COGNITIVE STYLES AND HR COMPETENCIES IN IRANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The following article aims to identify the effects of Jung's cognitive styles on Human resource (HR) competency levels in order to predict the level of competencies among those who are going to apply for a position and those who are seeking promotion. The data was collected from 102 HR administrators and professionals of 5 top ranked Iranian universities. The universities were chosen from the 2010 Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings. The questionnaire of this research includes two groups of tests, including Competencies' assessment tests and Jung's cognitive style tests. The findings of this study show that there is a significant correlation between Joung's cognitive styles and HR competency levels. The results of this study may be applicable as a hint in the top ranked universities for employing applicants with the best qualifications specially those who have no or not enough job experience.

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Keywords: Human resource management, Cognitive style, Personality, Competency, Iranian universities, Thinking, Feeling, Sensation, Intuition.

Contribution/ Originality

This study is one of very few studies, which have investigated the ways to predict Human Resource (HR) competency levels. The research is the first study conducted on this area in Iran, that proposes a new method to select competent individuals and to predict their levels of competencies through cognitive styles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, for so long up to the early 1980s, human resources (HR), once termed "personnel" among other titles, had largely been activity-based and non-strategic. The precursor to the human resources function was focused on transactions such as hiring, firing, setting policies, administering pay and benefits, and training staff (Rynes *et al.*, 2002). Human Resources degree programs emerged to educate professionals in the broader skill set needed to effectively service the new workforce. A new approach to the human resources field is focusing heavily on metrics to quantify the effectiveness of HR activities. Nowadays, regarding to the increasing complexity of business environment understanding the measurable outcomes of human resources programs and policies is important and some in the profession are advocating a shift to rename the function from human resources to human capital.

Today, global competition, advanced technologies and new knowledge have caused highly competitive and sharply changing business environment (Madu, 2009). In this situation, HR professionals have to retool their capabilities, skills and competencies in order to match current challenges. The competency approach to human resource management has its origins in military staffing decisions (Ulrich *et al.*, 2008). From the historical perspectives, about 4,000 years ago in China the imperial officers provided the standard checklist to identify competent people around the country, who can work for them as the imperial guards. During World War II John Flanagan, an American psychologist tried to identify critical traits, skills and ability required for optimum performance. The ensuing years, the theory and application of competencies have become a central paradigm in HR practices (Storey *et al.*, 2009). The strategic importance of job analysis and competency modeling are grounded first and foremost in their usefulness as systematic procedures that provide a rational foundation on which to build a coherent approach for managing human resources. This role for job analysis and competency modeling becomes especially obvious during periods of strategic change, when jobs in an organization are suddenly transformed (Jackson and Schuler, 2006). At micro perspective, universities, as organizations have many employees who are able to achieve organizational goals so that an attempt to employ efficient staff is one of the most important tasks of human-resource departments of universities. Considering the importance of human resources management roles at the universities, applying competent staffs in universities' HR department can guide to achieve the organizational goals and improve the level of HR competencies.

1.1. Problem Statement

In the competitive business environment, organizations will face serious challenges to define their missions well and achieve their goals efficiently parallel by evaluation of technology, IT, electronic business, globalization and intricate strategic alliances (Payne, 2005). The competitive environment both domestically and abroad is pressing HR professionals to apply adequately talented workers in the organization (Lawson and Limbrick, 1996; Ulrich, 1997; Payne, 2005). In the current century, although organizations continue to reveal the efforts in order to meet the demands of the changing business environment, the human-resource managers have faced with new roles and competencies (Ulrich *et al.*, 2008). Currently, both enhancing long lasting initiative and

