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Critical competencies for emerging human resource practitioners navigating the changing world of work

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Orientation: Studies show a need to enhance the competencies of emerging human resource (HR) practitioners to ensure their effectiveness, competence and sustainability in organisations and the field of HR.

Research purpose: This study explored the competencies (skills, knowledge and abilities) that are particularly pertinent to emerging HR practitioners as they adapt to the changing dynamics of the South African and global workplace.

Motivation for the study: The changing world of work, including the role of new and advanced technologies and the challenges of employability.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative descriptive research strategy was utilised, following an interpretivist paradigm. Non-probability convenience sampling and purposive sampling were employed, and the sample consisted of $n = 64$ HR managers. A qualitative survey on the QuestionPro platform was used to collect data, and a thematic analysis was conducted.

Main findings: Human resource managers highlighted 15 key competencies that emerging HR practitioners need. These competencies include business acumen, diversity and inclusion, employee wellness, HR service delivery, labour relations and employment law, risk management and compliance, strategic human resource management, talent management, workforce planning, cognitive skills, communication skills, consulting skills, executive presence, HR analytics and metrics and HR research methods.

Practical/managerial implications: Organisations can attract a competent, readily employable talent pool, while emerging HR practitioners benefit from industry insights into the competencies employers will require currently and for the future world of work.

Contribution/value-add: Identified competencies provide emerging HR practitioners with valuable insights into employers' and industry expectations, enabling them to enhance the competencies most critical to employability strategically. The findings offer employers, academics and industry stakeholders a framework to align HR education and professional development programmes with current and future work demands.

Keywords: abilities; competencies; emerging HR practitioners; knowledge; skills.

Introduction

The global workforce has experienced a profound transformation over recent years. Organisations worldwide are navigating rapid technological advancements, shifting workforce demographics and increasing demands that require professionals who are not only competent and agile but also able to contribute meaningfully in a turbulent and digital work environment (Achoki, 2023). Human resource practitioners are at the forefront of this transformation, expected to demonstrate advanced competencies as they navigate the changes affecting organisations in the 21st century. Furthermore, HR practitioners are expected to automate systems and processes, adapt, communicate effectively, display emotional intelligence, navigate regulatory landscapes and handle the demands of a dynamic workforce (Dima et al., 2024). These expectations highlight the need for advanced HR competencies that go beyond foundational knowledge and technical skills. The role of HR practitioners has been expanded now more than ever; existing and emerging HR professionals need to develop essential HR competencies.

Human resource professionals are increasingly required to develop future-fit HR competencies such as business acumen, people advocacy, digital agility and workplace stewardship to remain relevant in an ever-changing world of work (Coetzee et al., 2025). Future-fit competencies are essential at this moment and will continue to be relevant in a few years. The notion of future-fit

competencies applies to professionals across all career stages, as emerging and existing HR professionals need to adapt and upskill. However, it is particularly imperative for emerging HR professionals, unlike established and experienced HR professionals who may build these competencies through organisational exposure, whereas some emerging professionals may lack opportunities to integrate strategic, digital and business-oriented skills within real-world contexts (Coetzee et al., 2025). Given these significant changes in the workforce, employers are increasingly concerned about graduates' competency gaps. Employers highlight that graduates need to align more with business needs, particularly in the HR field (Chan, 2016; Khattri, 2023). While professional HR bodies such as the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP), the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and the Institute of People Management (IPM) have established competency frameworks to guide professional practice, these frameworks predominantly emphasise the capabilities of experienced practitioners, with comparatively less explicit focus on preparing emerging HR professionals for entry into the workforce (Matabane et al., 2024). Emerging HR practitioners are regarded as students studying in the field of HR, recent graduates transitioning into entry-level roles and individuals within their first few years of employment (Society of Human Resource Management [SHRM] 2016; Ulrich et al., 2012). Emerging HR practitioners usually fill entry-level roles such as interns, coordinators or specific junior roles. Limited attention is given to adequately preparing emerging HR practitioners for successful entry into the workforce. It is imperative to gain an in-depth and clear understanding of the competencies that emerging HR practitioners need to be employable, align with organisational needs and thrive earlier in their careers.

Problem statement

Organisations today operate in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) business environment, necessitating innovative approaches, agility and adaptability to navigate these challenges (Syamsir et al., 2025). There are several challenges organisations face, including technological adaptation and implementation, job displacement caused by artificial intelligence (AI), digital tools and remote work, which have impacted team dynamics, communication and collaboration (Ahmad, 2025). This century's organisations experience the realities of Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0, where introducing advanced technology requires a human-centric approach (Zizic et al., 2022). In addition, the pandemic has forced organisations to rethink their operations, processes and human resource management (HRM) (Gandrita et al., 2022).

According to Markham and Gobind (2022), HRM entails organisational processes, procedures and the management of various functions. These include, to name a few, workforce planning, recruitment and selection, learning and development, talent management, implementation of HR policies and systems and organisational development. Therefore, as strategic partners, HR practitioners are expected to lead organisations through complexities by leveraging advanced technological tools and demonstrating critical competencies (Akundi et al., 2022). However, concerns remain regarding the extent to which higher education qualifications and HR competency models adequately prepare emerging HR practitioners for workplace demands (Bawu, 2021; Chan, 2016). Employers globally have expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates (Bawu, 2021). The literature consistently points to a widening competency gap among HR graduates, particularly in soft skills such as leadership and critical thinking (Matabane et al., 2024; Yong & Ling, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to identify the competencies needed to equip emerging HR practitioners with those required by the industry. Essentially, emerging HR practitioners should be able to contribute to the world of work by delivering people solutions (Joseph et al., 2021). To address this gap, this study reviews the literature and gathers data from HR managers on the relevant competencies (knowledge, skills and abilities) that emerging HR practitioners are expected to demonstrate. Furthermore, this study identifies critical competencies required for emerging HR practitioners to operate effectively within Industry 4.0 and 5.0 and VUCA environments, while still preparing for the evolving world of work. The aim of this study, therefore, includes:

- To identify the competencies (knowledge, skills and abilities) emphasised in relevant HR competency models for emerging HR practitioners.
- To determine how experienced HR practitioners would rate a list of critical competencies needed for emerging HR practitioners.
- To identify the competencies (knowledge, skills and abilities) that emerging HR practitioners should display for the future world of work.

Literature review

The human resource management landscape

Traditionally, HR originated in the industrial era, viewed as personnel management, focusing mainly on administrative tasks, compliance and resource allocation and efficiency (Azam, 2023). The evolution of HR highlights four stages: administrative HR, personnel management, strategic HR and HR business partners. The role of HR has shifted from being very transactional to transformational. Human resources is not just responsible for the operations; HR's role and responsibilities include recruitment and selection, performance management, learning and development, succession planning, compensation and benefits, human resource information systems (HRIS) and HR data and analytics (Van Vulpen & Verlinde, 2024).

