



# **Inaugural lecture**

**Professor Alfred Henrico**

**Developing pervasive skills in higher  
education: Reflecting on an evolutionary  
journey**

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### **Developing pervasive skills in higher education: Reflecting on an evolutionary journey.**

#### **Abstract**

Managers develop and implement strategies to obtain a competitive advantage in the markets they are operating in. A competitive advantage can only be sustained until rival businesses can imitate or replicate the sources of competitive advantage. The most difficult sources of competitive advantage to replicate or imitate are managers' pervasive skill sets, including critical and creative thinking, logical thinking, problem-solving, business awareness, communication and teamwork skills. **Pervasive skills development should receive more attention in higher education teaching and learning** to align the needs of the working environment with the offering of higher education institutions. With my research, I invested in pervasive skills development in higher education. The simulative teaching strategy I developed equips graduates with the pervasive skills they need to contribute to the competitive intelligence and competitive advantage of their future employers.

#### **Introduction**

I believe that all the decisions I made and followed in my various career paths since graduating from high school have led to this moment. It is a privilege as an academic to earn the title of professor. It results from hard work, many sacrifices, and a lot of support from family, friends and colleagues. Tonight, I stand here, not as someone who has finally arrived at a destination, but as someone who is continuing the journey to be a distinguished academic.

To become a recognised expert on pervasive skills development in higher education evolved over many years of study, experience and research. While preparing for this lecture, I revisited the various phases in my personal and career life. I reflected on each phase, pondering and including everything I have learned to piece together a road map that has led to this moment. Tonight I share my journey with you, my family, friends, colleagues, fellow academics, deans, and the deputy vice-chancellor.

Strategic management emerged as a management approach in the 1960s and further developed in the 1970s when the focus was to enhance the competitiveness of businesses in the markets they operated in (Guerras-Martín *et al.*, 2014:69). The seminal work of Igor Ansoff, as published in his 1965 book on *Corporate Strategy*, identified the strategies for business growth in existing or new markets, specifically with existing or new products (Ansoff, 1965). In 1968, Henry Mintzberg, widely regarded as one of the fathers of modern management, published his PhD, in which he defined the roles of managers and specifically the strategic decisions managers make for the sustainability and growth of their businesses (Mintzberg, 1968). Shortly after that, Michael Porter received his PhD (1973) and quickly became the global expert on competitive strategy and competitive advantage. He proclaimed that businesses use their resources and skills to compete for customer attention in their markets. A competitive advantage is established when a business has obtained a favourable position in relation to other similar businesses in the market (Stonehouse & Snowdon, 2007:258-261). Although many resources and skills in businesses can ensure sustainability and growth, only the resources and skills that rivals find difficult or impossible to replicate are considered sources of competitive advantage (Chin, 2021).

Resources can originate from any business strength, such as marketing efforts, financial capabilities, technology, supply lines, or operations. Skills, on the other hand, especially the pervasive skill sets of managers, are the most problematic sources of competitive advantage to replicate or imitate by rivals. Pervasive skills (also known as soft, generic, employability and higher order thinking skills) (Keevy & Mare, 2018; Malan & Van Dyk, 2021:2) include critical and creative thinking skills, initiative, problem-solving, logical thinking, communication skills, flexibility and teamwork (Henrico & Botes, 2016:88).

The notion that pervasive skills are crucial when businesses rival each other for competitive advantage has interested me since my first exposure to strategy in my undergraduate studies. In fact, the first time I was exposed to strategy, I was unaware that strategy is a business management concept. Initially, I believed that strategy was only a military concept used by military leaders in warfare. This belief stemmed from my career as a military officer and my studies in military strategy.

### **Strategy and competitive advantage in a military context**

I joined the South African National Defence Force after graduating high school. During the first six months of my basic training, I was selected by the Department of Military Intelligence to study for a degree in Military Sciences at the South African Military Academy, a faculty of the University

of Stellenbosch. My first exposure to the art and science of strategy was during my undergraduate studies when I registered for the military strategy module in my second year.