originative genius and creating more job opportunities is one of the goals of universities. (Gaither, 2007). Therefore, having the competent employees is a new challenge for the managers of universities (Salim, 2006). Although, several studies about HR competencies have been done by researchers such as Ulrich (1998), Schoonver (1998; 2000) and Ulrich *et al.* (2008), the literatures about the prediction of the people's competencies and the capacity of learning competencies are not enough, particularly with regards to institutions of higher education (Ahmadi, 2009). In many cases, recognizing the competent candidate is very difficult (Everes and Anderson, 2005). People's competencies factors will be improved based on experiences. Furthermore, the levels of improvements are different in different people (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2001; Karimi, 2008). Thus, There is an important question for the managers how to predict the individuals' competencies in the future to hire new and fresh employees with no or little job experiences (Sun and Shi, 2008). There are very few empirical studies about Non – KSA competencies focusing on traits, motives, attitudes, dispositions and perceptions received attention in the HR Studies (Holland, 1996; Goleman, 1997). Based on these studies and importance of prediction of career success, some psychological factors have been definitely seen as the persistent factors to success. Some of the researchers defined these factors as psychological competencies (Goleman, 1998). In this study, we answered to this question: Can the cognitive styles be used to predict the level of competencies in order to identify, choose and hire the best applicant for the HR department as new employees In Iranian top ranked universities?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Hong, Tondora and Marrelli, a competency is a measurable human skill and ability that is required for efficient and effective performance. It includes knowledge, skill or ability, personal characteristic or a cluster of these constructs of work performance. Successful completion of most tasks requires the simultaneous or sequenced demonstration of multiple competencies" (Hoge *et al.*, 2005). Bakar (2014) stated that, the achievement of competencies is related to the acquisition of skills productively used to meet job competence. Boyatzis explained competency as the underlying characteristic of worker, and it could be the trait, motivate, skills, body knowledge and aspects of social roles or self-image, which are used in works (Boyatzis, 1982). According to Hornby and Thomas (1989) competencies are the skills, knowledge and qualities of effective leaders and managers. Boam and Sparrow (1992) said that competencies were used as an umbrella term which can cover almost anything. It can affect job performance directly and indirectly. Green (1999) defined competencies as notes and written description of assessable personal skills and work habits, which are used in order to achieve the work objective. Ulrich *et al.* (2008), in their book have been used two distinct terms, Competencies and capabilities. Competencies refer to skills knowledge and behaviors exhibited by individuals in their work (Liu *et al.*, 2014). In fact, Competency has technical nature, or social orientation, and Capabilities are the collective abilities of an organization.

A review of HR literatures shows that different competencies were found in different studies. Some studies on competencies have been done to find the essential competencies to match individuals and their jobs as well as to develop high value added HR department (García-

Barriocanal *et al.*, 2012). According to a study on 300 HR specialists; leadership style, management vision, performance abilities and personality characteristic are the critical competencies for HR managers (Schoonover, 1998). Bell (1999) said that flexibility in dealing with change, creativity in creating change, utilizing all potential of human resources, selecting the employees who are needed and acceptance of responsibility for employees as the most prominent competencies for HR administrators.

According to the generic competency manual of Rochester University, five core competencies have been identified as showing abilities, skills and behaviours which are necessary for personal and professional success (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2013). These competencies are:

1. Interaction with others (communication): Making a good communication with others by using effective listening, writing skills and verbal in order to provide clear essential information on time is one competency, which helps HR administrators to support their organization to achieve strategic objectives (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2013; 2014).

2. Customer service: Attempt in order to create and maintain a good environment of service, excellence and continually improving satisfaction of internal and external customers is very vital for the HR professionals (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2013; 2014).

3. Expertise-Continues learning: HR managers have to improve continually their knowledge and skills, which are related to their functional area. They have to exhibit their commitment towards developing personal and professional abilities.

4. Resourcefulness\ Results: HR managers have to use available resources to assist in day to day operations in order to produce quality products-services. They should feel as an organizational stewardship (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2013; 2014).

5. Personal account ability: Taking responsibility for own work and assisting others and supporting to provide resources to achieve success in their daily work is another prominent competency for HR managers.

Turner and Crawford (1994) explained that competencies belong to one of the two categories. These categories are personal and corporate. Characteristics such as experience, knowledge abilities, skills and personality make up personal competencies. Corporate competencies are embedded process and structures that tend to reside within organization, which belongs to the organization even when individuals leave. Organizational culture and the method of doing work can be formed by functions of personal competencies (Cardy and Selvarajan, 2006). In addition, the type of personal competencies that will best work or fit in the organization can be determined by corporate characteristics. Jamshidi *et al.* (2013) based on the data gathered through the interviews done with HR experts, presented five groups of competencies, including: 1. Individual competencies 2. Management and Leadership competencies 3. Communication and Social competencies 4.Strategic Competencies and 5. Complementary Competencies.

