

What Do Managers Do? Preliminary Findings from The Ugandan Context

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There is an ongoing scholarly debate on management development in Africa. Management theory and practice have previously been accorded scanty scholarly scrutiny leading to a gap in our knowledge of managerial work in Africa. This paper presents preliminary findings from exploratory study on what managers do in Ugandan organizations. It is underpinned by the models in extant literature. We posit that there is no new thread of thought in management thinking and the conventional tasks and skills define proportionately what the managers were found to be engaged in; the skills were equally proportionately distributed. The clustering around the same thematic areas could have been influenced by our conceptualization. We recommend grounded approaches to analyze more deeply the task design and management work.

Key words: Management, Managerial work, Management functions, Management skills
Managerial tasks, Uganda.

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Introduction

The debate on what composes managerial work is unconcluded. After many years of teaching principles of management to Ugandan students, with all vivid examples of managers' work that we have used, we still had no coherent local empirical data on the question: what do managers do? Managerial work in Uganda has not been subjected to scholarly scrutiny (Bagire & Namada, 2013). This is the same gap across the African region (Zoogah & Nkomo, 2012). Informed by the rich extant texts on management with models from the west, scholars in Africa have begun to wonder whether there is an African management (Terri, Punnet & Puplampu, 2013). While management is among the widely taught fields of study in all African business schools, there is scanty literature on management practices in African organizations (Zoogah & Nkomo, 2012). Challenged by this lack of local empirical data on the subject of management, together with our masters students, we set out to conduct a survey among Ugandan managers to inform a local understanding of managerial work. This paper presents a preliminary position on how and what managers do in the local context.

Conceptual overview

The theoretical bases we present in teaching are from research done in other regions. It is not clear whether this western knowledge adequately informs theory and practice in Africa. Management at its basic is a science and an art; the latter implies that organizational situations could specifically provide facets of management practice explicit to the African context. Terri et al.

(2013) have edited a book entitled "Management in Africa, macro and micro perspectives". With research reports from over ten African countries, Bagire (2014) notes that even with that attractive title the text does not adequately address the pertinent dilemma of understanding managerial work. The gap of what managers do at the shop floor or at the corporate level remains. Terri et al.'s (2013) presentation of African management thinking converges on internationalization, corporate governance, green management, employee motivation, corporate social responsibility, and ethics; other areas are portfolio entrepreneurship, human resources management and management control systems. This strengthens the evidence from an African context that managerial work is still broadly regarded.

Management according to various scholars is a multifaceted discipline with practical and theoretical approaches. This study is guided by the Upper echelons theory. According to the scholarly works of Hambrick and Mason (1984) organizations are a reflection of their top managers. Therefore features of operations in organizations may fairly indicate the work of managers. This theory has had a consistent debate and been applied in different study contexts. Our discussion in this paper also picks from the dynamic capabilities theory of Teece, Pisano and Shuene (1997). Organizations can adjust as the business environment shifts and the ability of managers to keep focus reflects their dynamic capabilities as a key managerial resource. Teece (2014) has stated that dynamic and ordinary capabilities

need to be distinctively understood. The former from the original works of Teece et al (1997) involves higher-level activities that can enable an enterprise to direct its ordinary activities toward high-payoff, with a view of competitive advantage. Ordinary capabilities on the other hand, generally fall into three categories: administration, operations, and governance. They are embedded in some combination of skilled personnel, facilities and equipment, processes and routines, the administrative coordination needed to get the job done. This is basically managerial activities that define what managers do. This clarification has provided a supportive framework that ably underpins the practice of management.

From his own insights, Mintzberg (1989) extended his earlier seminal work (1973) in a framework of three key roles of managers; they are interpersonal tasks, information role and decision making. Within, he outlined the sub-domains as being a figurehead, leader and liaison; being monitor, disseminator and spokesperson; entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator and negotiator. This model does imply that the environment complexity and task interdependence have variations. On the other hand Luthans et al. (1988) argued that managerial work comprised of three key areas namely, traditional management, human resource management and communication. The proportion of concentration by managers was then positioned with a categorization of average, effective and successful managers. Peter Drucker, the renowned management guru, gives five tasks namely, setting objectives, organizing, motivation and communication, measuring and developing

people (Murray, n.d). As if management is a giant enough to confuse scholars, Bloom, Sadun and Reenen (2012) framed managerial work into three tasks; these are, target (support long term goals, with short term performance benchmarks), incentives (reward high performers, retrain under-performers) and monitoring (analyze performance data for improvement).