Now more than ever, HR practitioners must be strategic partners, effectively managing employee relations and understanding employment law (Cayrat & Boxall, 2023), where practitioners are forced to integrate technology in the recruitment and selection process and manage workforces,

where we see remote work and an increased importance on employee well-being (Daraojimba et al., 2024). Changes in the workplace require HR practitioners to possess a range of critical competencies to address organisational challenges and contribute to business success. These critical competencies include business awareness, leadership, relationship building and self-belief (Lo et al., 2015). According to Kim and Jung (2022), to succeed in the 21st century, HR practitioners require competencies in critical thinking, emotional intelligence, digital literacy, customer orientation and interpersonal skills. Additionally, by 2027, demand will concentrate on analytical and creative thinking, AI literacy, lifelong learning, leadership, social influence and curiosity (World Economic Forum, 2023). Organisations need strategic, systematic reskilling and leadership development, including a complete redesign of HR education (Bawu, 2021; Gyeke & Amo, 2024; Kamal, 2020). A key contention point is the rapid adoption of new technologies, the need for constant innovation, and the implementation of automated systems (Destriani et al., 2024), versus the skills required to effectively build and implement human resource management systems (HRMS), such as cloud systems and digital collaboration platforms. Roles such as people analytics specialists, AI-augmented recruiters and employee experience practitioners increasingly require competencies related to digital literacy and data interpretation, which are not necessary competencies displayed by emerging HR practitioners or necessarily included in HR education (Strohmeier, 2020; Van den Heuvel & Bondarouk, 2017). We see further tension in the literature between organisational expectations and practitioner readiness. While organisations are trying to remain relevant by investing heavily in digital transformation, HR practitioners lack the necessary expertise, digital training and infrastructure (Minbaeva, 2021; Parry & Stromheier, 2014). This necessitates the need for awareness creation, education, development and training with the intention to equip emerging practitioners with the necessary competencies. Other scholars make an argument for a hybrid competency development approach, a combination of traditional competencies, as well as digital and analytical competencies (SHRM, 2024; World Economic Forum, 2023).

Competence theory

Literature defines *competence* as an overarching term for knowledge (cognitive), skills (functional) and abilities (behavioural) (Mulder & Winterton, 2017). The competence theory consists of three fundamental building blocks, namely cognitive, functional and behavioural elements, which appear in most qualification frameworks (Winterton & Turnbow, 2020). According to Mulder (2016), cognitive competence pertains to knowledge, encompassing understanding, expertise and proficiency in a specific subject matter. On the other hand, functional refers to practical skills and abilities necessary to perform specific tasks or functions effectively, which is tangible, observable, hands-on expertise (Mulder, 2016). According to Le Deist and Winterton (2005), functional competence is an individual's proficiency and capabilities within specific areas or domains, encapsulating their skill sets and abilities. Behavioural encompasses attitudes and behaviours such as emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, effective communication skills and adaptability (Mulder, 2016).

A competency-based approach has been increasingly used in HRM and development to adequately equip HR professionals for their careers. A competency is an observable and measurable attribute integrating knowledge, skills and values, demonstrated to a defined standard within a specific context. *Knowledge* is viewed as the theoretical or practical understanding of specific content or technical information needed to perform adequately on-the-job, usually obtained through formal education and on-the-job experience (Mulder & Winterton, 2017). *Skills* are viewed as techniques acquired over time by special training or experience (Mulder & Winterton, 2017). *Abilities* are the cognitive or physical abilities an individual possesses and displays that are necessary in a specific role or situation (Mulder & Winterton, 2017).

Human resource competencies and competency models

Literature highlights HR competencies and competency models that provide the competencies (knowledge, skills and abilities) that HR practitioners are expected to display to be effective within their roles. These include the following competency models; the HR competency model, the national HR management system standards model (Abbott & Jivan, 2023), the HR competency model of Ulrich (Ulrich et al., 2017), the competency model of McEvoy et al. (2005), the HR 5.0 model by Raj (2021), the CIPD competency framework (Josh Bersin, 2019) and the SHRM competency model (SHRM, 2016) (view Table 1 for a summary). Ulrich's model provides a strong foundation for evaluating HR roles. However, other competency models, such as the competency model of McEvoy et al. (2005), emphasise competencies that should be developed during a student's undergraduate degree to prepare them for success as HR practitioners. Some of these include communication skills, consulting skills, HR strategy, performance management, talent management, innovation, adaptability and self-esteem. The SABPP HR competency model describes what organisations should have in place to optimise human capital and create a positive employee experience (SABPP, 2024). This model closely aligns with the national HR management system standards model, which identifies the HR competencies that practitioners need to implement HR standards (SABPP, 2024).

The HR competency models for Industry 4.0 and 5.0 proposed by several authors highlight critical competencies for HR practitioners navigating the digital transformation and the human-centric focus of modern industries. Unlike previous models, the HR 5.0 model by Raj (2021) emphasises the balance between digital technologies and human-centric values to address the needs of Industry 5.0. The CIPD framework provides a comprehensive guide to competencies

TABLE 1: Summary of human resource competency models.

Model and source	Context and scope	Core domains and competencies (condensed)
SABPP HR competency model (Meyer, 2014; Meyer & Abbott, 2019; SABPP, 2022)	South Africa; linked to HR competency model National HR management system standards	Structured framework for developing HR competence in South Africa. 14 competencies to guide HR practitioners in developing and practising clearly defined competencies. Five core: leadership and personal credibility; organisational capability; solution creation and implementation; interpersonal and communication; citizenship for the future. Four pillars: duty to society; ethics; professionalism; HR and business knowledge. Five strategic capabilities: strategy; talent management; HR governance, risk, compliance; analytics and measurement; service delivery. The 13 standards were developed to standardise and improve HR quality across the country. Strategic HR management, talent management, HR risk management, workforce planning, learning and development, performance management, reward and recognition, employee wellness, employment relations management, HR service delivery, HR technology and HR measurement.
McEvoy et al. (2005) competency model	US university context; designed for HRM graduates	Emphasises competencies for HR students: Skills: Communication; collaborative; consulting, cognitive Knowledge: HR planning and staffing, performance management, employment law, team and interpersonal skills HR research methods, compensation and benefits, training and development, employee and labour relations, HR information systems, HR strategy. Abilities: Courage, proactivity, innovation, adaptability, self-esteem, quick study, risk-taking, energy level, conscientiousness, integrity and trustworthiness, respect for alternative viewpoints.
Ulrich's competency models (Merrell, 2016; O'Donoghue, 2021; Ulrich, 2016, 2017, 2022; Wright et al., 2021)	Global; multiple iterations since 1987	Developed and adapted various competency models and provided a competency model with a list of competencies specifically applicable to established HR professionals. Seven essential competencies, nine roles and nine outcome-oriented roles: Strategic positioner: aligns HR with market strategy Credible activist: trusted, proactive influence Paradox navigator: balances competing demands Culture and change champion: shapes culture, leads change Human capital curator: builds pipelines, drives performance Total reward steward: optimises holistic rewards/well-being Technology and media integrator: enables work through digital tools Analytics designer and interpreter: uses evidence for decisions. Compliance manager: assures governance and risk.
HR 5.0 model (Raj, 2021)	Digital transformation/ I5.0	Proposed the HR 5.0 model, which identifies three main domains: Business intelligence (strategic contribution, business knowledge management, HR technology, business acumen). Professional behaviour and leadership (leadership and credibility, organisational capability, solution creation, interpersonal communication). Service orientation and execution (talent management, HR governance, analytics and measurement, HR service delivery).
CIPD/Bersin capability stack (Gorge, 2022; Josh Bersin, 2019)	Framework guidance and practitioner capabilities	Highlights five competencies: HR domain expertise; consulting and problem-solving; business acumen and industry experience; technology/data/tools/vendors; leadership and executive presence.
SHRM competency model (SHRM, 2016)	Global; entry to executive	Provides a list of competencies believed to be essential for HR practitioners: Communication, relationship management, ethical practice, HR expertise (HR knowledge), business acumen, critical evaluation, global and cultural effectiveness, leadership and navigation and consultation.