## 2.1. HUMAN RESOURCE COMPETENCY STUDY MODEL (HRCS)

Human resources are the most valuable resources in order to achieve organizational goals by efforts and coordinating and utilization of other components of the organization (Ansari and Ghafori, 2014). Dave Ulrich and Wayne Brockbank performed the Human Resource Competency

study (HRCS) in the corporation with Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Global consulting Alliance and University of Michigan Business School. The HRCS is a longitudinal study and has been performed in five phases, up until now. At the first phase in 1987, 250 companies were invited to participate in research. At the end, out of 250, 91 companies were selected for study. The researchers wanted to recognize the competencies needed for HR professionals in order to be successful. In each phase of study in different years, the model of competencies was expanded, and results were refined. In 1987, Brockbank and Ulrich presented that themes of business knowledge, HR delivery and change management are the necessary competencies for the HR professionals (Ulrich *et al.*, 2008). In 2007, the fifth stage of this research was carried out. In this study, 441 companies from all over the world contributed. The results of this research demonstrated a more dynamic model than previous models of competencies. In this study, researchers presented that HR professionals are vital in 20% of organizational success. Six domains were identified that recognize specific HR competencies needed for the HR professionals in order to be successful in their roles (Ulrich *et al.*, 2008). These six domains are as the follows:

Credible Activist: The Human Resource professionals should be both credible (admired, respected, listened to) as well as active (offers a point of view, challenges assumptions, takes a position). Culture and Change Steward: HR professionals have to respect the past culture and also should help to shape a new culture.

Talent Manager and Organizational Designer: HR managers focus on competency requirements in order to manage talents in organization. Also organization design focuses on how a company places a capability such as collaboration, into the structure and processes that shape how an organization works. Strategy Architect: The HR managers should have a vision for how an organization can win in the future. This means recognizing business trends and their impact on the business, forecasting potential obstacles to success, and facilitating the process of gaining strategic clarity (Long and Ismail, 2009).

Operational Executor: The HR managers have to be able to perform the operational aspects of managing staffs in organizations. Business Ally: HR managers contribute to the success of a business by knowing the social context or setting in which their business operates. They also consider setting aims and objectives that react to external opportunity and threats. They also know how the business makes money regarding to the value chain of the business. Finally, they have a good understanding of the parts of the business (finance, marketing, research and development, engineering), so that they can help the business organize to make money.

Figure-1. SHRM HR Competencies Model. VER: 2007 (Ulrich *et al.*, 2008)
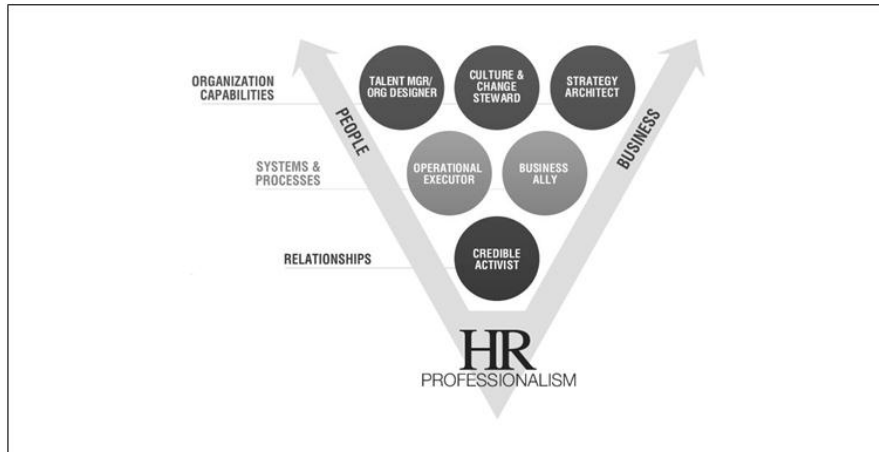
2.2. Personality and Personnel Selection

Some psychological requirements such as aptitude, interests, and personality can have effect on individuals' behavior, career choice and participation (Brown, 2011; Jamshidi *et al.*, 2014). Personality has been explained generally as the sum of people's perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and emotions. In addition, it can be expanded to include the behavior of personality too (Drummond, 1996). According to Funder (2001), personality is a person's characteristic patterns of emotion, thought, and behavior together with the psychological mechanisms hidden or not behind those patterns. According to Khorsandfar (2010) psychological factors are formed during the life, and these psychological factors affect the behaviors. Khorsandfar (2010), stated that a major part of one's psychological traits and personality is formed during childhood and adolescence. After youth, this formation fades dramatically.