Hales (2001) seems not bothered by the functional specifications. Agreeing with earlier scholars, he posited that many people are doing management work. Managers share an inescapable presence in all organizational activities. This at times preoccupies them in fragmented actions and reactions to events. Recognizing this argument, we know that many managers are fixated into urgent and adhoc matters. Many managerial activities are nested into others. The result has been some level of tension, ambiguity and at most pressure in managerial work. Yet, there seems to be much we don't know on what managers really do. Murray (n.d) does not agree; he states that managers don't do anything. We thus note that the debate on what managers actually do is not concluded.

From a non academic perspective, a former president of the republic of Ghana defined management in a non scholarly tone as "proper and astute administration of valuable resources for the express purpose of fulfilling personal, group, community, societal needs and aspirations in a sustainable way" (Terri et al. 2013, p.xvii). He emphasizes a view point that management is not the presence of entrepreneurs or business executives; it is

something that all those who have responsibility over assets and resources must engage in. When scholars of management discipline read this, then the question resurfaces of what management really is. The conceptualization of management is informed by the works of Fayol (1917) who is still regarded as the father of modern management. He outlined the five functions of management as planning, organizing, controlling, coordinating and directing. However for this survey is entranced from the works of Teece and Pisano (1994) of dynamic capabilities in which dynamic refers to the shifting character of the environment in which managers run organizations and capabilities are ways of organizing and getting things done and the works of Hambrick and Mason (1984) of the upper echelons theory in which organizational outcomes are a reflection of prominent individuals' traits of education, experience, expertise and social background. Kiggundu (2011) posited that times have however changed and regrets that management has split into 'many managements'. He insinuates, human resource management, tourism management, entrepreneurial management among others as leading the quick decline of the discipline; yet still strong in essence of running organizations. We know that management has grown more from practice to theory compared to other disciplines.

Our study did not attempt to redefine management in any way but to use models previously tested to explore what managerial work in Uganda really encompasses. We appreciate that practitioners of management from small sole proprietorships that span

Uganda may have shaped the field differently from the multinationals that have recently established business ventures in the country. Our survey does not however, address this dichotomy of management. We only emphasize that management is contextual and the Ugandan experiences could contribute towards multiple dimensions that define how things are done to give an African presence in the global knowledge community. Substantial new research has pointed to a richness of study contexts for not only management but all fields of study in Africa. This is an unexplored knowledge resource. Wit multinationals and nongovernmental organizations that have found a niche in Africa, the management paradigms of the west need to be retested to find whether they fit the African situation.

Zoogah and Nkomo (2013) posited that there is an under developed state of management scholarship in sub Saharan Africa. This is supported by the very low number of articles in top management journals originating from Africa. In the few cases that are available, the authors illustrate Eurocentric concepts only tested with African datasets. But the argument for African epistemology makes the reaffirmation that a significant contribution to knowledge and learning about Africa is still in nascent stages. The lost understanding of management in Africa can be traced to the long tiring journey indigenous communities went through to statehood. The illustrations of the ancient chiefdoms, kingdoms and empires are revealing. The native system of governance did not sustain in face of colonialism and

Christianity. This seems to have broken the development of business and management models that were evolving through inter-territorial trade. These could have been unique to Africa. The scramble for Africa in the 17th century onwards brought to a grand halt business patterns within African communities and instead opened the routes with the west and a recent change seen with China.

In Russia, recent events have generated considerable interest, but little empirical evidence exists on management. A study in that local context revealed that managers were mainly involved in traditional management activities. This finding concurred with earlier findings from American managers. The relationship between the Russian managers' various activities and their effectiveness was less clear, but, like the American managers, the communication activity was a significant predictor across analysis techniques (Bloom, et al 2006). Elsewhere, in other regions, the practice of management anchors on the old theories although Goshal (2005) argued that bad management theories destroyed good management practice. The width of the field has however, rendered it to fall-offs of sub-disciplines to chagrin of pure management scholars.