Note: Please see the full reference list of this article Mtshelwane, D.N., Graupner, L., & Rossouw, L. (2026). Critical competencies for emerging human resource practitioners navigating the changing world of work. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur, 24*(0), a3492. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v24i0.3492 for more information.

SABPP, South African Board for People Practices; HR, human resource; CIPD, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; SHRM, Society of Human Resource Management; HRM, human resource management; US, United States; I5.0, Industry 5.0.

that HR practitioners can develop, which are divided into core knowledge, behaviour and specialist knowledge areas (Josh Bersin, 2019). The SHRM provides this list of competencies, said to be critical for HR practitioners: HR expertise (HR knowledge), ethical practice, leadership and navigation, business acumen, consultation, critical evaluation, communication, global or cultural effectiveness and relationship management (SHRM, 2016). These competencies are essential for effective HR practice, especially in a field governed by several professional bodies.

Professional bodies

These professional bodies include SABPP, CIPD and IPM, which advance HR as a profession by setting standards, offering competency frameworks, certification, training, research and networking. The SABPP is a non-statutory professional body for HRM and people practices (SABPP, 2024). Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development is a UK statutory body with various hubs in the UK, Ireland, the Middle East and Asia for HR and people development; it promotes the HRM profession and its HRM practitioners as professionals (CIPD, 2017). The CIPD also offers a comprehensive competency framework that outlines skills, knowledge and behaviours needed in HR (Dube, 2022). These professional bodies exist to advance HR as a respected profession globally. These bodies ensure that HR practitioners are competent and invest in continuous development. These professional bodies focus mainly on developing registered practitioners already in the market. This creates a gap for emerging practitioners, who may not have the same opportunities for competency development at the student level as they prepare for entry-level jobs, highlighting the need for this study to identify the necessary competencies for emerging HR practitioners.

Research methodology

Research design

The researcher utilised a qualitative descriptive research strategy within an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on research participants' experiences and perceptions. The qualitative approach used an inductive method to determine how individuals interpret their social world (Bryman, 2016). The qualitative approach helped gain insights from

experienced HR practitioners based on their experiences working with emerging HR practitioners. Interpretivism involves developing interpretations of qualitative data to understand individuals' subjective meanings and experiences within their social context (Zahle, 2021). The interpretive perspective focuses on revealing multiple realities as opposed to searching for one objective reality (Guest et al., 2013). In this study, HR managers provided their own interpretations of the competencies displayed by emerging practitioners, based on their organisational environments, sectors and exposure to HR practices. The researcher used a questionnaire to gain subjective perceptions from experienced practitioners. A qualitative descriptive strategy was used, with a structured competency evaluation and qualitative input from the HR managers. The competencies listed were derived from literature, and managers evaluated emerging HR practitioners' performance against this list. The managers were encouraged to identify additional emerging competencies not reflected on the list. This strategy allowed for both structured evaluation and exploratory qualitative insights. The findings of this study contribute to the contemporary HR literature by illustrating how HR managers perceived the relevance and importance of existing HR competencies within Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0 contexts. The interpretivist position strengthens the study's methodological coherence and aligns with the explanatory aim of understanding how contemporary competency models are viewed and evaluated in practice.

Study population and sampling

The sample ($N = 64$) consisted of experienced HR practitioners, including managers from both the private and public sectors. A non-probability sampling strategy combining convenience and purposive sampling was employed to identify experienced HR practitioners. Convenience sampling, while critiqued in the literature for its potential to introduce selection bias and limit generalisability (Briggs et al., 2012), was pragmatically chosen because of accessibility constraints and the need to reach professionals actively working in the HR field. To mitigate the limitations of convenience sampling, this study incorporated purposive sampling to ensure the relevance and appropriateness of the participants. The inclusion criterion ensured that participants could provide credible, contextually informed insights into the competencies required for workplace success. By clearly outlining the inclusion criteria, the final sample comprised information-rich participants who were appropriate to answer the questions about the readiness and competence of emerging HR practitioners. Participants were therefore only included within the study if they confirmed that they had recent, direct experience with supervising, mentoring and evaluating emerging HR practitioners. Organisational size and industry were not considered; instead, a diverse sample across different sectors and sizes was used to capture broadly shared expectations regarding emerging HR professionals. This also ensured that the sample reflected the diversity of the broad South African HR landscape.

Research participants were recruited through the SABPP and the IPM, who shared the link to the online qualitative questionnaire with all their members (i.e. HR practitioners). Additional participants were recruited through the researcher's personal and professional networks, including social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook. The inclusion criteria for experienced HR practitioners were that participants should have: (1) more than 5 years of experience in HR or an HR-related field, (2) be actively involved in supervising, evaluating and mentoring emerging HR practitioners, (3) proficiency in at least English, and (4) be able and willing to partake in this study voluntarily. The minimum of 5 years' experience was chosen to ensure that the participants had progressed beyond early career and had sustained exposure to various business cycles and HR practices, and were likely to have supervised or mentored emerging HR practitioners. Within the South African HR context specifically, 5 years is also broadly consistent with the experience levels associated with mid-to-senior designations under the SABPP competency model. Table 2 provides the demographics of the research participants:

Data collection method

Data were collected using an online qualitative questionnaire that combined structured Likert-type items with open-ended questions. The closed Likert-type items were used only to direct participants to the competency list and support reflection on each item, while the open-ended responses were used as the main qualitative data that were analysed in this study. The open-ended questions invited participants to identify additional competencies, explain their relevance,

TABLE 2: Characteristics of participants ($N = 64$).

