

Male or female empowerment in Key Account Management – what’s best?

A conceptual framework focusing on the analysis of female KA managers’ multifaceted roles and competencies

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KAM is “a concept through which companies introduce the principle of relationship marketing into their customer policy and become closer to the customer” (Ivens and Pardo 2007, p. 472). The goal is to give key accounts (KA) with special treatment in the areas of marketing, sales, and services administration, as they are the most strategically significant customers in a company’s customer portfolio. Hence a KA is managed in a specific idiosyncratic way including dedicated actors, activities, and resources (Homburg, Workman, and Jensen 2002). Implementing KAM in an organization is “the creation of a new mission (thus the creation of a new job, new practices, etc.) and its integration into the existing structure. This mission involves coordinating supplier information and actions in time and space in relation to a customer in its entirety (geographical and historical)” (Pardo 2001, p. 1).

KAM is typically implemented through a KA Manager* who in many cases works with a temporary or permanent key account team (KA team) to serve the KA (Salojärvi, Saarenketo, and Puumalainen 2013). The most significant difference to classical sales management is the complexity of the business in KAM. In order to create value for the own organization as well as for the KA organization, the KA Manager fulfills a coordinating role between two complex networks of relationships (Wilson and Millman 2003). In this understanding the KA Manager’s position is often described as a boundary spanning one (Singh and Rhoads 1991). Academic research points out that the personal characteristics of KA Managers are an important aspect of successfully balancing internal and external KAM activities in this position (Kadam, Niersbach, and Ivens 2022; Niersbach 2016; Wilson and Millman 2003).

*Note that a KA manager can be a female or male employee. Bearing in mind that both genders can be represented, for the sake of convenience the masculine form ‘he’ will be used throughout the dissertation. For reasons of consistency, this will be also applied to a KA director, any manager or interviewee.

McDonald, Millman, and Rogers (1997) identified several characteristics for a successful KA Manager: integrity, the ability to communicate, a deep understanding of the internal and external relationship network as well as the relevant market, sales and negotiating skills.

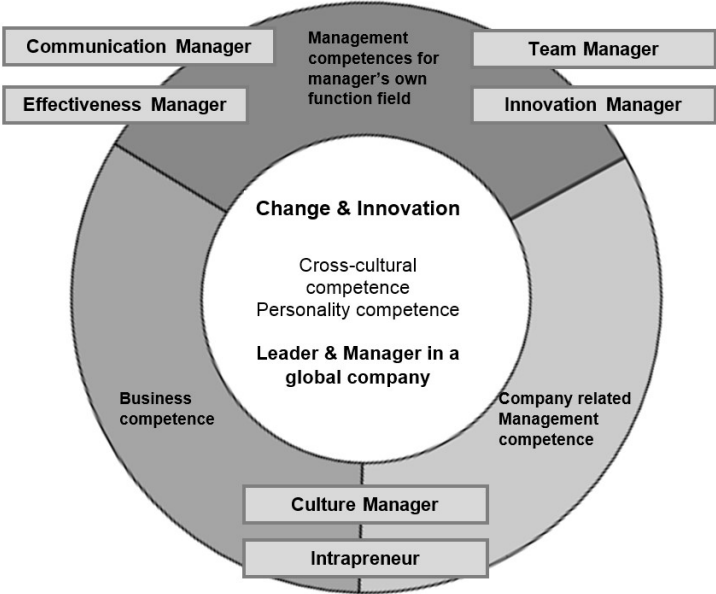
Wilson and Millman (2003) introduce the expression “political entrepreneur” to illustrate the demands in this role. The multiple demands in this role range from analytic competences to diplomatic and to entrepreneurial skills. Yip and Bink (2008) specify ten characteristics which in their opinion are of significant importance for KA Managers: the ability to communicate, global management skills, business and financial sense, strategic understanding, problem-solving abilities, cultural empathy, sales talent, market and branch knowledge and, finally, product knowledge. Interpersonal skills have recently been acknowledged as a crucial success factor for KA Managers. They comprehend the competence to communicate, coordinate, persuade and link different actors in KAM, in the internal organizational as well as in the KA network, in order to create value for both organizations (Niersbach 2016).

Due to a lack of hierarchical power and, hence, authority in the internal network, KA Managers often need to find other ways of influencing other network actors. The development of a ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘keeping everybody on the same page’ (Guesalaga and Johnston 2010) as well as establishing an ‘esprit de corps’ among the units involved in the management of KAs are essential for an effective KAM (Homburg, Workman, and Jensen 2002).

It becomes obvious that the selection of the KA Manager is a critical activity for ensuring an effective and innovative KAM system in organizations (Marcos-Cuevas et al. 2014). Moreover, while the required competence set is already multi-dimensional today, it becomes more and more sophisticated and complex due to the dynamic of markets including new trends and technologies and the transformation to an increasingly digital work environment.

Nowadays, and especially with the beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic, KA Managers frequently operate in digital KA teams whose members have diverse technological and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the epidemic heightened the market’s hurdles in terms of uncertainty and complexity (Niersbach, Hohl, and Ivens 2021).

Figure 1: Role and competence model (Hohl 2012)



On the basis of the role and competence model of Hohl (2012) depicted in Figure 1, we could demonstrate that the KA Manager is the “Intrapreneur” of the organization (Niersbach, Hohl, and Ivens 2021). The model shows the overlapping general manager roles and dedicated competences with great relevance in KAM: change manager, innovation manager, effectiveness manager, culture manager, team manager and communication manager.

