred to as "organizational accountability". During this stage, the HR department's responsibilities related to social trends accelerated demands for improving the quality of work life, managing cultural and ethnic diversity, and continuing training and retraining.

In the 1990s, HRM evolved to the fourth stage. We can refer to this stage as a "strategic partnership." It focused on the roles played in the struggle of both large and small firms to gain and sustain a competitive advantage in the worldwide marketplace. Top management. This stage emphasized the roles of top management and line managers in looking to the HR department to control costs, enhance competitiveness, and add value to the organization in everything.

The functions of HRM include: HR research and information systems; union/labor relations; employee assistance; compensation and benefits; organization and job design; human resource planning; performance management systems; and selection and staffing, as stated by McLean (2006, p. 11).

Human Resource Development (HRD)

McLagan (1989) introduced the McLagan HR wheel, illustrating the connection between HRM and HRD, as seen in Figure 1. This model points out the integration of three principal functions within human resource development: (1) training and development to augment employees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes; (2) organization development to enhance the effectiveness of the organization through systematic change processes; and (3) career development to assist employees in navigating their career paths.

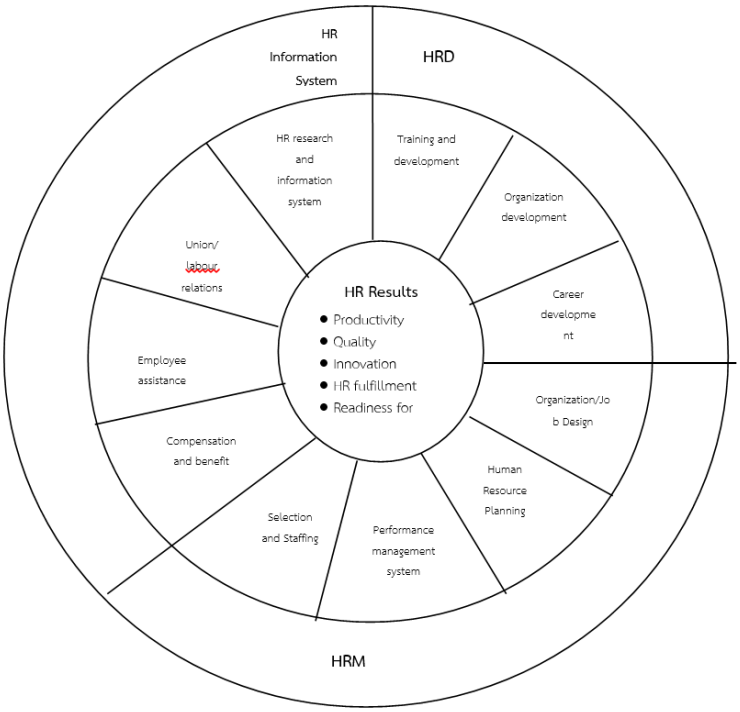

Figure 1: McLagan's Human Resource Wheel
Source: McLagan (1989)

According to Gilley, Eggland, and Maycunich (2002) the HRD mission is composed of four areas as shows in figure 2.

Results	Short term	Individual Development	Performance Management
	Long term	Career Development	Organization Development
		Individual	Organization
		Focus	

Figure 2: Principles of HRD Model
Source: Gilley, Eggland, and Maycunich (2002)

The principal components of the HRD mission are: (1) individual development, which aims to augment employees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes to enhance their current performance; (2) career development, which focuses on long-term advancement by evaluating individual interests and abilities to strategize for future roles; (3) performance management, which addresses the organization collectively, ensuring employees possess the requisite skills and motivation for optimal performance; and (4) organizational development, which seeks to enhance overall organizational efficacy through structural modifications, cultural shifts, and strategic planning.

Organization Development (OD)

Between 1940 and 1960, organizations and people began to benefit from the sharpened philosophy and methods of organization development (OD) (Swanson & Holton, 2009).

"OD is any process or activity, based on the behavioral sciences, that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop in an organizational setting enhanced knowledge, expertise, productivity, satisfaction, income, interpersonal relationships, and other desired outcomes, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation, region, or, ultimately, the whole of humanity" (McLean 2006, p. 9).

Spector (2021) defines OD as a family of techniques designed to help organizations change for the better. It entails the application of behavioral science principles and procedures to help employees improve performance and interact more effectively with coworkers.