Bagire (2014) posits that fresh insights could be established in the local context. For instance, the multinationals from developed economies coming to Africa can lead to a hybrid of practices from the mixture of their models and local approaches. There are strong African values, morals and convictions to underpin management

development. These are deeply rooted in African cultural practices and could be rightly integrated into business and management. On the other hand, it is agreeable that Africa is so segmented that to propose an overarching code of management practice is farfetched (Zoogah and Nkomo, 2012). However, country specific researches against generalizable techniques would be helpful. This is the motivation for our exploratory study to underpin practices among Ugandan managers.

Methods

The study was conducted as a cross sectional survey. The target for the first phase was a total of 100 managers starting with members of a management development course at the University. These results are based on 95 respondents. A population of student managers has previously been found enriching as they understand and appreciate the study variables (Bagire & Namada, 2011; Wong et al, 2009; Hill, et al, 2000). The instrument was developed, discussed and polished as part of class work on managerial tasks. After a review of relevant literature and discerning the key tasks managers are involved in, the instrument was further refined. They then filled the instrument giving their independent responses. Each one of them then took two copies to administer in their organizations among their superiors and peers. In this approach we managed to get views across various organizations and managers at different levels. Taking two people from different levels of management in each organization enabled us to control against common methods biases in our survey. A similar study done in Russia

observed a sample of 66 managers in a large textile factory (Luthans, et al. 1993). In India, Vijaya Kumar (2006) studied 180 senior, middle and junior managers. We used the framework of Luthans et al. (1988) and that of Mintzberg (1989) to anchor our study.

Results and discussion

Descriptive statistics

The majority of the respondents in the study were in middle level management with 54%, top management had 19% and the rest were supervisors at the shop floor level of management. The gender distribution was 57% male and 43% female. They were relatively mature with a majority above 30 years. The majority of the respondents had worked in those positions for at least three years; across the levels of management, more middle level managers had served for 4 – 6 years; those who had served for more

than ten years were more in top management than other levels. These descriptive thereby give credence of the responses provided by our sample.

Managerial functions, skills, tasks and outcomes

Our results have confirmed that managers in Ugandan organizations are involved in tasks identified in the literature reviewed (Luthans, et al. 1988; Mintzberg, 1989). We also confirmed that managers are aware of the three skills of conceptual, human relations and technical in their course of work. We nonetheless added into the model management success, so as to attempt linking tasks and skills to the outcomes.

We started with Pearson correlation analysis to test for the level and direction of association among the variables in our study. The results are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation coefficients

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1.Traditional Magt	1							
2.Communication	.371*	1						
3.Organizing	.804**	.511**	1					
4.Human Res Magt	.730**	.451**	.812**	1				
5.Networking	.142	.278	.111	.318	1			
6.Conceptual	.507**	.291	.521**	.621**	.338	1		
7.HR skills	.396*	.276	.358*	.518**	.327	.637**	1	
8.Technical	.442**	.353*	.429*	.526**	-.015	.647**	.622**	1
9.Magt Success	.317	.314	.355*	.220	-.220	.412*	.213	.377*

There were both positive and negative associations among the functions and skills. Networking was found to be negatively

associated with technical skills. The largest positive association was between traditional management and organizing, and that of

organizing and human resource management. This was not surprising given the closeness in the theoretical understanding of the two variables. Our discernment is that in Uganda, traditional management may not be distinctively identified. Scholars define it in terms of controls, supervision, setting work procedures, work designs etc. From our results, it reigns in organizing and human resource activities, thus not supporting the framework of Luthans et al (1988).

On the other hand, the lowest association was between organizing and networking. This may imply that organizing activity was seen in the presence of managers to influence structure, authority, delegation and resource appropriation. When managers are networking outside organization, they are regarded as 'absent' from management work. This is a point of further investigation as Luthans et al.'s (1988) model does not give adequate insights. All scholars regard management as an in-house activity which our findings have confirmed in the negative coefficient of networking with management success.