Freud *et al.* (1974) claimed that the personality is developed during the first five years of life and after that the amount of changes is negligible. Fromm (1994) was agreement with Freud about the importance of primary five years but didn't believe in stabilization of personality. Costa *et al.* conducted a research on 2274 male students of Northern California University. Researchers re-evaluated samples after six to nine years (Costa *et al.*, 2000). According to the Costa *et al.* (2000), there is a little meaningful mean-level change in any personality traits past the age of 30. Because many competencies' factors in people will develop based on experiences, and the growth rate is different in different people and also in many organizations, Managers conduct to employ new and fresh staffs without enough experience (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2001; Karimi, 2008), so it's important for organizations to hire people with predicting their competencies. Personality measures have been used since 1920, for personnel selection purposes in IWO (industrial, work and organizational) psychology (Everes and Anderson, 2005).

During the last years in both educational and organizational settings, various studies have been done to evaluate the applying of cognitive style and ability for predicting behaviors, performances and outcomes (Everes and Anderson, 2005). In a research has been done in Iranian Construction firms, Jamshidi *et al.* (2014), showed that, Jung's cognitive styles affect the HR competency level, also the results of this research confirm that there are consequential differences in HR competency level based on Jung's cognitive styles. Cognitive has been defined as the ability to arise with new,

unusual or clever ideas, combine separate pieces of information and data or specific answers to solve problems.

Cognitive style assessment is useful in prediction learning in both job training and educational settings (Kuncel *et al.*, 2001; 2004). Cognitive ability is the important individuals' psychology factor that helps to predict successful acquisition of job knowledge. According to Brand (1987) and Gottfredson (2002), cognitive ability is correlated with some important life outcomes.

Carl Gustav Jung explained his theory about cognitive styles and personality types based on psychological preferences for thinking or feeling, sensation or intuition, extroversion or introversion and Judging or perceiving. He shows cognitive style based on two dimensions, which are the manner to gather information, and the way to evaluate and analyze information (Whetten and Cameron, 2000). At the heart of this complex theory are located four personality types These. Four personality types have been named Sensation-Thinking (ST) or Practical, Intuition-Thinking (NT) or Conceptual, Sensation-Feeling (SF) or Gregarious, Intuition-Feeling (NF) or Creative (See table 1).

Table-1. Jung's personality types described

Personalities	Behavior
Sensation-Thinking (ST) or Practical	Practical, impersonal, interested in facts, down to earth, precision, wants order, no ambiguity, values efficiency and clear lines of authority in an organization.
Intuition-Thinking (NT) or Conceptual	Conceptual and inventive, is comfortable using flow Charts and graphs, sees future possibilities through analysis, generates new ideas and change, sparks enthusiasm in others.
Sensation-Feeling (SF) or Gregarious	Gregarious and sociable, dislike ambiguity, interested in facts about people, likes to establish settings in which people care for and support each other, has no time for reflection.
Intuition-Feeling (NF) or Creative	Creative, is enthusiastic, values imagination and warmth, has grandiose goals, likes flexibility and open Communication, dislike rules, hierarchies and procedures, is persistent and committed, can be seen as an idealistic dreamer.

Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother Katharine Cook Briggs developed Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), to assess psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions based on the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung. Isabel and her mother started to develop the MBTI test during World War II, in order to assist the women who were entering the industrial workforce for the first time to recognize the sort of war-time jobs where they would be "most effective and comfortable " with the information which was obtained. Their initial questionnaire was published in 1962 (Pearman and Albritton, 1997).

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study has performed to address four research questions:

RQ1: Are there any differences in the level of HR competencies based on the Jung's personality styles at the top-ranked universities?

RQ2: Are there any correlations between Joung's cognitive style and HR competencies level?

4. METHODOLOGY

In this study, the conceptual model has been developed based on four cognitive styles, including: Conceptual, Practical, Gregarious and creative as well as the level of HR competencies (Ulrich *et al.*, 2008). We wanted to know cognitive styles can be used as the predictor to Identify competent people and their competency level in the future. Figure 2 shows the research framework of this study. Jung's personality styles have been examined as the independent variables. The HR managers' level of competencies measured based on the SHRM competency model and has been studied as the dependent variable.