The entire organization, or a significant portion of it, participates in OD, which aims to bring about significant changes in the organization's operations.

HR Consultants: Roles and Responsibilities

According to Gilley, Eggland, and Maycunich (2002), many consultants enter the consulting profession from the ranks of the HRD field. In HRD, there are two primary types of consulting: performance and organizational development.

Snell, Moris and Bohlander (2013) stated that many HR managers go outside their organizations for professional assistance from qualified consultants. HR managers expect consultants to solve a variety of HR problems.

There are various issues and problems that HR managers expect consultants to address and solve. According to Snell, Moris, and Bohlander (2013), most consulting firms specialized in one or two areas of expertise. The areas for which consultants are used most frequently are pension plans, executive recruitment, health and welfare plans, psychological assessment, wage and salary administration, job evaluation, and executive compensation. Those enlisted consultants can assist organizations in areas such as selection, training, employee motivation and satisfaction, performance appraisal, and the design of organizational structures and working conditions.

As stated by Elaine Dickson in the book Handbook of Management Consultant Services by Barcus and Wilkinson (1994), “the human resource functions are broad. The human resource functions encompass a wide range of activities related to the human aspect of an enterprise, and they can take on diverse forms within different organizational settings.

Competency Concept

Human resource management history has documented the competency method for approximately thirty years. In 1973, David C. McClelland published a research paper ‘Testing for competency rather than for intelligence’, which has been credited with launching the competency movement in psychology (McClelland, 1973).

According to Rothwell (2005), the term competency can refer to "an underlying characteristic of an employee that results in effective and/or superior performance in a job."

Spencer and Spencer (1993) defined competency as the combination of an individual's underlying attributes, skills, traits, knowledge, and motives that have been casually related to superior job performance.

According to Cooper, Ken (2000), "competency is a cluster of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that affects a major part of one's job."

Study of HR Consultants Competencies in Thailand and Other Countries

There are a few studies concerning HR consultant competency. Most studies regarding this topic focused on HR professionals or management consultants. For examples: Ulrich (1997, p. 251) suggested a three-domain framework of HR competencies, which includes knowledge of business, delivery of HR, and management of change processes, as shown in Figure 3. He explained that competencies in each domain contribute in different ways to the overall performance of HR professionals.

In 2006, the Personnel Management Association of Thailand (PMAT), a professional association of personnel managers, personnel officers, labor administrators, academic professors, and lecturers in Thailand, reported that they had set core competencies for HR professionals from their study of HR professional competencies, as shown in figure 4.

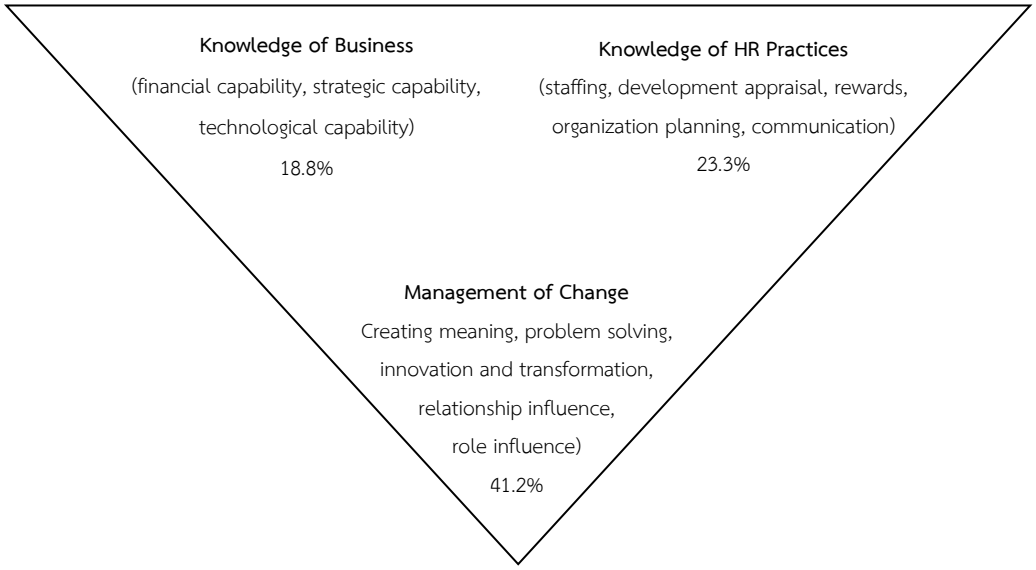

Figure 3: Relative competencies for HR professionals as business partners (data from 12,689 associates)
Source: Ulrich (1997, p.251)