When management functions were interpreted against the skills, we found strong, moderate and low positive associations; the highest was between human relations and conceptual skills. Our interpretation is that as managers are envisioning the future, creating mental maps of their organizations, the highest focus is on human resource aspects. The strategic dimensions of the firm are its managerial and organizational processes, positions and

paths which are ingrained in the skills of the firm's managers in strategic positions of the firm, how they execute their routines and how they position the firm into the future in agreement with Teece and Pisano (1994).

The lowest was negative between networking and technical skills, meaning that the more managers focus on technical activities in the organization the less will they be involved in networking. From our data set we could propose that managers who were at the operational level were less involved in networking. Networking seems therefore to be a premise of managers at higher levels.

Our last focus of the Pearson correlations was the association of management success – our criterion variable with the functions and skills. Save for networking, management success was positively related with all the variables in the study. Among the functions, the coefficients were moderately low; the strongest and only significant at $p=.05$ was organizing. The coefficients of communication, human resource management and traditional management were not significant. For management success and the skills, the moderately strong association was that with conceptual skills; that with HR skills was low and not significant. These results provide interesting insights in our understanding of managerial occupation in Uganda. Human resource management with its respective skill is seen to be a non significant factor to management success; organizing function renders high success as do conceptual skills.

Table2. Ranking of Management activity by type (how often function applied in organizational tasks)

Function of management	Rarely (f)	%	Often (f)	%	% age influence of task to management success
Tradition management	31	52	29	48	27.7%
Communication management	25	47	28	53	28.2%
Organizing management	30	50	30	50	28.6%
HR management	28	48	30	52	28.6%
Networking management	33	56	26	44	35.0%

We note that the statistics in tables 2 and 3 are based on multiple responses; managers are not involved in a single activity and they share out their time, skills and efforts across various tasks. In line with the works of Teece and Pisano (1994) the study found that dynamic capabilities of firms require organizations to appropriately adapt, integrate and reconfigure internal and external organizational resources, skills and operational competences into the changing environment. So the column totals do not sum up to the number of respondents. The same with the percentages; the value given

is the singular measure of how a function or skill was rated as reflecting the individual managers viewed the contribution to management success. The results in both tables provide us with key insights on the behavior of managers in Uganda. In table2, organizing function was found to be balanced across all organizational tasks. Traditional management and networking were rarer in the work of management compared with communication and HR management which were found to be more often in running organizational tasks.

Table3. Ranking of Management activity by skills (how often skill is required in running organization)

Type of management	Rarely	%	Regularly	%	%age influence of skill to Management success
Conceptual skills	23	37	39	63	16.9%
HR skills	32	53	28	47	17.1%
Technical skills	30	52	28	48	48.6%