Item	Category	*n*	%
Age (years)	25–34	16	25.0
	35–44	21	32.8
	45–54	19	29.7
	55+	8	12.5
Gender	Male	20	31.0
	Female	44	69.0
Years of work experience	5–10	24	37.5
	11–15	3	4.7
	16–20	11	17.2
	20+	26	40.6
Job role	HR manager	20	31.2
	Director	10	15.6
	Head of talent	6	9.4
	HR practitioner	8	12.5
	Business partner	9	14.1
	Rewards and remuneration manager	4	6.3
	Academic	2	3.1
	Employee wellness manager	1	1.6
	Industrial psychologist	4	6.2
Years of employment in the current organisation	0–5	35	54.7
	6–10	18	28.1
	11–15	6	9.4
	16+	5	7.8

HR, human resource.

and describe what emerging HR practitioners need for current and future work contexts. By following this approach, participants were free to elaborate on their professional experiences and provide contextually rich insights regarding working with emerging HR professionals. The use of structured response formats alongside open-ended questions is recognised in qualitative research as a means of enriching subsequent qualitative responses (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Firstly, the researcher compared competency models and lists from the existing HR and HRM literature and, based on this review, compiled a consolidated list of competencies relevant to emerging HR practitioners. For each competency, a brief definition was drafted. Definitions of competencies' skills, abilities and knowledge components were also provided for clarity. Secondly, the list of competencies and their definitions was presented to participants in the questionnaire to ensure that participants understood what each competency entailed. The questionnaire included 48 questions and took participants approximately 30–60 min to complete.

Thirdly, participants were asked to rate these competencies using Likert-type scales ranging from: very poor (1) to very good (5). Furthermore, they had to rate the importance of each competency in the organisation on a Likert scale, ranging from not important (1) to very important (5). A Likert scale was considered the most suitable for capturing the perceptions and opinions of experienced HR practitioners regarding the competencies of emerging HR practitioners. The use of Likert-type items in qualitative research provides a nuanced means of exploring complex attitudes and perceptions, thereby adding to the precision of quantitative measures with the depth of qualitative insight. Although traditionally associated with quantitative analysis, integrating qualitative interpretation enables a deeper understanding of the subjective meanings embedded in individual responses (Bryan, 2024). While this study primarily followed a qualitative, interpretivist approach, Likert-type scales were used to complement the open-ended questions.

Fourthly, after completing the ratings, participants responded to a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions that invited them to suggest additional competencies. The questions included:

- What other knowledge, skills or abilities (if any and not included in the list) do you consider necessary for emerging HR practitioners?
- Which other knowledge, skill or ability components are necessary for emerging HR practitioners, specifically in the future world of work (considering Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0)?

Data analysis

The researcher followed a deductive and inductive thematic analysis method. Braun and Clarke (2022) indicate that thematic analysis is a method used by researchers to identify, analyse and report patterns (themes) during data analysis and ensures an accurate data analysis. The qualitative data collected in this study, particularly the open-ended responses from experienced HR practitioners, were analysed using manual thematic analysis, without the use of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. This decision was intentional and aligned with the study's interpretivist orientation. According to Braun and Clarke (2022), manual thematic analysis is a valid and widely used approach in qualitative research, particularly when the dataset is manageable. By following this hands-on approach, the researcher stayed close to the data, enabling more comprehensive insights and greater control over interpretation.

Deductive thematic analysis entailed using a predetermined framework, namely the research objectives, when analysing the data to establish whether the theory was true or false. The objectives suggested a top-down deductive approach because they involve applying existing literature, theories and models to guide the study. Following an inductive method, data-driven coding was used to explore unanticipated themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The purpose of the data analysis was to identify the competencies needed for emerging HR practitioners. The following three categories were identified for emerging HR practitioners: knowledge, skills and abilities. In line with the competency definition adopted from the literature, which conceptualises a competency as a combination of knowledge, skills and abilities, this structure was used for data analysis purposes. Related codes were collated into candidate themes (no sub-themes emerged) and iteratively reviewed for coherence. Themes were then defined and clearly named, supported by illustrative participant extracts, and presented to address the research questions and objectives. Although the study used the competency framework of knowledge, skills and abilities to organise reporting, themes were still developed based on the participants' expressions and interpretations.

Research rigour

Participation in this study was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. Data collection complied with the *Protection of Personal Information Act* and upheld informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. Trustworthiness reflects the rigour of the research process and instils confidence in the accuracy and applicability of the findings (Ahmed, 2024). Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

Credibility refers to the accuracy of data, respondents' opinions and their interpretation as presented (ul Haq et al., 2023). The researcher determined the list of competencies for emerging HR practitioners to ensure credibility through meticulous data collection from multiple sources. Competencies were developed by reviewing and incorporating competency models from the existing literature and by consulting HR managers through data collected via the questionnaire. The research drew on theoretical frameworks and practical insights to ensure that

the competencies were well-informed and validated. By incorporating multiple perspectives, the researcher ensured a robust foundation for identifying competencies, enhancing the study's reliability.

Confirmability was enhanced through transparent documentation of the research process and the use of participant extracts to demonstrate that the findings were grounded in the data rather than solely in the researcher's assumptions. Co-coders were involved to support analytical consistency and reduce potential researcher bias. They were suitable for this role because of their experience in qualitative analysis and familiarity with HRM research. Their role was to review the coding, assess alignment between extracts, codes and themes, and provide feedback on theme coherence. The primary researcher retained responsibility for the final interpretation. Boundaries were managed through prior role clarification, the use of a shared coding framework, and a discussion of differences until agreement was reached.

Dependability focuses on reliability, ensuring that the findings remain consistent when the study is repeated within the same context with the same group (Shenton, 2004). The same methodology should then be followed, and results should not differ. The researcher meticulously followed and adhered to the set methodology, ensuring consistency throughout the study. This means the same questionnaire was used for all research participants, including instructions, context and study information. This approach ensured reliable and consistent results. Co-coders assisted in this process to ensure dependability by verifying the collected data.

Transferability refers to the extent to which research findings are applicable to similar contexts, individuals, groups and settings (ul Haq et al., 2023). The researchers made sure to collect descriptive data from research participants and provided comprehensive descriptions of them. The researcher provided an in-depth description of the research context.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the North-West University Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ref. No. NWU- 00642-24-A4).

Results

The following section describes the findings. Upon compiling the competencies from the selected models, the researcher conducted a comparative analysis to identify areas of convergence across the frameworks. Competencies that appeared in two or more models were considered to have cross-model relevance and were therefore prioritised for inclusion in the emerging competency list. This approach strengthened the validity of the findings in the literature by prioritising widely recognised competencies and excluding those with limited evidence of broader applicability. Two main criteria guided the process of identifying these competencies:

- Semantic alignment: This refers to the use of linguistically similar terminology or phrasing that, upon analysis, indicates conceptual equivalence.
- Functional overlap: Competencies were also compared based on their functional role within HR practice. This approach allowed the grouping of competencies that, while differently phrased, fulfilled analogous functions.