I then learned that the term strategy was derived from the Greek word “strategos”, a word that refers to the generals who develop plans in warfare to destroy the enemy through the effective use of resources (Bracker, 1980; Steiner, 1979). Military strategy can be traced back to the period 400 to 200 B.C. The legendary Chinese military leader, Sun Tzu, already developed *The Art of War* in 400 B.C., which received critical acclaim as one of the best works on military strategy. However, the military figure that perhaps had the biggest impact on strategy was Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). He was a Prussian general who proclaimed that the key to strategy was always to be strong, first overall and then at the point where decisions are made (Horwath, 2020).

While studying military strategy and the works of these strategists, I analysed several case studies on South African as well as the first and second World Wars. All these case studies revealed that the military leaders with strong decision-making skills, also possess the pervasive skills to deploy their resources effectively. I also learnt through my studies in military strategy that the forces with the better skilled military leaders have a better chance for victory. Military leaders with pervasive skill sets use their initiative to plan for the unexpected and have a ruthless determination to succeed. They can place the enemy at a disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power (Spencer, 2021). For example, if a military leader is aware that he lacks firing power compared to his enemies, a prudent line of attack would be to, instead of attacking the frontlines, rather skilfully use manoeuvring tactics to overpower the enemy by destroying their infrastructure, strategic resources, logistic supplies, and their command centre(s). Executing these manoeuvring tactics with precision requires leaders who possess pervasive skill sets.

After my undergraduate studies, I continued to study military strategy at an honour’s degree level. Here I received my first in-depth exposure to strategic management from a business perspective.

### **Strategy and competitive advantage in a business context**

In the business environment, strategic management is an approach where managers gain as much information as possible about internal and external influences on their business operations. Based on this information, they formulate, implement and evaluate strategies to obtain a competitive advantage in the markets they are operating in (Ehlers & Lazenby, 2019:3).

According to Porter (2008:88-90), managers can use three generic strategies to obtain a competitive advantage: cost-leadership, differentiation and focus strategies. Cost-leadership is when businesses produce or sell products at a lower cost than similar businesses in the market. Differentiation is when businesses differentiate themselves from other businesses using superior customer service, high-quality products or innovative product development. With focus strategies, businesses change their scope to focus on narrow target market segments. They cater for the needs of specific customers. In a practical sense, if you have ever been in a situation where you have bought a product from a particular retailer because they have the lowest prices, or because they provide exquisite customer service, or their products have features which you cannot find elsewhere, then these businesses most probably follow either a cost-leadership, differentiation or focus strategy. However, sustaining a competitive advantage in the business environment is difficult because when rival businesses imitate or replicate each other's cost-leadership, differentiation or focus strategies, their competitive advantage is neutralised. Therefore, managers need pervasive skills as sources of competitive advantage to formulate, implement and evaluate their strategies.

When businesses execute their strategies to obtain a competitive advantage, it often leads to intense rivalry, which sometimes shares the same elements as warfare. In 1992, Finnie (1992:10) published an article that focused on the basics of business warfare. In his article, he argued that "the business warfare analogy applies to any business. It is not a single strategy, but a framework for determining how a company can obtain a competitive advantage in its particular market".

Up to today, the Coca-Cola Company's diversification strategy when it entered the wine industry, is one of the best examples of business rivalry related to the business warfare analogy. In 1977, the market leader and family-owned business, E&J Gallo, was the largest producer and distributor of wine in the United States of America. Compared to Coca-Cola, Gallo was a small company in terms of available resources. As a result, Coca-Cola launched a frontal attack on Gallo by entering the wine industry. However, Coca-Cola's managers were convinced that they could use "money, muscle, and marketing" to become the leader in the wine industry, which was, at that stage, perceived to be a sleepy and product-oriented industry. Coca-Cola's wine products were perceived to be superior to that of Gallo, and Coke had an estimated 10-fold financial resource upper hand over Gallo. Adding insult to injury, Coke also had superior marketing expertise. Coke projected the growth in their wine sales to be 15-fold, expecting sales figures to reach \$1 billion within ten years. These projections would have resulted in Coke's wine sales exceeding that of