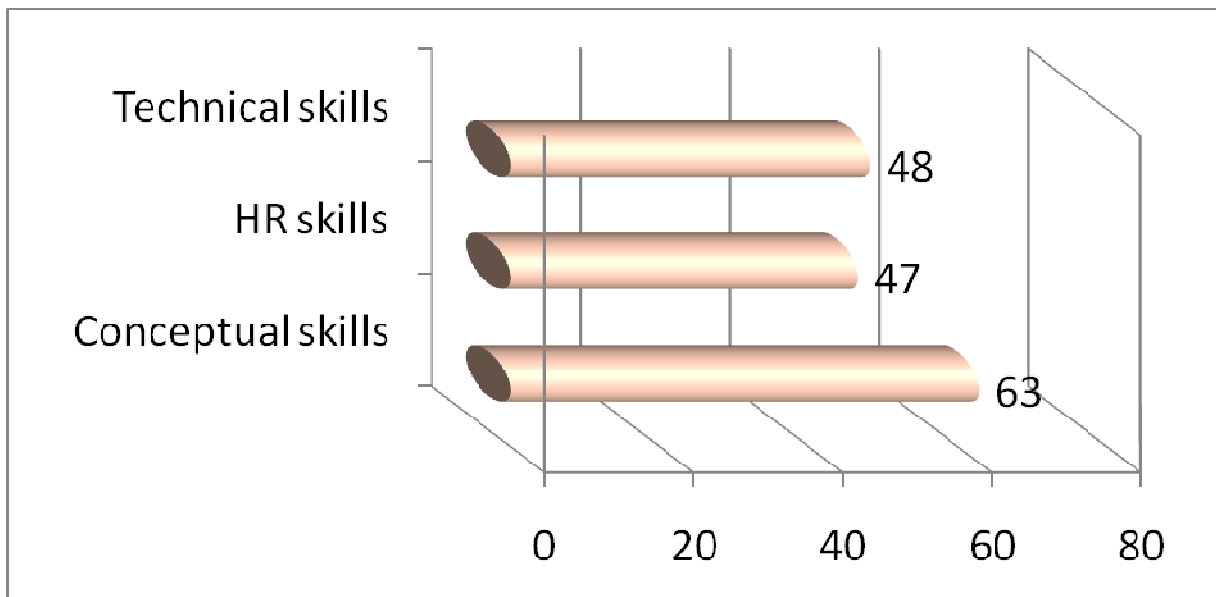


Figure1 Graphical presentation of skills in management work in Ugandan context

Regarding the influence of the function to management success, networking had the highest percentage; we have already discerned that this influence is negative from the Pearson coefficients. The rest of functions were balanced around the same score in influencing management success.

In table3 and Figure1, we analyzed the frequency of the skills in running the organizational tasks. The result was that conceptual skill was more regular in the managerial work of respondents. HR and Technical skill compared well across the perception in running organizations. Key in our analysis was the influence of the skill to management success. The results showed that technical skills were perceived to have the highest independent influence to management success than the other skills. Conceptual skills were found to have the lowest self-regulating internal influence to management outcomes.

This result points to the need for further analytical studies to understand management better. Vijaya Kumar (2006) found that managerial work across nations was similar but actual performance was context dependent. The pivot of management has shifted from organizational based functions to industry or community dimensions. We should be worried that this trend will bring into literature vast ideas from multiple disciplines spiced up around management unable to defy critics.

Our results therefore make a direct contribution from Uganda to the argument for African based models to galvanize management. But it is not all that we would like to worry about - Kiggundu (2010) has complained of the 'many managements'. His argument is that management is getting fragmented before it is well rooted in African philosophy; different professionals have picked their own management fields

which in-turn influences their approach to management practice like financial management, project management, human resource management, green management, etc. In Africa these are still immature knowledge bundles. Vijaya Kumar (2006) found no significant differences in traditional management, communication in a survey among Indian senior, junior and middle managers. Dale (1981, in Vijaya Kumar, 2006) had earlier found that

decision making was more frequent, followed by informational function than interpersonal roles in managerial work. Vijaya Kumar (2006) has suggested that a possibly forgotten paradigm in management research is to ask those under managers if management matters to them. Hales (1986) posited that authority was a necessary reference for defining the work of managers, arguing that not enough attention had been given to understanding what managers do.