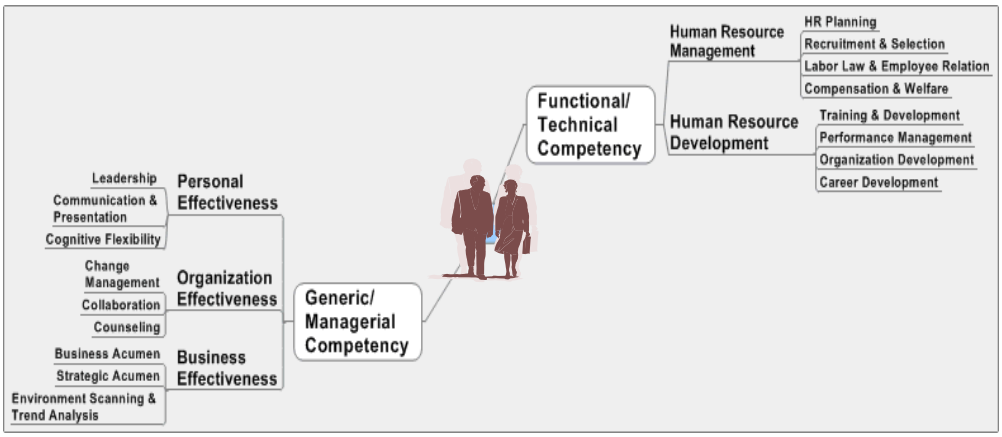

Figure 4 Competencies of HR professional

Source: Personnel Management Association of Thailand

Thai Context and Culture

As said by Williams, Dobson, and Walters (1996, p. 24), culture is a significant factor in the success of strategic implementation. Because organizational culture is a significant contributor to strategic analysis and the development of strategy, it influences what other members of the organization attend to, how they interpret this information, and how they react. “If we wish to change organizational culture, we will need to influence the thoughts and behavior of individual employees" (Williams, Dobson, and Walters, 1996).

The significant of teacher in Thai Context

In Thai society, the term "kroo," or teacher, has many meanings and influences Thai people from birth until they grow up. Thai people are familiar with various metaphors, such as "Mother is the first teacher in our lives," "Teacher is the mold of the nation (Mae Pim Khong Chat), "Teacher is the candle light," and "Teacher is the leader of life." Teerasak Akarabavon (2001, p. 10–27) defines the term “kroo” as a person who has a career concerning teaching and supports the learners in many ways. He explained that “Kroo” has four important roles: (1) build a new generation; (2) develop human resources; (3) maintain the nation's culture; and (4) cure society. Summery defines "Kroo" as an individual within society who assumes the role of a human resource developer, aiming to elevate the soul's level in accordance with societal norms. In order to achieve this, "Kroo" must recognize the worth of humanity and guide the student towards the correct perspective.

Research Methodology

For the research design, qualitative research was used, as was a case study for the research strategy. The researcher selects an in-depth interview and document analysis as the main data collection methods. The research process entails emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the data's meaning.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected from documents and in-depth interviews with 14 participants from these three groups:

1. HR consultants in Bangkok and its surrounding areas who have at least ten years of experience in HR consulting.
2. HR managers that have experience using the services of HR consultants.
3. CEO or M.D. in the organizations that have used HR consultants' services before

Table 1 displays a list of the participants along with their backgrounds. To keep it confidential for these participants, the researcher used codes instead of their names. As this research is case study research, the researcher divided these participants in the table into two groups: the first group includes P01-P07, who work and reflect their views and experience as HR consultants, and the second group includes P08-P14, who express their opinions and experience as HR consultants' clients.

