

Emotional intelligence as the key to leadership qualities in Key Account Management - a qualitative analysis investigating the gender differences and the underrepresentation of women

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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 the role of emotional intelligence as a key competence for leadership skills in KAM and highlights gender-specific differences and the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Emotional intelligence (EI), is understood as the ability to recognize, understand, and regulate one's own and others' emotions, is considered a critical success factor for effective leadership—especially in KAM.

Based on a comprehensive literature review and expert interviews, gender-specific characteristics of emotional intelligence in KAM are analyzed. The results show that women often score higher in the areas of empathy, relationship management, and social

competence, while men tend to be stronger in emotion regulation and stress management. Despite these strengths, women remain underrepresented in KAM, mainly due to structural barriers, traditional role models, and inadequate professional conditions. We discuss these challenges with the focus on the German market, and provides concrete recommendations for action on how companies can reduce the gender gap in KAM through targeted measures such as flexible working models, mentoring programs, and training to promote emotional intelligence.

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).

EI is part of a person's skill set and is defined as the ability to perceive one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to differentiate between them, and to use this information in a targeted manner to control one's thoughts and actions (Salovey and Mayer (1990). Perceiving emotions refers to the ability to recognize, interpret, and understand emotional and social signals in context. Regulating emotions involves developing and applying appropriate strategies to control emotional states. This process includes deciding on a specific strategy, monitoring its success, and, if necessary, adjusting it by switching to an alternative strategy if the original measure does not achieve the desired effect (Kang, Day, and Meara 2006). It has been found by Goleman (1995) that the central role of EI is a decisive factor for successful leadership and professional careers.

In spite of the advanced knowledge on the personal skillset of key account managers that promote performance, there is a lack of empirical research on how gender diversity and EI 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 with focus on the German market. The central objective of our research is to analyze the influence of EI on leadership skills in KAM and to determine the extent to which gender-specific differences affect leadership success. We aim to examine whether women, due to their potentially higher EI, have particular aptitudes for leadership positions in KAM and why they nevertheless remain underrepresented.

Another focus is on identifying possible structural, cultural, and individual barriers that could prevent women from using emotional intelligence as a career advantage. We try to analyze whether existing corporate cultures and decision-making mechanisms contribute to women being less likely to advance to leadership positions in KAM despite their high emotional intelligence.

Our research questions are as follows:

- (1) How do gender differences affect the execution of the boundary spanning role in KAM?
- (2) How does emotional intelligence differ between women and men?
- (3) What biological and cultural factors could contribute to women having higher emotional intelligence than men on average?
- (4) How important is higher emotional intelligence for leadership positions? Why are women less likely to be represented in leadership positions in KAM despite often having higher emotional intelligence?
- (5) What role do heterogeneous teams play in leadership success in KAM, and how do they contribute to overcoming the gender gap?
- (6) How can emotional intelligence be optimally utilized in mixed leadership teams to increase success in KAM?
- (7) To what extent do social and structural barriers influence the career development of women in leadership positions, especially in KAM. And what opportunities are there to overcome these barriers?

This study is built around two validated theory and two major theoretical constructs: the differentiation and alignment theory by Lawrence and Lorsch (1969), the theory of EI by Goleman (1995) as well as the “network construct of KAM” by Ivens et al. (2014) and Niersbach (2016) and the construct of EI by Salovey and Meyer (1990). The theories and the models are necessary for answering the research questions, as there is no existing model in the KAM literature that integrates EI in KAM. To address this gap, we have incorporated the theories and models into our own theoretical model. It will be introduced at the conference.

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). To analyze the interview data, we utilize the thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012).

The findings, which are based on a comprehensive literature review and qualitative interview samples, are as follows:

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. The perception and importance of EI among key account managers manifests itself in various ways and is considered by respondents to be essential for successful leadership in KAM. EI is regarded as one of the most important skills for remaining professional and responding appropriately even in difficult situations, as eg. In negotiations with key accounts. Particular emphasis was placed on the need to

remain rational and objective in stressful moments without getting caught up in emotions that could lead to conflicts or misunderstandings.

A central aspect of EI is the ability to recognize, understand, and specifically control one's own emotions as well as those of the customer's side. The principle of "stay professional" is often cited as a guiding principle for maintaining composure and remaining rational even in tense moments.

Diverse key account teams are immensely important for success, as they combine different perspectives, ways of thinking, and approaches. This diversity of perspectives leads to more balanced decisions and more creative solutions, as problems are viewed from different angles. A balanced mix of male and female team members therefore not only promotes decision-making, but also increases the team's effectiveness.

The use of EI is a decisive success factor for managing heterogeneous key account teams. In groups consisting of a wide variety of characters, age groups, and genders, different perspectives and approaches to problem solving naturally arise. While this diversity is an enormous strength, it also harbors potential for conflict. This is where the EI of the Key account directors comes into play, who must be able to recognize tensions, respond empathetically, and bring conflicts to a factual level. EI not only helps to defuse differences, but also promotes a harmonious working atmosphere in which all team members feel valued and motivated to work.

The results show that EI plays a central role in the success of executives in KAM. Skills such as empathy, self-regulation, social responsibility, communication skills, and relationship management are crucial for building long-term customer relationships, leading teams effectively, and managing conflicts. In the dynamic and competitive environment of KAM, which is characterized by complex negotiation processes and demanding customer relationships, these skills prove to be indispensable.

According to the results of our empirical study and the literature review, women often score higher in the dimensions of EI, especially in the areas of empathy and social competence. These skills enable them to lead in a team-oriented manner, identify the needs of employees and customers at an early stage, and communicate in an integrative way. Especially in KAM, where building and maintaining business relationships is crucial, this form of leadership is a key success factor.

Despite these proven strengths, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions in KAM. The analysis shows that this is less due to a lack of professional or emotional skills and more to structural and social barriers.

From a societal perspective, it would make sense to promote EI more strongly in school education. School programs could help students develop empathy, self-reflection, and social skills—abilities that are crucial for leadership success in later professional life. At the same time, initiatives to raise awareness of gender stereotypes should be strengthened in order to break down traditional role models at an early stage.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, the investigation is subject to certain limitations that must be taken into account when interpreting the results. One significant limitation is the small sample size of the expert interviews. The interviewees come from different industries and companies of varying sizes, which on the one hand allowed for a diverse range of perspectives, but on the other hand does not allow for generalizable statements for all KAM positions. In addition, only the German market was analyzed. Methodologically and geographically, there are many possibilities for expanding this study.

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