

# Core Competencies : Concept And Relevance

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of 'Core Competencies' was first proposed by Prof. Gary Hamel and Prof. C.K. Prahalad in 1990 to deliver sustainable competitive advantage. This paper reports a part of the research conducted on a sample of selected listed Indian companies on "Factors Determining Excellence In Business - A Study of Selected Listed Companies In India".

However, a few companies in the sample - that represented the top performing companies - indicated that they had identified their core competencies. The concept of core competency may well become a trap of false security unless it is understood in the right context. The core competencies have to be viewed in context of future competition and have to be well integrated with product-market strategy. The paper examines the various aspects of core competencies by critically examining various issues related to assessing, developing, and utilizing such competencies for achieving business excellence. The paper explains the issues with several examples of Indian and foreign companies that makes the reader grasp the concept easily. The present paper concludes that the right bundle of core competencies do act as a crucial factor for business excellence.

**Keywords:** Core Competency, Factors of Excellence, Competitive Advantage, Business Excellence

**JEL Classification:** M10

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## INTRODUCTION

While working on his research project on 'Factors Determining Excellence in Business', when the question about core competencies was posed to 75 top performing listed companies in India by the researcher, which are virtually the 'Who's Who' of Indian industry, with many of them occupying high ranks in Forbes list, Global Innovators list and having won excellence model awards, only 6 companies replied to the question. It appeared to the researcher that core competency was not considered to be of significant importance by companies working in the current complex environment, or they had not seriously worked on this aspect. This pan-India survey was conducted between October 2011 and March 2012.

The following were the responses of the companies regarding their Core Competencies :

- ❖ **Mahindra Holidays** : Land acquisition, Low cost holidays
- ❖ **Everonn** : Technology in Education & Training material
- ❖ **Exide** : Battery Technology
- ❖ **Crompton Greaves (CG)** : Transformers
- ❖ **Orient Fans** : Pollution Control equipment
- ❖ **Carborundum Universal Ltd.** : Abrasives technology and a range of products

But are these really core competencies?

The results were surprising and hence, enquiry began as to the meaning & relevance of core competencies and the advantage the competencies might give to the companies. The Indian companies seem to be working far away from the hedge-hog concept advanced by Jim Collins (2002) in his pioneering study for the book "*From Good to Great*".

**However, Four Basic Questions Arise:**

- 1) Are core competencies a permanent feature of any company ?
- 2) Do customers value core competencies ?
- 3) Are core competencies relevant to certain areas like high technology based products?
- 4) In the modern environment of globalized business and access to technology by all firms, do core competencies offer any differentiation advantage in the market?

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Question of relevance arises due to the current environment of innovation, cloud computing, outsourcing, and multiple joint ventures. However, even to manage such joint ventures and collaborative products, one needs special skills and network, which can be termed as 'Core Competencies'. In the present paper, the researcher proposes to define 'Core Competency' in a simple format first, and then critically examine this in view of literature and practices followed by companies.

'Core competency is a unique capability acquired by a firm over a period of time in the form of a resource, operations facility, specially skilled manpower, know-how or delivery of service, which gives the firm sustainable competitive advantage in the future in quality, design, production or distribution of a product/service or in cost of the product and is viewed as a relative value addition by a prospective customer.'

A firm can have multiple competencies. We can see that the concept of competency is contextual and should deliver superior value to existing or prospective customers of the firm.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Amit Mitra of FICCI, New Delhi commented in a restructuring and people strategy article in Economic Times (February 14, 2011). "The core competencies of these companies have over the years evolved into newer core competencies," giving the example of how L&T has evolved. "L&T might have started with infrastructure, but now they are also a part of India's nuclear submarine program." But again, this is a confusing and vague observation as far as the concept of core competencies is concerned.

Core Competencies are a bundle of skills and technologies that are very difficult or impossible to match or emulate. The concept was made very popular in the mid nineties by Hamel and Prahalad (1990), through their excellent book *"Competing For The Future"*.

Core Competencies, by their very definition, are not ordinary skills that can be acquired by any business organization, anywhere in the world, easily. These are skills and competencies that are built over a very long period of time. Their main strength lies in the fact that such competencies are unique to the particular organization and to the particular industry, in which the organization operates. However, since the competencies are always skill-based, it is very difficult or simply impossible for any competitor to copy such skills. This gives the organization an unbeatable competitive advantage.