Figure-2. Research Framework
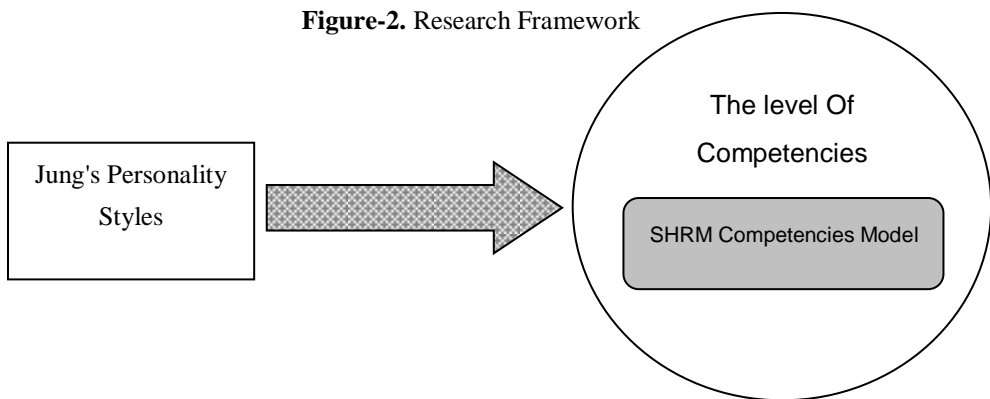
4.1. Participants

The database we used comprised a total of 102 HR administrators and professionals of five top ranked Iranian universities. The universities were chosen from the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings. QSARanking is originally published in collaboration with Times Higher Education and is famous as the Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings (QS World University Ranking, 2012). In order to choose participants of this study, the random sampling methods were used. 68 % of the respondents were male and 32% of them were female.

4.2. Dependent and Independent Variables

In the present study, the level of competencies as the dependent variable and Jung's cognitive styles as the independent variable have been considered (Ulrich *et al.*, 2008; Jamshidi *et al.*, 2014).

4.3. Instruments

In this study, the data and information were collected by questionnaire. Two groups of tests were used in this research in order to develop the questionnaire including, Competency assessment test and Jung's cognitive style test.

4.3.1. Competency Assessment Test

In order to measure the level of competency, multi source assessment method was used to measure the competencies level of participants and assess their performance (Hayward *et al.*, 2013). In multi source assessment, the data and information are developed from two or more distinct sources such as supervisors, subordinates, peers and customer as well as self assessment

(Dalessio, 1998). Multi-source assessment provides more valid and reliable results about management behavior and performance. In this research, two sets questionnaire including, 24 tests was developed based on SHRM HR Competencies Model, VER: 2007. Five point scales whereby one (very weak) to five (very good) was used. One set of questionnaires was given to universities' HR administrators and professionals to perform self assessment. The second group of these questionnaires was given to their supervisors to score each item of HR managers and professionals' competencies. This set of questionnaires requested the respondents to specify for each competency the level of their subordinate HR managers and professionals' competencies.

4.3.2. Jung's Cognitive Styles Test

In order to recognize the cognitive style of the HR administrators, managers and professionals In Iranian top ranked university a test consists of 24 items was developed. Each item has two statements. Respondents should choose one of the statements between two terms which best describe their behaviour in different situations (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2014). This test measured the level of four important factors of cognitive styles (Thinking, Felling, Intuitive and Sensing). The results of this questionnaire were explained individuals' cognitive style. In order to certify validity the questionnaire was given to a group of five professionals and experts in HR to ensure that the sentence of questionnaires are understandable, clear, comprehensible, measured appropriate contend and suitable for this study. Some small changes in questions were done based on the feedback of this group. In addition, a pilot study to measure the reliability was conducted and the responses were analyzed by Cronbach's alpha test. In this study, Cronbach coefficient for competencies' level assessment test was 0.796, and for Cognitive style, test was 0.716.

5. FINDINGS

The first research question (RQ1) focused on competency level differences among different types of Jung's cognitive styles**.** To assess the first research question we compared the competency level of four personality types. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Pearson correlation test were used to examine the Hypotheses. Table 2 shows the P value of analyze is less than 0.05 (Sig = .000 < 0.05). It presented that means of competency levels are different based on Jung's cognitive styles. The Post hoc test using Tukey comparisons were used to explore which types of personality are different from others.