Gallo's. However, this never happened! In 1983, only five years after entering the wine industry, Coca-Cola opted to follow a divestiture strategy. Coke started to sell off its wine company for \$210 million to the Seagram company (Finnie 1992:10). Although standard theories of marketing struggle to explain this outcome, the concepts of business warfare and competitive intelligence can (Finnie 1992:10):

- Gallo was an industry leader until Coke entered the wine industry. In business warfare, frontal attacks against a strong industry leader typically do not suffice.
- Coke's Achilles heel was deeply embedded in their battle plan. They failed to conduct an effective competitive intelligence analysis. If they did, Coke would have been aware that Gallo had superior competitive intelligence. As such, Gallo was able to defend themselves successfully against such an ill-fated frontal attack.

Competitive intelligence refers to the abilities of managers to use their pervasive skills to collect, analyse and use information about the industry, market, competitors or clients to improve their competitive advantage. (Mabe *et al.*, 2019). Gallo's competitive intelligence gave them an advantage in the business war against Coca-Cola. In essence, Gallo could sustain its competitive advantage in the wine industry because its managers possessed pervasive skills that enhanced their competitive intelligence and ensured their victory. To this day, Gallo is the market leader in the United States wine sector, with a market size of \$41.8 billion in 2021 (E&J Gallo Winery, 2022).

After completing my honour's degree, I was equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to argue the need for and importance of pervasive skills for business managers expertly. However, after I entered the private sector as a business consultant, I practically experienced how pervasive skills and the lack thereof impacted businesses' competitive advantage.

### **Practical exposure to the need for and importance of pervasive skills**

As a business consultant, I worked with more than 240 small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises in the North West, Northern Cape and Free State Provinces. The pervasive skills of the managers in these businesses contributed to their competitive intelligence, which enabled them to obtain a competitive advantage in the market they operated in. I witnessed how business managers used their competitive intelligence to successfully manage their businesses, from start-ups or family-owned businesses to provincially, nationally and internationally recognised businesses.

On the downside, I also experienced how some managers' lack of competitive intelligence has led to them formulating defensive strategies as a last resort to rescue their business ventures. Although one might label some of these business failures as the result of financial shortages, intense competition in the markets or the lack of customer retention, holistically, these businesses failed due to the managers' lack of competitive intelligence at the point where decisions had to be made. I remember distinctively how a small leather shoe manufacturing family-owned business in the Free State Province failed due to the owner's inability to think critically about the future of his business. After analysing this business, I consulted the owner on various growth strategies that he should follow to obtain a competitive advantage in his market. Unfortunately, his lack of competitive intelligence limited his ability to implement my recommended growth strategies.

Due to this case and other failed business ventures I witnessed, the need for pervasive skills development became apparent.

### **Researching pervasive skills development**

I wanted to assist managers in developing their pervasive skills and competitive intelligence, but I was unfamiliar with the learning environments needed for pervasive skills development. I believed that for me to understand the pedagogy of skills development, I needed to empower myself with skills development from an educational perspective. Subsequently, I enrolled for a higher education diploma and entered the secondary education environment.

As a high school teacher, my exposure to outcome-based education enabled me to understand the general elements of pedagogy. However, it was only after my appointment as a junior lecturer at the Faculty of Education at the North-West University that I decided to research pervasive skills and the development thereof. This has led to my Master's degree. Here my research focussed on the leadership roles of departmental heads in schools. As part of the investigation, I found that a specific pervasive skill set was one of the elements needed by heads of school departments to execute their leadership roles effectively and assist principals with managing schools toward creating competitive advantage. My study revealed that the most important pervasive skills heads of departments should possess are the skills to think critically and creatively, solve problems, communicate effectively and teamwork (Henrico, 2005). In my Master's degree, I also confirmed the need for and importance of pervasive skills development in managers.