Since core competency has a future context for competitive advantage, we have to move from current core competencies to core competencies of the future (Drejer, 2002). In general, core competencies have been seen as capabilities held by people within a firm that, when applied through corporate operational processes to create products and services, make a critical contribution to corporate competitiveness (Edgar and Lockwood, 2012). These authors describe in detail how core competencies are identified, and conceptual framework is developed.

A useful way to think of core competencies is to view these as an aggregate of capabilities - where synergy is created to deliver value. Within core competency aggregates, there are always at least two complementary critical capabilities; these critical capabilities are the source of the power of competency and are where a company's strength can really distinguish it from other firms. In case of 3M, several critical capabilities exist at the heart of core competency (Gallon et al., 1999). The goal of core competencies should be generating sustainable competitive advantage. Studies have found that core competencies generate competitive advantage and affect organizational performance (Agha & Alrubaiee, 2012). A competitive advantage is meaningful if it is related to an attribute valued by the market. Customers need to perceive a consistent difference in important attributes between the producer's products or services and those of its competitors. These differences must relate to some product/delivery attributes which are among the key buying criteria for the market. Product/delivery attributes are those variables that impact the customers' perceptions of the product or service, its usefulness and its availability. Some examples of such attributes are product quality, price, and after-sale services. Key buying criteria are those variables and criteria that customers use in making their purchase decisions. They are different for different industries and different market segments (Javidan, 1998). Gupta et al. (2009) pointed out that resources alone are frequently not enough to generate competitiveness over other firms. In creating a competitive advantage, a firm needs the ability to make good use of resources – defined as the capability to handle a given matter – and, as the ability grows over time, to utilize the available resources to create new resources, such as skills (through new technology or software application), or to open new doors for the development of new types of products. "A firm is said to possess a competitive advantage when it is implementing a value creating

strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential player” (Clulow et al., 2003).

Competence based strategy is the part of the overall strategy that is concerned with integrating technology, know-how (including patents), value and culture in order to create a set of competencies that unfolds superior value for the customer and thereby supports the product-market strategy of the firm. Core competencies can be divided in two types (Coarse, 1996):

1) Core Technical Competency

2) Core Marketing Competency.

A structure of competency can be thus defined as Core or Critical competence, Meta-competencies, Core competencies, and constituent skills (Shrivastava, 2005).

## EXAMPLES FROM THE INDUSTRY

In this section, the researcher presents an example of how the industry often confuses normal business practices and policies or mission statements as core competencies. The Brooklyn Hospital Center, USA lists six core competencies on their website, which are as follows ([www.tbh.org/6-core-competencies](http://www.tbh.org/6-core-competencies)):

1) Medical Knowledge

2) Patient Care

3) Interpersonal & Communication Skills

4) Professionalism

5) Practice-based Learning and Improvement

6) System based practice

It should be noted that these are not core competencies. What the hospital management has to do is to look for certain competencies or skills that they may have, or would like to develop in each area, to acquire a set of core competencies that few competitors can replicate or match. For example, a hospital in Singapore - Mount Elizabeth Hospital is well known for organ transplant. That is the core competency of this hospital. This hospital may as well have doctors and nurses from various countries to create a multi-ethnic workforce for better communication with patients and patient management. That would be their core competency. Hence, it has to be noted that developing a core competency is not easy.

One of the core competencies of USA as a country is its ability to attract and retain the best multi-ethnic global workforce of scientists and other experts. English-speaking Indians is a clear core competency of India as compared to China as far as some industries are concerned - like IT based Outsourcing. Everyone knows how difficult it is to develop such a competency, and China is on this course since the last two decades.

Therefore, it is important to identify the skills available with an organization or the need of acquiring particular skills or a work culture, to remain competitive in the future. It is important to emphasize that distinct work culture and shared vision among employees are clear winners as core competencies of an organization. Very few organizations in the world possess such skills.

❖ **Sundram Fasteners Ltd. :** Consider the example of Chennai-based Sundram Fasteners Ltd., which supplies over seven thousand different types of tools to one of India's finest organizations - Tata Motors, which has launched the cheapest car in the world - the Nano, priced at around 2,100 US dollars.

