

# **Gender match for continuous performance in KAM: A seven country qualitative analysis investigating different roles and competences of male and female KA Managers for joint success**

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## **Abstract**

Gender diversity at work and its influence on performance has been a major topic of interest for both practitioners and academics in the past decade, mostly focusing on top and middle management. However, there is a gap in key account management (KAM) research with respect to whether gender differences affect the execution of the boundary spanning role in KAM, and whether female and male key account managers complement each other to increase the success of the team. This research aims to investigate the underrepresentation of women in KAM by examining factors at the organizational, team, and individual levels, and to identify barriers to the development of potential female managers in this domain considering gender heterogenous KAM teams to be most efficient. The study is built around the “roles and competences model” and the “network model of KAM”, and adopts a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews to male and female key account managers from seven different countries. The findings are expected to be presented at the conference.

## **Statement of Key Contributions:**

This research contributes to the existing knowledge on KAM by looking at the influence that gender diversity within the KAM team might have in the execution of the boundary spanning role between the supplier and the customer, and in the performance of the KAM team or the sales organization. To date, gender in KAM research has been empirically studied mainly as a control variable or a descriptor (e.g., Ivens et al. 2016; Reisel, Chia, and Maloles III 2005), but without deeply analyzing the extent to which gender diversity adds value to KAM practice. In addition, this study adds a new context (of KAM) as well as an international perspective to research on the role of gender diversity in middle management positions on business performance. The expected findings of this research should contribute to the practice of KAM in various ways. First, it would make key account managers aware of some differences between men and women in such role, which could guide some actions to work more cohesively as a team and to complement their characteristics and competences in favor of KAM and organizational performance. Second, the insights from this research should provide guidance to Sales or KAM directors who lead KAM teams, especially in making sure they have a balanced composition of men and women in the position of key account managers. Finally, this research may also bring some hope to female professionals in marketing and sales who may have been discouraged to apply to a Key Account Manager position because it is commonly predominantly executed by men.

## **Paper**

Gender diversity at work and its influence on performance has been a major topic of interest for both practitioners and academics in the past decade. According to a McKinsey & Company study, organizations in the top quartile for gender diversity are 15 percent more likely to outperform their respective national industry medians in terms of financial returns (Hunt, Layton, and Prince 2015). Furthermore, according to a survey of around 22,000 companies done by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, organizations with at least 30 percent female leadership experienced a 15 percent increase in standard profitability (Noland and Moran 2016). Recent scholar work (Islam, Saha, and Rahman 2023) finds that gender diversity in boards of directors positively influences firm performance in terms of return on assets. Likewise, a study by Joo et al. (2022) reveals that gender diversity at middle management positively affects organizational performance (profitability).

Key Account Management (KAM) is defined as “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). KAM can develop and maintain a competitive advantage through the establishment of beneficial long-term relationships with strategic customers (Dyer and Singh 1998; Tzempelikos and Gounaris 2015). To this end, supplier companies typically organize the KAM effort around a customer with different actors, being the most salient the key account manager, a cross-functional KAM team, and senior management (Guesalaga 2014; Homburg, Workman, and Jensen 2002).

It has been acknowledged that an important part of KAM success relies on the contribution of key account managers, who constitute a critical tangible resource for strategic KAM (Guesalaga et al. 2018; Mahlamäki, Rintamäki, and Rajah 2019) and whose role is frequently described as a “boundary spanning” one, requiring a comprehensive understanding of both their own organizational as well as the key account organization (Singh and Rhoads 1991). The key account manager must balance and influence internal and external networks, minimize frictions, and maximize the fit between the supplier’s value offer and the key account’s needs; he or she is an enabler and promoter of existing relationships and coordinates with individual and organizational actors to achieve KAM performance. Moreover, resource-based theory (e.g., Helfat and Peteraf 2003; Penrose 1959) suggests that resources and capabilities are the key drivers of competitive advantage and long-term success. In this regard, the skills and competencies of key account managers are seen as valuable resources for strategic KAM (Guesalaga et al. 2018).

In spite of the advanced knowledge on the roles and capabilities of key account managers that promote performance, there is a lack of empirical research on how gender diversity in KAM teams affects KAM performance, or the functioning of the KAM process. This seems very relevant, as most KAM positions are held by men, even though gender diversity is an essential part of any organization, and it has been demonstrated that women possess several key characteristics that are advantageous to KAM. Only 31.2 percent of KA Managers and 22.5 percent of KAM directors in the United States are female (Zippia Research 2021). In the European prime-age workforce in 2014, women occupied only 19 percent of corporate board seats and 14 percent of senior executive roles in Europe’s top 600 largest corporations (Christiansen et al. 2016). Evidently, these numbers reveal a gender gap in KAM. However, to date the only academic research that we are aware of that has focused specifically on gender diversity in KAM is the systematic literature by Ivens (2023), that recognizes the need to develop empirical research on this topic.