The researcher identified a set of 20 competencies from the competency models. These 20 competencies were placed in three sub-dimensions: (1) knowledge, (2) skills and (3) abilities, deemed suitable for emerging HR practitioners. These are reported next.

Competencies (knowledge, skills, and abilities) that emerging human resource practitioners should display according to relevant human resource competency models

Table 3 provides a consolidated list of the critical knowledge competencies identified by examining multiple HR competency models and grouping together similar items found in at least two sources.

Table 4 provides the consolidated list of the critical skills competencies that were identified by examining multiple HR competency models and grouping together similar items found in at least two sources.

Table 5 provides the consolidated list of the critical abilities competencies that were identified by examining multiple HR competency models and grouping together similar items found in at least two sources.

The lists of competencies were used to compile a questionnaire using the QuestionPro platform, which was presented as a questionnaire to HR managers. Next, the findings reflect the responses from the HR practitioners.

Knowledge competencies of emerging human resource practitioners

The rating findings revealed that HR practitioners in participant organisations demonstrated specific knowledge competencies. *Reward and recognition*, and *performance* were rated as competencies that emerging practitioners are performing excellently in and were rated as very important and necessary in their organisation. Eight competencies, namely *risk management and compliance, strategic HRM, HR service delivery, workforce planning, employee wellness, talent management, business acumen, labour relations and employment law*, were rated by the participants as being averagely displayed; however, they were viewed as very important and necessary in their organisations.

The participants reported additional knowledge competencies. Seven themes emerged from the data: Change management, financial acumen, HR systems and technology, labour law, learning and development, organisational development, recruitment, and selection.

TABLE 3: Description of critical knowledge competencies.

Competency	Definition	Reference and competency model
Workforce planning	The business process of integrating organisational needs and people strategy.	McEvoy et al. (2005) SABPP (2014) Ulrich (2021) Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) SABPP national HR management system standards model
Strategic human-resource management	A systematic approach to developing and executing HRM strategies, policies and plans that are aligned with the organisation's overall strategy and enabling the achievement of its goals (Abbott & Jivan, 2023)	Meyer and Abbott (2019) McEvoy et al. (2005) Raj (2021) SABPP (2014) Ulrich (2021) Abbott and Jivan (2023) SABPP National HR Management System standards model of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)
Talent management	Proactively design and implement an integrated talent-driven organisational strategy that focuses on attracting, developing and retaining talent.	Raj (2021) Meyer and Abbott (2019) SABPP (2014) SABPP national HR management system standards model of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
Business acumen	Intellectual ability to make profitable and professional decisions based on knowledge and insight in a timely and precise manner.	Josh Bersin (2019) Makhele and Barnard (2019) Raj (2021) Ulrich (2021) Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
Performance management	A systematic method for directing, developing, supporting, aligning and improving individual and team goals.	Abbott and Jivan (2023) SABPP (2014) McEvoy et al. (2005) SABPP (2014) SABPP national HR management system standards model
Labour relations and employment law	Competence in understanding the application of rules and processes governing the employment relationship between employer and employee.	Bailey et al. (2012) McEvoy et al. (2005) SABPP national HR management system standards model
HR risk management and compliance	A systematic approach of identifying and addressing people-related factors, such as uncertainties and opportunities, which can either have a positive or negative impact on the realisation of the objectives of an organisation (SABPP, 2014).	Meyer and Abbott (2019) McEvoy et al. (2005) SABPP (2014) SABPP national HR management system standards model
Reward and recognition	Insights into systems that allow organisations to offer their employees fair and competitive levels of pay and benefits in recognition of their contribution to the achievement of agreed deliverables in line with organisational objectives and values.	Meyer and Abbott (2019) SABPP national HR management system standards model
Diversity and inclusion	Understanding the diversity of unique individuals within a group and creating an environment that allows them to work together as equally valued contributors	Daley (2022) Ulrich (2021)
HR service delivery	Insights into influencing and partnering approaches in the provision of HR services, meeting the needs of the organisation, its managers and employees, which enable the delivery of organisational goals.	Abbott and Jivan (2023) SABPP national HR management system standards model of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
Employee wellness	Knowledge of strategies that create and maintain a safe and healthy social and work environment.	McEvoy et al. (2005) Meyer and Abbott (2019) SABPP (2014) SABPP national HR management system standards model

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SABPP, South African Board for People Practices; HR, human resource; HRM, human resource management.

Change management

The research participants mentioned that emerging HR practitioners should demonstrate sound knowledge of change management, including planning, interventions and execution of practices that secure buy-in and participation from those affected, emphasising the human-centric approach to managing organisational change, as indicated by Participants 18 and 24's responses:

> 'Change management in the context of being deliberate about designing a change experience for people so that they can buy into it …' (Participant 18, Female, Employee wellness manager)

> 'The importance of change management …' (Participant 24, Female, Head of people development)

Financial acumen

Findings indicate that emerging HR practitioners should demonstrate financial acumen, including financial principles, cost management and HR payroll software, which is crucial for HR professionals to contribute strategically to the

TABLE 4: Description of critical skills competencies.

Competency	Definition	References and competency model
Team and interpersonal skills	Essential skills involved in dealing with and relating to other people, primarily one-to-one.	Zhang (2018) Raj (2021) McEvoy et al. (2005) SABPP HR competency model Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
Communication skills	Can effectively convey, receive, or exchange ideas, information, signals or messages through appropriate means, enabling individuals or groups to persuade, seek information, offer information or express emotions	Raj (2021) SABPP (2014) McEvoy et al. (2005) SABPP HR competency model Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)
Cognitive skills	Capacity to plan, reason and solve problems with mental ability.	McEvoy et al. (2005) SABPP (2014)
Collaborative skills	Contact in which individuals, teams or organisational members work together to achieve a single shared objective, activity or production.	McEvoy et al. (2005) Keyton (2017)
Consulting skills	Ability to implement strategic change in an organisation.	Josh Bersin (2019) McEvoy et al. (2005) Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)

Note: Please see the full reference list of this article Mtshelwane, D.N., Graupner, L., & Rossouw, L. (2026). Critical competencies for emerging human resource practitioners navigating the changing world of work. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur, 24*(0), a3492. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v24i0.3492 for more information.
SABPP, South African Board for People Practices; HR, human resource.

TABLE 5: Description of critical abilities competencies.