Each fastener requires as many as forty different tools to make, and Sundram Fasteners has over four lakh tools in its tool library. This tool making competency is a clear core competency of the organization. Its tool library is two and a half times the size of its nearest competitor; furthermore, the organization has not lost even a single man-day due to strikes or lock-outs in over fifty years of its existence. The organization is world-famous for quality products. In fact, it is part of the Chennai-based TVS group; at least four organizations of this group are Deming Award winners. In the several years of its existence, Sundram Fasteners has never missed a single shipment, and is the sole supplier of radiator caps to different plants of General Motors throughout the world. This is the kind of core competency, which makes it tick, as one of its kind. In the past decade, this particular organization has gone in for acquisitions and has cemented its place in the particular business it operates in. Imagine for a moment, the complexity of building such a vast tool library, over a period of twenty-five years. Even if a new competitor were to attempt to copy the same, it

would take as many as fifteen years. And during this period, Sundram Fasteners would have grown to several times its present size.

❖ **Upper Indian Steel Mfg. & Engineering Co. Ltd. :** It would be worthwhile to give one more example from India. A relatively small manufacturer in Ludhiana by the name of Upper Indian Steel Mfg. & Engineering Co. Ltd. was known as quality special steel 'long products' manufacturer over three decades in the 60s, 70s and 80s with enviable leadership in its product category. Its core competencies had been melting file steel in small lots and then rolling these into small lot sizes of very thin sections required in manufacturing engineering files running into tens of profiles like squares, semi circular, triangular, and circular in various sizes in a difficult to roll grade (File steel grades) of carbon and alloy steels. This was an unattractive combination for a large industry to undertake, and almost impossible for small competitors to emulate. With liberalization and diffusion of technology, many small firms came up in Kolkata and Mumbai, giving stiff competition to Upper Indian Steel Mfg. & Engineering Co., and offered competitive prices, thus eroding the high margin enjoyed by this firm, which was concealing its operational inefficiency. The firm's leadership in manufacturing Silico-Manganese Steel flats that are required in automobile carriage leaf spring assembly was also whisked away by modern semi automatic mills, and concast technology based plants set up by new-age entrepreneurs like Sunflag Iron & Steel Co. Ltd. in the 80s. In this manner, three decades of unquestioned leadership simply melted away in less than ten years.

In today's world of cut-throat competition, Core Competencies clearly stand out. Apple, for example, has been able to come out with stunning products like the iPod. Disruptive innovation is clearly its core competency. In fact, Apple and Sundaram Fasteners might as well qualify as fit cases for having employed, what is famously called the Blue Ocean Strategy (Chan and Renee, 2004), as they have consciously avoided fighting in markets where there is too much competition, and where skills can be easily copied.

Core competency needs intense human efforts over the years and significant investment in R&D and infrastructure. Companies create capabilities that are difficult to replicate or execute, at least in the short term. This may be one of the reasons for the poor response in Indian companies. World Class Organizations have to build sustainable competitive advantage through core competencies. A firm's existing core competencies reflect the fundamental skills and knowledge behind its successful products. They may relate to world leadership in specific technologies, or they may be related to particular organizational or managerial skills.

## **SOME GLOBAL EXAMPLES**

Benetton has fast cycle times, while Honda has Engines and Power Trains. Coca-Cola has brand strength and geographical spread, while Toyota is known for fast cycle times. Prahalad and Hamel (1990) quoted several such examples of core competencies. The success of NEC, for example, resulted directly from this approach. In a similar vein, between 1980 and 1988, Canon grew very rapidly to beat Xerox with a range of core products, including image scanners, laser printers, copiers, and cameras, based on core competencies in precision mechanics, fine optics, and micro electronics. NEC adopted the core competencies approach by systematically exploiting the convergence of core competencies in computing and communications (C&C). 3M's products include Post-It notes, magnetic tapes, photographic film, pressure sensitive tapes and coated abrasives. All these companies have quite different production technologies, end-consumers, and channels of distribution. The rationale is based on core competencies in substrates, coatings, and adhesives (Proctor, 2000). If the core competency gets limited to an order qualifier for a customer instead of an order winner (Hill, 1985), it is no more beneficial to the company.

Core competency is the pooled skill, know how, physical resource or intangible assets that help the competitor service its customer by either offering:

- 1) Better products or their delivery ;
- 2) Faster execution ;
- 3) Being more reliable (credibility) like in insurance claim settlement and overnight courier service ;
- 4) Cheaper (It is also a core competency of countries, like China).