Therefore, our research aims to investigate the underrepresentation of women in KAM by examining factors at the organizational, team, and individual levels, and to identify barriers to the development of potential female managers in this domain considering gender heterogenous KAM teams to be most efficient. The research questions are as follows:

- (1) How do gender differences affect the execution of the boundary spanning role in KAM?
- (2) Can competences and roles be related to gender in KAM, and if so, how do different genders execute certain competences and roles?
- (3) How can different approaches of female and male key account managers be aligned to create value in a KAM team or organization as a whole, and how can female and male key account managers complement each other to increase the success of the team?

This study is built around one validated theory and two major theoretical models: the differentiation and alignment theory by Lawrence and Lorsch (1969) as well as the “roles and competences model” by Hohl (2012) and the “network model of KAM” by Ivens et al. (2014) and Niersbach (2016). This theory and the models are necessary for answering the

research questions, as there is no existing model in the KAM literature that integrates roles and network approach in KAM. To address this gap, we have incorporated these models into our own theoretical model, which is depicted in Figure 1. The suggested model seeks to provide a theoretical foundation to guide the investigation of gender disparities, KA roles, and their impact on KAM practices.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

This research adopts a qualitative methodology based on in-depth interviews to both male and female key account managers following the analysis and interpretative approach by Spiggle (1994). We are in the phase of gathering qualitative data from seven different countries: France, Germany, Spain, Ukraine, India, Vietnam, and Chile. In each country, 20 qualitative in-depth interviews are conducted for reasons of validity whereas each interview should last between forty and sixty minutes. To analyze the interview data, we utilize the thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012).

The preliminary findings, which are based on a comprehensive literature review and qualitative interview samples, are as follows (Two country extracts are given here):

Germany has a high percentage of female university graduates, including in management. However, the percentage of female board members in DAX companies is only 14 percent, 8 percent for the M-DAX, and 5 percent for the S-DAX (Kirsch et al. 2023). Similarly, the percentage of female key account managers in Germany is also low, with women occupying only 23 percent of KAM positions.

In Indian organizations, women are respected and valued, but they are also perceived to have a “family-oriented” role (Kadam, Niersbach, and Ivens 2023). Furthermore, the gender pay gap is 19 percent, with women earning less than their male counterparts for the same job (Chakraborty 2019). The underrepresentation of women in KAM positions is likely due to various factors, including cultural views, lack of flexible childcare options, and the perception that women should choose between having a career or children. Organizations should address these concerns in order to achieve gender equality and maximize the potential of their workforce.

[Note: More country specific results will be shown at the conference.]

This research has significant implications for both theory and practice.

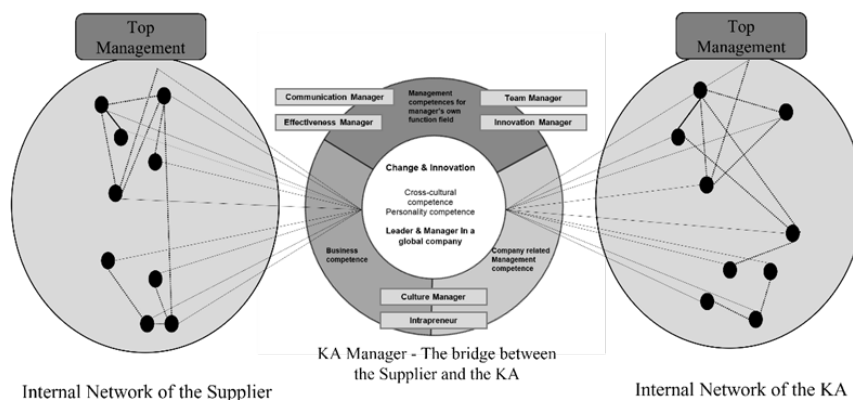
On an organizational level, the findings will provide valuable insights into how organizations can close the gender gap in their KAM teams by efficiently qualifying, training, and developing female key account managers to fulfill the complex demands of diverse managerial roles and skills.

In addition, the study will identify whether female and male managers are inadequate in specific roles and competences, which may entail specialized training for overall success in a KAM team. Also, the research will motivate professionally successful women to take on the position of Key Account Manager, thereby assisting companies in empowering their female managers.

The findings will contribute to the existing academic study on KAM, shedding light on the female empowerment and team effectiveness aspects of KAM. The study's limitations will be reviewed, as well as suggestions for further research would be discussed at the conference in detail.

## Figure

Figure 1: Boundary-spanning Role Integration Model of KA Manager (Source: Authors)



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