By definition, a competence is considered “the convergence of knowledge of the subject, generic skills and the communication of ideas. Competences are thus a part and final product of the education process, they can be considered a construction throughout the educational process, as well as its performance, that is to say, the practical result of knowing” (Vazquez et al., 2001, p. 6). Fagerberg et al. (2004), argue that the competence in innovation is determined by the capacity to generate and implement a new idea, product, service, or business successfully in the market, as well as to obtain a tangible benefit from the generation of ideas in order to successfully make the most of them. Hence, competences are related to an individual’s ability to perform a task or undertake a role.

In this understanding, the different roles in the model with regard to KAM are defined as follows (Niersbach, Hohl, Ivens 2021):

Communication Manager:

- The communication manager understands the dynamics of interpersonal and intergroup conflicts.
- He improves the intra-organizational communication process as well as the communication process towards the KA.
- He is the initiator of trust through sharing information, explaining entrepreneurial decisions, ensuring an open communication.

Innovation Manager:

- He has to find opportunities, think how innovation fits into strategy, structure, technology, skills, resources, and organizational commitments
- He has to balance the needs of existing lines against the needs of potential lines via portfolio planning.

Effectiveness Manager:

- He has to master the discipline of execution through linking people, strategy and operational processes.
- He has to acquire the relevant resources and the people in order to realize appropriate strategies.
- He has the ability to manage people with self-awareness.

Culture Manager:

- He can understand and manage cultural diversity.
- As a consequence, the Culture Manager is cross-culturally sensitive,

understands and appreciates diverse attitudes and behaviors, and works successfully in a global environment.

Team Manager:

- He has to shape structures of task work and teamwork in order to build network relations and information flows that connect team members and create effective team processes.
- He should link different individuals with various skills and combine heterogeneous team roles in order to create an extra value to the customer.

Change Manager:

- He has to anticipate and scan possible changes in the external business network and to set in motion the practices and processes for the internal adaptation in the internal organizational network with focus on e.g. operating systems, organizational structures, culture, and strategic resource management.

As we found, the competences and manager roles needed for successful KAM comprehend the competences and manager roles introduced by Hohl (2012). Moreover, we could define some new roles for KA Managers: the “digital manager” and the “resilience manager” (Niersbach, Hohl, and Ivens 2021). In this understanding, the KA Manager can be defined not only the entrepreneur of the company (Wilson and Millman 2003), but rather the “intrapreneur” of the company, as an intrapreneur is described in the academic literature as self-motivated, proactive, and action-oriented people (Parker 2016). Thus, intrapreneurship creates an entrepreneurial environment by allowing employees, in our case the KA Manager, to use their entrepreneurial skills for the benefit of both the company and the employee.

We found that the multiple requirements can only be represented by few individuals representing exactly those different roles and therefore multiple competences. Hence, companies need to be very distinct in electing their employees for successful KAM or should be aware of the fact that they have a special in-house training program to prepare them for the multiple challenges needed in KAM (Niersbach, Hohl, and Ivens 2021). Furthermore, we could detect that companies have to face a lack of qualified employees who could be trained as a KA Manager (Niersbach, Hohl, and Ivens 2021). Most importantly, we could confirm that interpersonal skills are crucial for being successful in KAM (Niersbach 2016; Niersbach, Hohl, and Ivens 2021).

In this vein, it surprises that numerous positions in KAM are occupied by male KA Managers, even though women benefit from “psychological benefits, emotional advice and support, practice at multitasking, relevant background, opportunities to enrich interpersonal skills, and leadership practice that enhance effectiveness in the management role” (Ruderman et al. 2002, p. 369). However, the statistics give proof that male KA managers occupy the majority of positions in KAM: among KA managers in the US, 31.2% of them are women compared to 65.0% who are men (n=30 million). In Europe, the percentage is even worse: only 1 manager out of 3 in the EU is a women, and even less in senior management positions, that is the field of KAM. The numbers indicate a gender disparity that requires more empirical investigation. For this purpose, we are in the phase of designing a qualitative research approach in Germany in the form of a case study. Concretely, we aim to comprehend why there are so many more

male KA Managers than female KA Managers in firms. In addition, we want to understand why it seems to be such a hurdle to develop potential female managers for being successful in KAM in a multi-lateral approach: the organization, the team, and the individual level.

The managerial implications on the organizational level might be give some valuable insights on how companies can close the gender gap in KAM, and how they might qualify, train and develop female KA managers in an efficient way in order to fulfill the multiple demands on diverse manager roles and needed competencies. On the team and individual level, we might determine if female managers are deficient in particular roles and competencies and if they require specialized training in these roles and competencies for success in KAM. Our empirical research might also give us the possibility to expand the findings of the enlarged role and competence model to the benefits of multiple roles for female KA Managers, and hence encourage successful female managers to dare the step into the actual male world of KAM. Hence, we might also be able to support companies in encouraging female managers to become a KA manager. With our results, we might be able to give a valuable input to the existing academic research in KAM with shedding some light on the aspect of female empowerment. Our research will conclude with a discussion of its limitations and suggestions for future research directions.

[Note: Please note that the case study is work in progress. We are at the very beginning of designing the conceptual framework and will be able to show the theoretical model at the conference. Future steps regarding the planned empirical analysis will be indicated.]

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