Competency	Definition	References and competency model
HR technology and digital proficiency	Effective use of technological tools and platforms that make information accessible and accurate in real-time, providing HR line management with the knowledge and analytics needed for more effective decision-making.	Meyer and Abbott (2019) SABPP HR competency model SABPP national HR management system standards model Raj (2021) Ulrich (2021)
HR analytics and metrics	Metrics refer to measurements that predict the effectiveness and efficiency of HR policies, whereas analytics are the people drivers of business outcomes.	Raj (2021) SABPP (2021) SABPP national HR management system standards model
Executive presence	Communicates with gravitas, authority and a deep breadth of knowledge in their field of competence.	Sherman (2015) SABPP (2014) Raj (2021) Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)
HR research methods	The ability to collect data using specific instruments, analysing and interpreting the data to reach a conclusion to a problem.	Goundar (2012) McEvoy et al. (2005)

Note: Please see the full reference list of this article Mtshelwane, D.N., Graupner, L., & Rossouw, L. (2026). Critical competencies for emerging human resource practitioners navigating the changing world of work. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur, 24*(0), a3492. https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v24i0.3492 for more information.
SABPP, South African Board for People Practices; HR, human resource.

organisation's financial planning and decision-making, as indicated by Participants 4 and 49:

> 'Learning payroll and HR software's for example Sage in varsity …' (Participant 49, Male, Consultant and executive coach)

> 'Understanding financial principles, budgets, and cost management is essential, especially when managing HR budgets and justifying HR investments to senior leadership …' (Participant 40, Female, HR business partner)

Human resource systems and technology

The findings highlight the need for emerging HR practitioners to develop competencies in HR systems, AI, HR analytics and digital ethics, reflecting the growing importance of incorporating these into HR practices to driving organisational efficiency, make strategic decisions, and ethical considerations in the digital age, as indicated by Participant 29:

> 'What different HR systems are available and most used, especially in SA …' (Participant 29, Female, HR business partner).

Participant 25 reflected as follows:

> 'I know you mentioned technology, but I would put a lot of focus on AI and AI ethics …' (Participant 25, Female, HR business partner).

Labour law

The research participants identified labour relations as a critical competency indicating that HR practitioners should have sound knowledge of labour relations practices, especially South African legislation and labour relations practices that need to be applied in a work environment to ensure effective people practices, as stated by Participant 37:

> 'A greater understanding of all the laws required to run a business and not just the labour laws …' (Participant 37, Male, HR manager).

Participant 64 indicated:

> 'Knowledge of labour legislation and application of the legislation. I have found that emerging HR professionals don't realise the importance of understanding the labour and how organisations apply these in everyday activities …' (Participant 64, Female, Manager – rewards, operations and services)

Learning and development

Learning and development are crucial knowledge competencies for emerging HR practitioners, involving continuous employee learning, innovative design thinking and upskilling, reskilling line managers to foster adaptability, as well as innovation and effective team performance in an evolving work environment, as indicated by Participants 45 and 58:

> 'Upskilling line management to manage their team effectively …' (Participant 45, Female, Senior HR executive)

> 'Design thinking. HR professionals should learn how to design work while implementing …' (Participant 58, Female, HR business partner)

Organisational development

The findings show that emerging HR professionals should have strong knowledge of organisational development, including work design, organisational structure and the alignment of roles with goals and processes to ensure equitable and efficient HRM practices. This is reflected in Participants 33 and 54's responses:

> 'Work design from organisation to individual job level …' (Participant 33, Male, Senior manager: HR and support services)

> 'Job evaluation and grading organisational structures. Staff establishment control …' (Participant 54, Female, HR business partner)

Recruitment and selection

Findings highlight that emerging HR practitioners should have extensive knowledge of recruitment and selection, emphasising the need for efficient talent acquisition strategies and the holistic integration of new employees. While recruitment and selection seem to address a short-term staffing need, talent management was highlighted as an additional, distinct competency focused on long-term strategic workforce planning, as reflected in the responses below:

> 'Talent acquisition …' (Participant 50, Female, Human resource manager)

> 'Importance and use of onboarding work enabling equipment …' (Participant 64, Female, Manager – rewards, operations and services)

Skill competencies of emerging human resource practitioners

The findings revealed that HR practitioners in participant organisations demonstrated specific skill competencies. *Team and interpersonal skills* and *collaborative skills* were rated highest in competency, matching their high importance. *Communication skills*, *cognitive skills* and *consulting skills* were rated as average in terms of competency despite being considered very important. Interestingly, all skills were considered very important for the organisation, indicating their critical nature in HR practice.

The following additional skill competencies were reported by the participants, resulting in the following nine themes:

Change management

The findings revealed that emerging HR practitioners should display strong change management skills, including adaptability, resilience, learning agility, innovative thinking and the ability to manage remote teams while developing and implementing strategic solutions to workforce challenges. This is reflected in Participants 24 and 61's responses:

> 'Solution creation and implementation …' (Participant 24, Female, Head of people development).

> 'Remote workforce management skills …' (Participant 61, Male, HR manager).

Executive presence

The findings indicate that emerging HR practitioners should display executive presence, characterised by strategic influence across the organisational levels, contextual understanding and the ability to communicate HR initiatives effectively. This is reflected in Participant 45's response:

> 'Influencing people who don't have a reporting line but upon whom you are reliant to effectively execute your job well …' (Participant 45, Female, Senior HR executive)

Participant 47 reported:

> 'Influencing contextual understanding …' (Participant 47, Male, HR officer)

Financial skills

The findings showed that financial skills are imperative for emerging HR practitioners, combining numerical and financial acumen with team management abilities to align HR functions more closely with business strategy and operations. This is reflected in Participant 18's response:

> 'Financial acumen – I often say when the CFO speaks about numbers, HR professionals often switch off …' (Participant 18, Female, HR manager)

Participant 9 added:

> 'Finance for non-financial managers …' (Participant 9, Female, HR practitioner)

Human resource analytics

Human resource analytics are regarded as a critical skill for emerging HR practitioners, highlighting the importance of analytical thinking, proficiency in AI and digital technologies, basic coding skills and a strong understanding of digital HR practices. This is reflected in participant 64's response:

> 'Artificial intelligence and data analytics related to HR practices …' (Participant 64, Female, Manager – rewards, operations and services)

Participant 63 added:

> 'Digital HR …' (Participant 63, Female, Manager: recruitment partner)

Interpersonal skills

The findings showed that interpersonal skills are imperative for emerging HR practitioners, including communication,

empathy, emotional intelligence and personal credibility, which support positive workplace relationships, conflict management and a workforce culture that promotes employee well-being and organisational success. This is reflected in Participant 47's response:

> 'Emotional intelligence, assertiveness, adaptability, empathy …' (Participant 47, Male HR officer),
>
> '… and managing interpersonal relationships …' (Participant 10, Female, HR officer and payroll administrator)

Listening skills

The findings revealed that listening skills are essential for emerging HR practitioners, including active listening and the ability to listen without interruption, which help build trust, understand diverse perspectives and facilitate effective organisational communication. This is reflected in Participants 10 and 34's responses:

> 'Listening without interruption …' (P10, Female, HR officer and payroll administrator)
>
> 'Listening, learning on-the-job …' (P34, Female, Payroll manager)

Negotiation skills

The participants indicated that negotiation skills are essential and required skills that emerging HR practitioners should possess, emphasising their role as mediators, negotiators and influencers within the organisational context. This is reflected in Participants 37 and 50's responses:

> 'Negotiating skills, particularly in conflict situations …' (Participant 37, Male, HR manager)
>
> 'Negotiation skills and employee relations …' (Participant 50, Female, Human Resource Management)

Professional skills

The findings showed that emerging HR practitioners should display professional communication, public speaking, administrative abilities and time management skills, combining traditional competencies with technical and digital proficiencies to support organisational objectives effectively. This is reflected in Participants 11 and 64's responses:

> 'Time management and time management seem to lack …' (Participant 64, Female, Manager-rewards, operations and services)
>
> 'Computer literacy and problem-solving …' (Participant 11, Female, Director)

Well-being management

Experienced HR practitioners indicated that emerging HR practitioners should display skill competency in well-being management, encompassing employee support and conflict resolution, reflecting HR's evolving role in fostering a healthy and supportive workplace culture. This is reflected in Participants 2 and 51's responses:

> 'Workplace counselling and managing mental and ill health …' (Participant 2, Female, Lecturer)
>
> 'Group facilitation and mediation …' (Participant 51, Female, Senior HR practitioner)

Ability competencies of emerging human resource practitioners

The findings revealed that HR practitioners in participant organisations demonstrated specific ability competencies. *Human resource technology and digital proficiency* were rated highest in competency, matching their high importance. *Human resource analytics and metrics and executive presence* are rated as average in terms of competency despite being considered very important. Interestingly, HR research methods are rated as an average ability in importance, slightly lower than the other abilities.

The additional ability competencies identified by the participants are reported next. The following three themes were identified: *change management*, *leadership and professional abilities*.

Change management

Human resource professionals identified change management as a key knowledge competency and an essential ability for emerging HR practitioners. Research participants emphasised that effectively handling and navigating organisational change is a critical competency that needs to be demonstrated by emerging HR practitioners. This is reflected in Participant 64's response:

> 'Ability to cope with the changing technological and societal circumstances …' (Participant 64, Female, Manager – rewards, operations and services)

Participant 29 added:

> 'Being able to adapt and learn quickly …' (Participant 29, Female, Head of people development)

Leadership abilities

The participants' responses reflected that emerging HR practitioners should demonstrate leadership by aligning HR with business goals, and showing assertiveness in communication and advocacy is essential to lead effectively. This is reflected in Participants 16 and 48's responses:

> 'Lead and implement change …' (Participant 16, Male, Divisional manager, people strategic enablement senior specialist)
>
> 'Strategic thinking …' (Participant 48, Female, HR manager)

Professional abilities

The responses highlighted that time management, emotional intelligence and cognitive-reasoning abilities are essential competencies for emerging HR practitioners. This is reflected in Participants 33 and 66's responses:

> 'Cognitive-reasoning ability …' (Participant 33, Male, Senior manager: HR and support services)
>
> 'Time management and project management …' (Participant 66, Male, Manager – rewards, operations and services)

Next, the participants were asked which competencies are necessary for emerging HR practitioners, specifically for the future world of work (considering Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0).

Knowledge competencies for the future world of work

The following knowledge competencies were identified by the participants as necessary for emerging HR practitioners to display for the future world of work:

Hybrid work model

It was indicated that HR practitioners should understand hybrid work models and navigate them effectively, positioning themselves as strategic partners who can implement and support employee well-being during transitions. A response from a participant stated:

> 'Hybrid working model.' (Participant 8, Female, HR business partner)

Data-driven human resource practices

Data-driven HR practices were identified as a knowledge competency that emerging HR practitioners should acquire. Data-driven HR practices involve practitioners with a sound knowledge of information technology and automation. Practitioners can become tech-savvy partners and optimise HR processes, thereby navigating the complexities of the digital workplace. A response from a participant stated:

> 'Predictive data analytics – using people-related data to make predictions about dynamics in the workforce.' (Participant 51, Female, Senior HR executive)

Global workforce and diversity

Research participants expressed that emerging HR practitioners should have a sound understanding of the global workforce and diversity to ensure that they can navigate a diverse workforce and its complexities. A participant stated:

> 'Understand global workforce and diversity.' (Participant 16, Female, HR officer)

Artificial intelligence and ethics

It was expressed that HR practitioners should have a sound knowledge of AI and ethics and their impact on HR practices. A participant's response stated:

> 'AI and AI ethics.' (Participant 25, Female, National HR business partner)

Human resource trends

Human resource practitioners stated that emerging HR practitioners should have sound knowledge of HR trends and social media developments. A response from a participant stated:

> 'Understanding the future HR trends and the impact on organisations and its workforce.' (Participant 34, Female, Industrial psychologist)

Skills competencies for the future world of work

The following skills competencies were identified by the participants as necessary for emerging HR practitioners to display for the future world of work.

Analytical skills

Human resource managers expressed that emerging HR practitioners should possess analytical skills as they are essential skills within an HR role. A response from a participant stated:

> 'Analytical ability to interpret data, tell the story and provide insights to move the organisation forward.' (Participant 25, Female, National HR business partner)

Critical thinking skills

Research participants highlighted that emerging practitioners must demonstrate critical thinking to navigate workplace challenges and change, incorporating problem-solving, communication and digital literacy to drive business success. A response from a participant stated:

> 'Critical thinking and strategic planning.' (Participant 45, Female, HR manager business partner)

Systems thinking

Human resource managers stated that emerging HR practitioners should demonstrate systems thinking that enables them to shift from reactive to strategic approaches, thereby anticipating challenges, optimising practices and aligning HR with organisational success. A response from a participant stated:

> 'Systems thinking.' (Participant 33, Female, Head of assessments)

Ability competencies for the future world of work

Additional abilities that were deemed necessary for emerging HR practitioners to display, according to experienced HR practitioners, for the future world of work (considering Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0), were adaptability and collaboration.

Adaptability

Adaptability is regarded as a necessary ability that emerging HR practitioners would require for the future world of work, considering Industry 4.0 and Industry 5.0. Human resource practitioners who can effectively adapt to the ever-changing world of work typically display strategic, proactive behaviour in their work. A response from a participant stated:

> 'Adaptability quotient.' (Participant 24, Female, HR manager)

Collaboration

Human resource practitioners must demonstrate the ability to collaborate, enabling them to function effectively and achieve organisational goals. A response from a participant stated:

> 'The future of work will require HR professionals to collaborate closely with IT, operations, and other departments to implement digital HR solutions and support organisational goals effectively.' (Participant 40, Female, Payroll manager)

Discussion

This study identified core competencies from HR competency models such as the SABPP, Ulrich, McEvoy et al., Industry 4.0

and Industry 5.0, Raj's HR 5.0 model, CIPD, and SHRM, and consolidated a list of 20 competencies.