Intel Corporation has a distinct advantage of cooler microprocessors as compared to those manufactured by AMD, which have the problem of heating up and taking more power. The spoke and hub system developed by FedEx of USA



is no advantage now as virtually all global courier services have adopted the same system or are even faster. There never was a transparent technology environment as there is now. The robots that were found in USA earlier are found in China and the Korean industry. Hence, core competency cannot be based on simple technology or mere automation of information. Moreover, the high mobility of key personnel of companies makes it difficult to preserve core competencies. Instead of 25 years, now, a golden watch is awarded to key personnel staying with a company for 25 months. It seems, mainly three things offer core competency to companies : Patented Technology, Special Skills and Intangible Assets that companies build over a period of time. It might as well be the distinguished leaders that a company may have on its rolls. For example, any orchestra would have a core competency with a conductor like Zubin Mehta in the band or competitive advantage that a heart surgeon like Dr. Naresh Trehan may offer in a super specialty cardiac hospital or Prof. Philip Kotler as the faculty of any management school.

The culture that an organization builds up over time is a distinct intangible asset almost impossible to copy and implement by competitors, at least in the short term. The core competency will simply rot away if it is not constantly maintained. Unless this competency gives value to the customer, it is not a core competency. The value that is offered today is taken for granted tomorrow, and no more excites the customer. It is a tall order for companies to achieve this status in a complex, open and globalized environment. Therefore, unless a company performs better and better in some area backed by special skills or resources, core competencies cannot be maintained and put to advantage. For example, Larsen & Toubro, a giant engineering company in India has acquired the core competency in handling complex and large construction project like the Delhi Metro network, bridges, and highways. The sheer financial muscle, equipment, the largest geek of highly qualified engineers as its employees (perhaps it is only pure corporate body without any promoter owners in-charge and is being run by engineers), and a large number of successfully executed projects give them the competitive advantage of know-how and capability to execute such projects better and faster vis-à-vis their competitors in the future. The organizations that own some fundamental unique skills have better chances to remain as leaders. For example, imaging technology or designing a supersonic aircraft or having a large network of self-owned retail stores across the country.

Core competencies need to be continually validated. In the early 70s, Timex held a good part of the global market for watches with its core competency in low priced precision manufacturing. But then, the watch industry moved to digital technology, making Timex's core competency irrelevant. The core competencies not only have to configure the existing value chains of a company, but also explore new value chains to seek new customers in the same business line. It is, of-course, possible to export these core competencies in multiple businesses of an enterprise for taking advantage. Unless the core competency, tied to the portfolio of a firm's products, can offer the organization dominance in its industry, it is irrelevant (<http://managerial-accounting.blogspot.in/>).

Both the technology and social change dynamics of globalized markets, especially over the last two decades, have been so fast and tumultuous, that core competencies will loose meaning unless these are synchronized with products that the markets demand and the products that create value for customers. Otherwise, these competencies may well become memories of once-a- great kingdom like the 'Vijayanagara Empire' in South India. The industry is replete with examples of lost core competencies - Eastman Kodak in photography film and cameras, IBM that lost money in the PC market and hived off the business to Lenovo, Nokia, who lost its dominant market position to competitors and entered into collaboration with Microsoft for new mobile solutions. But is it a strategic or a tactical move by Nokia? It remains to be seen.

Prahalad and Hamel (1990) made the concept of 'Core Technology' popular, but in a single example of electronics like mobile phones, the disruptive solutions reduced the electronics industry into a commodity, especially by China.

While core competencies remain important as differentiators and do offer a competitive advantage, the disruptive innovations both in technology, product assembly, and marketing may reduce the core competency into irrelevance. A design or research house like Flextronics or Lucent licensing technology/product design and the same being manufactured in China at a low cost can throw off-balance any great leader in their respective industry. Hence, one has to go beyond the current core competencies and products, and think not *what is best*, but think *what is next*? This ability itself is a new core competency of the firms. Now, the researcher comes back to the Kodak example. The problem is that one tends to fall in a trap. Products are not core competency. For Kodak, its core competency is imaging. Be it digital imaging or film based. One has to understand what is CORE. *One has to understand if this CORE remains relevant in the future and does this CORE offer value advantage to the present and future customers of the company.*

## DISCUSSION

The Hedgehog Concept advanced by Jim Collins that was supported by research of the best companies in USA in a meticulous study about a long period of time, remains valid. A company should leverage on what it is best in doing and should keep improving this capability further to remain in leadership in the industry in the future. Companies have to ensure that they become innovative, flexible, quick response organizations and synergize product-market strategy with their core competencies. It appears that core competencies face more threats in new technology industries, rather than in fairly stable industries like in the case of auto and industrial fasteners where Sundaram Fasteners have the core competency of a large tooling library.