Table 1: List of the participants

Code	Position	Age	Gender	Working years	Nature of Business	HR Working Years
	HR Consultants					
P 01	HR Consultant	69	Male	48	Freelance	40
P 02	HR Consultant	59	Male	36	Freelance	36
P 03	HR Consultant	52	Female	32	Consulting Company	25
P 04	HR Consultant	40	Male	20	Consulting Company	20
P 05	HR Consultant	42	Male	22	Consulting Company	22
P 06	HR Consultant	62	Female	41	Freelance	41
P 07	HR Consultant	45	Female	25	Consulting Company	20

Table 1: List of the participants (Continued)

Code	Position	Age	Gender	Working years	Nature of Business	HR Working Years
	HR Consultants 'Clients					
P 08	HR Director	58	Female	36	Construction Company	36
P 09	HR Manager	59	Male	35	Trading Company	20
P 10	HR Manager	50	Male	28	Finance	26
P11	HR Manager	48	Male	26	IT Company	26
P 12	Vice President	59	Male	39	Public Enterprise	15
P 13	Board of Executives	59	Male	39	Public Enterprise	20
P 14	General Manager	60	Male	40	Industry	20

Quality of the Study

Triangulation of data sources was applied in this research. This research uses the technique of comparing and cross-checking the consistency of information derived at different times and by different means. This has been achieved by comparing the perspectives of individuals from diverse backgrounds and points of view, as represented in the participants' selections. Furthermore, written evidence in the form of individual e-mail reports, documents, and interview transcription reports can be incorporated.

Ethical Protocol

According to Creswell and Poth's (2018) suggestion, the researcher asked the participants to sign an informed consent form before they participated in this study and gave each participant an opportunity to ask questions. Moreover, the researcher maintained participant privacy and confidentiality by using a code to represent each participant instead of their name. All research-related documents were kept in a locked filing cabinet to make sure that they remained confidential and secure.

Limitation of the Study

This research collects data from three groups of participants: HR consultants, HR managers, and CEOs, or M.D.s, who work in Bangkok, and parameter only.

Finding and Discussion

In this paper, I have presented and discussed the findings concerning the roles and competencies of HR consultants only.

Finding about the roles of HR consultants in Thailand,

From the findings concerning this point, I concluded that the roles of HR consultants in Thailand are divided into three groups: the role of human developer or teacher, the role of organization helper or mentor, and the role of business partner, as shown in figure 5.

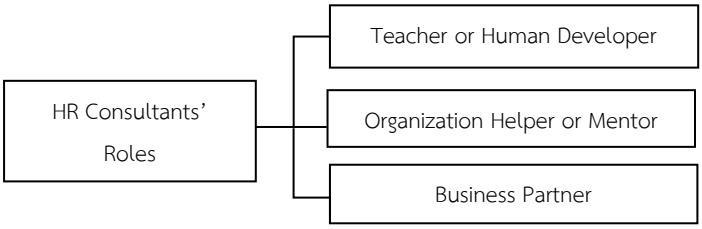

Figure 5 Roles of HR consultants in Thailand

As a human developer or teacher, the responsibilities or activities that are done by HR consultants are: to transfer knowledge; to train the employees; to coach; to suggest or supervise the executive, HR staff, and employees. The interesting concept that was picked up from the informants is the role of a "teacher," or "kroo" in Thai. The meaning of this term seems to be the common meaning, but for Thais, it gives a feeling of Thai context and culture as the statement of the informants: P01: " *We will have a good chance to be a line manager. I mean, suggest a line manager."* P02: "*Actually, the role of a consultant is to assist. We think that they are people who have some problems and need help. I think it should be like, "Teacher."* P03: "HR *consultants are like teachers who teach students who fail. It is like we train them to pass the test".* P09: "*The important thing is to transfer knowledge that customers can do by themselves."* In the Thai context, teachers have more roles than teaching students in the classroom. This accorded with the statement of Teerasak Akarabavon (2001) mentioned in the literature review.