Continuing my research, I decided to specifically focus my PhD on skills development from an educational perspective. During the literature review for my PhD, I discovered that business managers are increasingly concerned about their inability to find new entrants, especially graduates with the required pervasive skills to contribute to their businesses' competitive intelligence and competitive advantage. Managers blamed universities because they felt that universities are partly responsible for developing the pervasive skills they require from newly employed graduates (Cox & King, 2006:262; Harvey, 2005:13; Hesketh, 2000:245; Yorke & Knight, 2006:5). Using policy documents analyses of at several national and international higher education institutions, I obtained evidence that the higher education environment realised the need for the development of pervasive skills through teaching and learning. However, pervasive skills development at several national and international higher education institutions was reflected merely in institutional policy documents, mission statements or at the lowest level, curriculum statements. I found limited evidence of genuine efforts in classroom teaching and learning where the focus is specifically on developing pervasive skills. This realisation led me to focus my PhD on the pervasive skills development of graduates in higher education, instead of the pervasive skills development of managers in the private sector. I believed that if I was able to develop graduates' pervasive skills, they would contribute to the competitive intelligence and advantage of their future employers and be skilled to become managers.

Therefore, in my PhD, I created a teaching model for developing higher order thinking skills, including a specific set of pervasive skills. These skills entail the ability of people to use critical and creative thinking to analyse situations, evaluate the value of elements as part of a whole and then draw from various sources to create or synthesize new knowledge (Henrico, 2010:61).

To create this teaching model, I studied the work of Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. Vygotsky (1978:86) created the Zone for Proximal Development, in which he focused on how educators support learning in the zone between assisted and unassisted problem-solving. Piaget (1967:150-152) focused on the importance of social interaction in learning and the notion of assimilation and accommodation in cognitive development. Eventually, I concluded that the best strategy to develop these skills is based on the sociological theory of social constructivism, in which inductive teaching, cooperative learning and activity-based teaching are combined.

- Inductive teaching is the ability of the educator to move from the specific to the general. This means the educator *“needs to present information that illustrates the topics and*



*then guide the learners as they search for relationships in the information”* (Eggen & Kauchak, 2001:158; Henrico, 2010:125-126).

- Cooperative learning is the ability of the educator to use group work as a method that enables learners to work actively and collectively together to solve problems and to learn from each other's realities. The aim of cooperative learning is not to divide the work among the group members or for the group members to change each other's viewpoints. Cooperative learning enables the members to solve real-life problems by drawing from each other's knowledge and skills (Henrico, 2010:126-128).
- Activity-based teaching is a subset of problem-based learning in which the educator uses simulated activities to expose the learners to real-life problem solving (Henrico, 2010:130-135).

After I developed this teaching model from literature, I tested it in practice to determine if this model could in fact contribute to the development of students' pervasive skills. The participants were divided into an experimental and control group, with both groups being subjected to the teaching model intervention in different stages of the research. Data were collected by means of pre-tests and post-tests during the various stages of the research. A mixed methods approach, with a concurrent dominant status research design, was used to simultaneously collect quantitative and qualitative data (Henrico 2010:175-176; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004:22).

The results from the pre-tests indicated the participants were lacking in several pervasive skills. After the participants were subjected to the teaching model intervention in the sequential stages of the research design, the post-tests revealed that the participants' skills levels increased in all instances. These results were ground-breaking. Moreover, the pervasive skills developed by this model include critical and creative thinking, analytical skills, problem-solving, communication, teamwork, investigative skills and flexibility. I managed to create a unique teaching model that could indeed contribute to pervasive skills development.

At that stage, the teaching model I developed was applied only to the pervasive skills development of student teachers. As a result, I started to research the applicability of this model to the pervasive skills development of business management students after being appointed a senior lecturer in the School of Management Sciences.

Keeping to the model combination of inductive teaching, cooperative learning, and activity-based teaching, I adapted the teaching model into a unique simulative teaching strategy, making it more flexible within business management education. With this unique simulative teaching strategy,

business management students develop their own consulting businesses (cooperative learning) and work through the modules' subject matter while solving real-life problems (inductive teaching) in the form of consultations (activity-based learning). This simulative teaching strategy was based on the practical experience and expertise I gained from working as a business consultant in the private sector.