The point is not to just leverage and profit from the competency, but the organization has to constantly work on what core competency to develop from time to time, and how to defend these competencies from commoditization. Core competency is not what is lying buried in the past of an organization, and a company cannot rest on past laurels. It is the decision - what a company thinks about being its core competency, with a view on future challenges - that makes a difference. In order to survive, it has to add value for the customers in the future. An interesting twist to the core competency concept as envisaged by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) is to divide what is the 'Core' that should be managed inside and the 'Not-Core' that can be outsourced through third parties, if economically (and also functionally) feasible. Looking at Indian companies' track record, what has resulted is simply a mess. Most of the consumer durables companies having recorded exponential growth - like those making home appliances have hired the franchise services for after-sales services and warranty - which is a very crucial marketing component for such family of products. The rapid expansion of consumer durable goods industry post-liberalization led to a network of unskilled, untrained, and ill equipped greedy service centers who are further badly supervised by company executives. What should have been a 'Core' competency of such companies has been hived off as the 'Non-Core'. This is in direct conflict with the Customer Driven Excellence Model proposed by the researcher (Gupta and Dwivedi, 2012).

Unless companies are closer to six-sigma levels, such a process may lead to disastrous results, eventually by loss of customer good will and erosion of Brand value. The biggest hurdle to the proposed opening of the retail sector to MNCs in India is going to be the acquisition of right property and building of stores network. The land prices have already risen 10 times in last the 10 years period. Acquiring and managing properties at premium locations shall be the core competency of retailers. Acquisitions, takeover, or mergers with local companies like Pantaloon and Bata is not ruled out. Hence, core competency is a decision and not an absolution. It is relevant till it is futuristic. It is about figuring out what one needs to meet competition in the future. Core competency may lead us to be wrapped in a blanket of false security by ignoring disruptive innovations, emerging technologies, and rising capabilities of competitors. Most importantly, the customers may change their tastes all together, and switch over from a product and companies, like in the case of typewriters and scooters (that dominated the scene in the early nineties). Companies should use systematic step by step procedures to identify major constituent skills and then test each to match against their best and nearest competitors ; make use of product-market strategies and sharpen their ability to act as differentiators. The filtered competencies should be sharpened with meticulous planning and allotment of time and resources to have one or more competencies, for which the organization is known and valued by the customers.

## CONCLUSION

Core competencies are a set of skills or resources that are painstakingly developed over a period of time and are difficult to replicate. Core competencies should be futuristic as originally envisaged by Prahalad and Hamel (1990). Core competency is no guarantee of continued success of an organization and its products/services. Companies should focus on sticking to what they are best in doing, and core competency is the one that can make a company a preferred supplier for customers and acts as 'order winner' and not merely 'order qualifier'. Futuristic core competencies have to be integrated with product-market strategies of the firm. Indian companies largely are focusing more on diversification, outsourcing, and scale of economies rather than on developing core competencies. This situation needs correction. Multi-businesses of an organization should be based on certain core competencies of the organization like in the case of NEC and Honda of Japan. To meet the future challenges by alteration of competencies, adopting innovation and taking strategic decisions itself is the core competence of an organization. 'Critical competence' is the ability of a firm to identify its core competencies by generic procedure and ,therefore, is universal.

Well identified and developed core competencies that are relevant to global markets are important factors of business excellence to deliver superior results consistently.

## SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was motivated by poor response of top performing companies in India regarding having well identified core competencies. The study was aimed at highlighting the various aspects of core competencies as important factors for business excellence. The study did not go into the details of why and how sample companies identify core competencies. This is an important aspect that can be studied in detail in future research works. The author strongly recommends that further research should be conducted to find the reasons as to why Indian companies that are globalizing fast have not clearly identified their core competencies.

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