The second category of roles involves serving as an organization's helper or mentor. This concept refers to the activities of HR consultants in helping clients find a way out of their problems or solve them. In other ways, the consultants may guide or propose alternatives to manage or practice for their clients, as the following statements emerged from the interview: P06: "*We just guide the best; however, the duty to make decisions belongs to our clients, not us.*" P07: "*For me, the role of HR consultant is to be a mentor, teacher, or the one who helps the organization solve its problems.*

Finally, when discussing the role of HR consultants as business partners, it's important to note that there are two distinct statuses for HR consultants. Firstly, as employees of the consulting company, HR consultants are responsible for achieving the business goals of their company. Therefore, in their current role, they must establish relationships with their clients and promote their company to potential future clients. Meanwhile, as the consultants of the clients, HR consultants have to work with their clients concerning the business goals of their clients' companies, as the statements expressed by the informants" P05: *"As the employee of a consulting company, I have to find new projects for our company and also manage the obtained projects. Every consultant has to try to achieve the assigned targets every year."* P09: *"At present, HR consultants' role has changed into that of business partners and will become more so in the future. The consultant will provide services from a customer perspective and try to use their knowledge to enable the client's business."* This concept accords with Ulrich (1997) and PMAT (2006), as mentioned in the literature review.

Finding about the competencies of HR Consultants in Thailand,

This finding allows for the division of competencies suitable for HR consultants in the Thai business environment into four groups. They are a body of knowledge, skills, attributes, and ethics, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 HR Consultants' Competencies

Body of Knowledge	Skills	Attribute	Ethics
Human Resource Management Human Resource Development Organization Development Scientifics Business Consultancy industry	Presentation Communication Team working Life and Work experience Listening Conclusion Question and answer technique Analyzing Problem solving Apply knowledge Time management	Maturity Personality First impression Friendly Open minded Be patient Human relations Understand Human Nature Have own idea / own words	Keep clients' confidential Honesty Trust Tell the truth Tell clients the best way Positive thinking Optimistic Express idea directly Concern clients' benefits

These competencies emerged from the informants' opinions. For examples from their statements: P03: "The initial consultant may have a unique approach to problem-solving." "*One competency is analyzing and making decisions on the problem." "They should have experience in every HR and consulting loop."* P01: *"The second important thing is interpersonal skill. For example, Question and answer: how to ask, how to answer, how to make a conclusion, how to communicate"* P04: "*Sometimes characteristics and dressing are important. Especially, we should improve our dressing to reflect the organization's culture."* P05*: "The first core competency is the knowledge of the consulting industry, such as competition, competitive goods, or services*."

The first three groups of competencies mentioned above provide many details that readers can learn from the research. However, in this section, I will focus on the topic of ethics. Some informants expressed their desire for an organization to be in charge of organizing the code of ethics for HR consultants, as indicated in their statements. P08: "*I believe that in the future, the demand for using HR consultants will increase, and I expect that there should be an association to control the quality and ethics of HR consulting services as well as other consulting fields."* P06*: "In other countries, wherever in western or Asia, they have accreditation for HR professionals that includes HR consultants, so I think that this study will be very useful for our country to develop the accreditation for HR consultants in Thailand. It may be done by PMAT (Personnel Management Association of Thailand)."* This aligns with the findings of Joungtrakul (2010)'s study, which asserts that a code of ethics is a crucial element of any profession or occupation. It is a set of guidelines for conducting oneself in performing and discharging his or her duties and responsibilities according to such professional competency standards."

Implications and recommendation

The researcher would like to propose implications for five groups.

Implications for Practitioners

The practitioners in this section are HR consultants. The study's findings could serve as a guide for HR consultants, enabling them to understand roles and competencies from the perspective of experienced HR consultants, as well as from the perspectives of executives and HR managers who serve as their clients. This will be the information they need to develop themselves in order to meet the expectations of their consulting company and clients.

Implications for Clients of HR Consultants

The researcher has two points of view for this group.

First, HR managers and executives may use the information presented above as a tool to measure qualified consultants.

Secondly, understanding the roles of HR consultants can serve as a valuable guide for clients. For instance, we should anticipate that consultants will assume the role of a teacher rather than an employee. This implies that effective consultants should empower our company's staff to independently perform tasks, rather than relying on consultants to do so. As parents, we should expect that the teacher will teach our children to do exercises by themselves, not for them. The concept of using consultants is the same.

Implications for the education field

Future studies can utilize the findings of this research. Any institute that wants to create a program for developing competency for HR consultants may use these findings as a guideline to design the curriculum.

The implications for HR associations

The findings of this study can serve as criteria for HR consultants in Thailand to receive accreditation from the Personnel Management Association of Thailand (PMAT) or other HR associations.

Implications for theoretical

The study's tentative competency model for HR consultants in Thailand serves as a basis for future development in the academic process.

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