Table-2. ANOVA Test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5068.071	3	1689.357	52.200	.000
Within Groups	2459.617	76	32.363		
Total	7527.687	79			

Table-3. Multiple Comparisons Tukey HSD

Styles (I)	Styles (J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
NT	ST	15.181*	2.42241	.000
	SF	1.587	2.34996	.906
	NF	-7.766*	2.75054	.030
ST	NT	-15.181*	2.42241	.000
	SF	-13.594*	1.46415	.000
	NF	-22.947*	2.04618	.000
SF		-1.587		
		13.594*		
		-9.353*		
NF		7.766*		
		22.947*		
		9.353*		

According to table 3, the results of Tukey comparisons show the levels of competency between different cognitive styles are different significantly except SF and NT. Table 4 displays conceptual (NT) people possess the highest level of HR competency, and practical (ST) people have the lowest level of HR competency.

Table 4 displays conceptual (NT) people possess the highest level of HR competency, and practical (ST) people have the lowest level of HR competency.

Table-4. Homogeneous Subsets (Tukey HSD results)

STYLES	N	Subset for alpha = .05		
		1	2	3
ST	26	76.9615		
SF	36		90.5556	
NT	7		92.1429	
NF	11			99.9091
Sig.		1.000	.889	1.000

The second research question (RQ2) focused on the correlation between the managers' scores of each cognitive style with HR competencies' level. The data from Table 5 confirmed that all four variables are significantly correlated with the HR competency level (Sig < 0.05). The highest Pearson correlation value is 0.749 for NF. The correlation analysis showed that ST style is negatively correlated to HR competency level (-0.764). The correlation coefficients between HR competencies level with NT, and SF were 0.298 and 0.210 respectively.

Table-5. The results of Pearson Correlation analysis

		NT	ST	SF	NF
Competencies Level	Pearson Correlation	.298[**]	-.764[**]	.210[*]	.747[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	.000	.034	.000
	N	102	102	102	102

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study presented that Intuition-Feeling (NF) people had the most mean of HR competencies level in Iranian top rank universities. Pearson's correlation test presented that NF style has the strongest correlation with HR competencies' level. According to Whetten and Cameron (2011) the managers with characteristic of NF are charisma people who have the effective ability to lead the effective teams. NF persons are willing and flexible individuals who are capable of contacting others, conveying their messages and understanding other people appropriately. As these people have creative minds, they can decide in the most optimum way in challenges and crisis. Also, controlling efficient teams is their another capability. Regarding to the importance roles of effective communication and innovation in HR affairs, the people who have NF characteristics are the best choose to work as the managers in universities' HR departments. In addition, the findings presented that Intuition-Thinking (NT), and Sensation-Feeling (SF) people can be adequately competent HR managers in top rank universities. In order to deal with challenges and difficult issues through strategic decisions, NT managers utilize not only their power of thinking but also innovativeness or imagination.

NT people are good options for HR management jobs, because HR managers need the abilities and the skills such as creativity, "delegating and empowering others" and "openness and honesty in dealing with subordinates" beside the analyzing complex systems. In common, in Sensation_Feeling (SF) individuals, the capability to coordinate things is an innate capability. Companionability, friendliness and cordiality are other features of these individuals. Such persons are able to cooperate with other members of a team efficiently and encourage them to work simply. The managers of SF are able to efficiently assign responsibilities and duties to others (Jamshidi *et al.*, 2014). The findings of correlation analysis showed that the variables of NT and SF are correlated to HR competencies level significantly and positively. Although there are no significant differences between NT and SF managers in terms of HR competency level, strongest correlation between NT and HR competencies level presented that NT people are preferable than NT people to choose for HR related jobs.

Finally, this study illustrated that there is a negative correlation between Sensation-Thinking (ST) and HR competency level in Iranian top rank universities. These result showed that the individuals who had higher ST score showed less competence in HR works. Two essential issues in HR affair's occupations are social and communication competencies. Usually, other cognitive styles in ST individuals are stronger than their social relations. This weakness can be one of the reasons for their low scores in HR competencies. In addition, nowadays because of increasing complexity and ambiguity, universities need HR managers that use their innovation and creativity in making decisions and solving complex and ambiguous problems. Low creativity and unwillingness to resolve complex issues are the other causes of low HR competencies level in ST people. The present research proposes that while selecting and employing individuals for the occupations related to HR in the top ranked universities in Iran, NF individuals should be considered the most important applicants, and they should be taken into special consideration.

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