### **Becoming an expert on pervasive skills development**

In 2012, I started researching the effects of the simulative teaching strategy on business management students. The results from my research revealed that the strategy did not only develop all the pervasive skills of the teaching model. It also enhanced the students' business awareness, planning and organising skills. This unique teaching strategy was revolutionary because a similar teaching strategy has never before been created or used in higher education to develop the pervasive skills of business management students. As a result of my research using this unconventional (or rather revolutionary) teaching strategy, I published my first single-authored internationally accredited journal article (Henrico, 2012). In the same year, I was honoured with the Vice Chancellors Teaching Excellence Award as the best lecturer at the North-West University. I finally empowered business management students to develop the pervasive skills they needed to contribute to the competitive intelligence and competitive advantage of the businesses they are employed in after graduation.

In the years that followed, I implemented the simulative teaching strategy in all my undergraduate and post-graduate classes. I continued to research the various elements of this strategy and the pervasive skills it equipped students with. Due to my research, the simulative teaching strategy evolved from being used in face-to-face contact sessions to hybrid modes of delivery and, since the onslaught of Covid, also in the online learning environment. I published my findings in national and international journals and presented my finding at national and international conferences (Botes & Henrico, 2015; Botes & Henrico, 2016; Henrico, 2014; Henrico & Botes, 2016; Henrico & Botes, 2017; Henrico & Gair, 2018; Henrico & Mouton, 2021; Henrico & Van Staden, 2015; Meintjes *et al.*, 2015; Van Staden & Henrico, 2016; Van Vuuren *et al.*, 2015).

Due to my research on the revolutionary contribution I made to pervasive skills development in business management education, my recognition as a national and international expert expanded exponentially. My continued research and practical applications in the educational environment led to me receiving the distinguished teaching excellence award as the best lecturer at the North-West University in 2016, for the second time. In 2017, I also received a commendation from the

Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa as one of the eight most innovative lecturers at South African Higher Education Institutions. By invitation, I presented my teaching strategy as an expert to lecturers at six of the eight faculties at the North-West University, the Universities of Pretoria, Stellenbosch, Limpopo, the Nelson Mandela University, and, as a mentor, to more than 700 national and international school teachers. In 2018, I presented my teaching strategy as a keynote speaker at national and international conferences. I was the African representative for six years at the Australian-based global enterprise challenge and served as a judge for three years at the international SAKAI teaching awards. I am also a dedicated member of the World Trade Organisation Chairs program and the National Small Business Chamber in Africa.

With my teaching strategy, I have developed pervasive skills in more than 4000 students since I first adapted and applied the model I developed in my PhD. I have supervised five Master's and two PhD students to date. All of them focused their studies on identifying and developing pervasive skills further. I also mentored several lecturers on how to use the teaching strategy as part of their teaching at the North-West University, as well as national and international universities.

Since my research on pervasive skills extended beyond pure quantitative research methodology, much of my research used qualitative research methods. My expertise as a qualitative researcher was acknowledged in 2021 when the University of Mauritius invited me to present a workshop on qualitative research methodology to their post-doctoral school.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me summarise. Managers develop and implement strategies to obtain a competitive advantage in the markets they are operating in. A competitive advantage can only be sustained until rival businesses can imitate or replicate the sources of competitive advantage. The most difficult sources of competitive advantage to replicate or imitate are managers' pervasive skill sets, including critical and creative thinking, logical thinking, problem-solving, business awareness, communication and teamwork skills. Pervasive skills development should receive more attention in higher education teaching and learning to align the needs of the working environment with the offering of higher education institutions. Therefore, due to my research, I invested in developing pervasive skills in higher education with the revolutionary simulative teaching strategy I created. This teaching strategy equips graduates with the pervasive skills they need to contribute to the competitive intelligence and competitive advantage of the businesses they are employed in after graduation.

### **Continuing the journey**

The next phase in my research career is to continue focusing on skills development. Due to the need for business managers to possess competitive intelligence (Ezigbo & Uduji, 2013:1-2; Oraee *et al.*, 2021:125-126), I have been extending my research from pervasive skills development in higher education to pervasive skills development in the private sector over the last two years. This research extension enables me to combine management education with enhanced management functioning in the South African context. This extension of my research allows me to integrate my teaching, research and industry involvement when I equip managers with the pervasive skills they need to effectively contribute to the competitive intelligence and competitive advantage of the companies they are employed in.

Thank you

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