The findings further revealed how experienced HR practitioners perceived the extent to which emerging HR practitioners in their organisations display certain critical *knowledge* competencies, as well as the importance of those competencies. Reward and recognition, as well as performance management, were highly rated in both display and importance, indicating that emerging HR practitioners are generally competent in these areas. This suggests that emerging HR practitioners display acceptable competence in these competencies. Parry and Tyson (2019) contradict the higher rating on reward and recognition, stating that organisations have become more flexible in this digital and globalised economy. Therefore, traditional reward systems may not be as effective. This means that traditional reward systems might be less impactful in future work environments; even though current emerging practitioners are displaying this competence well, there will be a need to understand, learn and adapt to new and more flexible reward strategies.

Other key knowledge competencies, including *risk management and compliance, strategic HR management, HR service delivery, workforce planning, employee wellness, talent management, business acumen, labour relations* and *employment law*, received moderate ratings but remain very important. This suggests a gap that could impact employability and effectiveness. In smaller organisations or agile environments, HR practitioners might be required to be competent across the entire HR value chain rather than to have deep expertise in traditional HR management (Gallardo-Gallardo et al., 2015). This perspective challenges the relevance of the identified competencies in this study, such as strategic HRM, considering the size or context of the organisation. At the same time, this study suggests that emerging HR practitioners should demonstrate all these competencies, whether in small or large organisations, across industries and sectors. Additional knowledge competencies were also identified by research participants, stating that these competencies are imperative for emerging HR practitioners. These competencies include *change management, financial acumen, HR systems and technology, labour law, learning and development, organisational development, recruitment and selection*. According to Coetzee et al. (2025), HR professionals need to build cross-functional future-proof skills such as business acumen, digital agility, people advocacy and workplace stewardship. Human resource practitioners should have sound knowledge and be competent in these competencies to be able to adapt to the challenges of the global economy (Motsoeneng et al., 2024).

Regarding *skills* competencies, *team and interpersonal skills* and *collaboration skills* were rated as being well displayed by emerging HR practitioners, with both deemed crucial for organisational success. However, communication, cognitive and consulting skills were rated as being only moderately displayed, though still important. These skills are crucial for HR practitioners in the changing world of work, as they significantly impact how practitioners influence, lead and negotiate (McDonnell & Sikander, 2017). These findings suggest a gap in the skills that emerging HR practitioners display only moderately. The moderate display of communication and cognitive skills aligns with Ulrich's (2016) observation that HR practitioners must strengthen their strategic communication to thrive in complex work environments. The research participants provided a list of additional skills competencies that emerging HR practitioners should display, which include *change management, executive presence, financial skills, HR analytics, interpersonal skills, listening skills, negotiation skills, professional skills and well-being management.* Academy to Innovate HR (AIHR) proposes 18 HR skills that every HR professional needs. The skills mentioned by research participants seem to be like those proposed by AIHR, and these include active listening, being analytical and data-driven, as well as well-being evangelism, to mention a few (Van Vulpen, 2025). This argues and emphasises the importance of these skills reflected in data collected and recent research findings.

Regarding ability competencies, participants rated HR technology and digital proficiency highly in both demonstrated application and overall importance. Conversely, data analysis and metrics, executive presence and HR research methods were rated as only moderately displayed, but vital for organisational effectiveness. Although technology is increasingly integrated into HR processes, the findings suggest it should not overshadow the human aspect (Becker et al., 2001). The strong ratings for digital proficiency are consistent with Borthakur and Das (2023), who emphasise the importance of technology in transitioning to I5.0. Sparrow et al. (2020) note that data analytics and metrics are underutilised yet critical for strategic decision-making. Ultimately, while digital fluency is viewed as essential in this study, it should be complemented by robust leadership and people skills to ensure organisational success (Rajad & Mounir, 2022). The additional abilities and competencies that were identified include *change management, leadership and professional abilities.* Not only is it important for HR practitioners to display these competencies, but enhancing leadership and professional abilities also amplifies the positive impact of HR change leadership on organisational commitment (Ha & Diem, 2025). These competencies have the potential to benefit the employee and contribute to the success of the organisation.

Pertaining to the competencies the participants deemed relevant for the future, the findings showed the following for knowledge competencies for the future world of work: *hybrid work models, data-driven HR practices, global workforce and diversity, AI and ethics* and *HR trends.* Skills competencies for the future world of work were reported as: *analytical skills, critical thinking* and *systems thinking*. Ability competencies for the future world of work were reported as *adaptability* and *collaboration*. These findings align with the work of the HR 5.0 model, which states that emerging HR practitioners should possess knowledge in technical, social, analytical and managerial competencies to remain

competitive. While the competency models emphasise that these areas, mainly technical, social and managerial competencies, are essential in an era of digitisation, they also highlight a balanced approach between digital proficiency, people management and strategic leadership skills (Dhanpat et al., 2020). In Industry 4.0, HR practitioners are expected to possess core skills, technical expertise, personal attributes and analytical decision-making abilities (Sharma et al., 2021), while in Industry 5.0, reskilling and upskilling are crucial to deliver the expected value within organisations (Güğerçin & Güğerçin, 2021).

While developing competencies that align with the demands of Industry 5.0, complex work environments, and effective human-robot collaboration, it is crucial to integrate social proficiency, social intelligence and adaptive leadership skills (Borthakur & Das, 2023), thereby ensuring that HR practitioners can effectively navigate intersections of human and machine interactions.

Practical implications

The study carries significant implications for universities, professional bodies and employers. Higher education institutions such as universities may need to integrate these competencies into HR curricula or incorporate micro-credentials aligned with these competencies to ensure graduates are work-ready and employable. Short learning programmes and continuous professional development initiatives could be designed to strengthen competencies such as leadership, systems thinking and critical reasoning. The findings point toward the need for professional bodies and employers to provide structured development opportunities and mentorship that expose emerging HR practitioners to real-world challenges. This ensures that organisations can cultivate an agile HR workforce that contributes strategically to business growth and transformation.

Limitations and recommendations

A few limitations can be identified in this study: a limited sample of HR managers, which may restrict the generalisability of results across diverse organisational contexts. Future research could adopt larger, more diverse samples and consider cross-industry to validate and expand the identified competencies. Longitudinal studies could also track how these competencies influence HR career progression and organisational outcomes over time. Furthermore, research may benefit from exploring the role of technological advancements, such as AI-driven HR analytics, in reshaping competencies required of emerging practitioners.

Conclusion

In this study, it is evident that the competencies of emerging HR practitioners extend beyond technical expertise to include strategic, interpersonal and adaptive capabilities. By fostering change management, leadership, emotional intelligence, critical thinking and systems thinking, HR practitioners will be better equipped to address workplace complexities and align HR practices with business goals more effectively. The study offers valuable insights and a foundation for designing development programmes that bridge the competency gap and prepare emerging HR practitioners for success in the ever-evolving world of work.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Debbie N. Mtshelwane: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Visualisation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Lené Graupner: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Lizelle Rossouw: Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of the study are available from the corresponding author, Debbie N. Mtshelwane, upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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