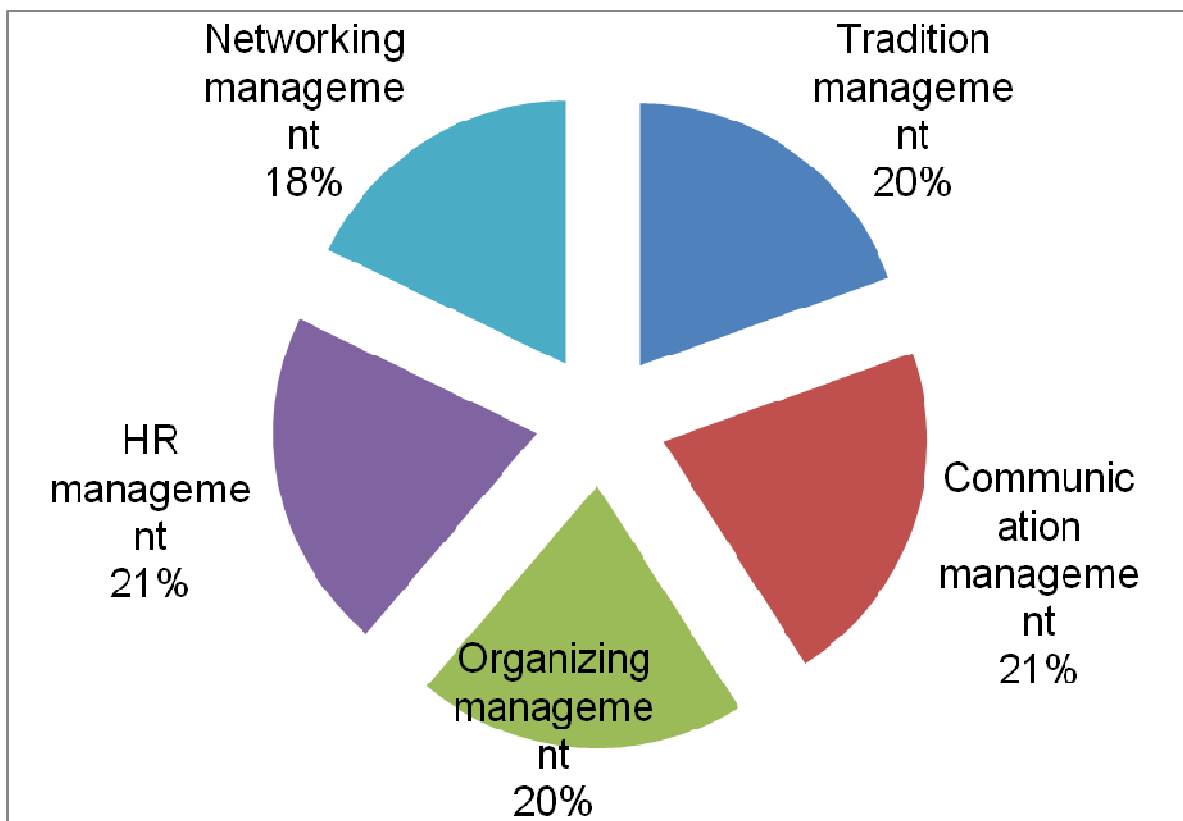


Figure 2. Pie chart of time allocation to Management tasks by Ugandan managers

In Figure2 above we depict a framework from our analysis showing the percentage time allocation of the functions in managerial work. The result shows nearly balanced proportions. Overall, however, Ugandan managers spend equal time in

human resource and communication management at 21%, and equally the same time at 20% in traditional and organizing management. Proportionately networking takes less time than the other functions. Compared to the framework of Luthans et

al. (1988) that informed our study, the scores are not anywhere close. But interpreting our results against their categorization, we find that Ugandan managers evenly cut across average, effective and successful management.

The survey anchors the central argument that local empirical tests of managerial work are wanting. Our finding has so far provided similar insights like the American and the Russian managers who were observed to focus mainly on traditional management, communication, human resources and networking activities. Also similar to the managers studied in the U.S, China, Brazil, India and Japan, there are variations in management practices (Bloom et al. 2011; Weihrich, n.d).

A key inference from this study is however that there is a lean distinction in the work of managers at the different traditional levels. Our finding is that managers do balance in the tasks across the managerial divide of top, middle or bottom management. This is possibly challenging the Upper echelons theory of Hambrick and Mason (1984) in some aspects.

Conclusion and Implications

In the overall synthesis of our findings and discussion, we find no new thread of thinking on management. There are some gaps in flow of actual tasks and roles, but the linkage and regrouping of previous models area coherent interpretation. The distinction between our empirical findings and conceptual models needed not be clearer than we have examined, so is the clustering around thematic areas. Some patterns seemed to be extracts from general

management. Nonetheless, the management aspects that we have reported upon are important to the enhancement of theory and practice for scholars of management in Africa. Management indeed seems to continue being a dynamic capability of the upper echelons. However, we post that our results do not give strong distinction in the works of managers at the different traditional levels.

There are various implications for policy, practice and research. First, management practice in Uganda is consistent with patterns in other regions. What is important and yet explored adequately is the contextual outcomes from managerial tasks. There is need to develop clear modes and policy framework to ensure that whatever managers do produce the desired organizational results. For researchers, the arena is still in demand of empirical explanations of what tasks, roles, processes and outcomes that comprise managerial work in the African setting.

The findings of this survey are limited by the very nature of the research design, especially operationalization of the constructs. The measures that we used may have not guided us adequately to think of alternative answers. Our scales could have also affected the sleekness of responses. The sample is still small and if more responses are received we hope the results will be enriched. We nonetheless contend that this survey is an eye opener and will trigger further analytical studies into this very important discipline.

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