

LABOR MARKET COMPETENCIES IN ROMANIA: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

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Abstract

The rapid transformation of labor markets driven by digitalization, globalization, and demographic changes has intensified the demand for a diverse set of competencies. This study investigates the competencies required by the Romanian labor market and identifies potential gaps between employers' expectations and the skills possessed by the workforce. Using empirical evidence derived from survey data and secondary statistical sources, the paper examines the relative importance of technical, digital, cognitive, and socio-emotional competencies. The findings contribute to a better understanding of workforce preparedness in Romania and provide policy recommendations for educational institutions, employers, and decision-makers.

Keywords: labor market, competencies, employability, skills mismatch, Romania, human capital.

JEL Classification: J21, J23, J24

1. Introduction

The contemporary labor market is undergoing profound transformations generated by technological progress, globalization, demographic changes, and the transition toward a knowledge-based economy. Digitalization, automation, and the increasing integration of artificial intelligence into organizational processes have significantly reshaped the nature of work and the competencies required from employees. Consequently, employers are no longer interested solely in occupation-specific knowledge and technical expertise, but increasingly value a broad range of transversal competencies, such as communication, teamwork, adaptability, critical thinking, creativity, and the capacity for lifelong learning.

In this context, the concept of labor market competencies has attracted growing attention from researchers, policymakers, and employers. Competencies are generally understood as a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors that enable individuals to perform effectively in a professional environment. Their development and continuous adaptation have become essential not only for individual employability and career advancement but also for organizational competitiveness and economic growth. Human capital, therefore, represents a strategic resource whose quality largely determines a country's capacity to respond to the challenges associated with economic and technological change.

Romania is no exception to these developments. Over the past decades, the Romanian labor market has experienced substantial structural changes resulting from economic transition, integration into the European Union, increased labor mobility, and accelerated digital transformation. Although the country has recorded positive economic dynamics and improvements in educational attainment, employers continue to report difficulties in recruiting candidates who possess the competencies required for available jobs. At the same time, the coexistence of labor shortages in certain sectors and unemployment or underemployment among specific population groups suggests the existence of persistent skills mismatches.

The mismatch between the competencies supplied by the education and training systems and those demanded by employers has become an increasingly debated issue in both academic

literature and public policy. Such discrepancies may generate multiple negative consequences, including lower productivity, reduced innovation capacity, difficulties in filling vacancies, and limited career opportunities for workers. In the Romanian context, understanding the nature of these competency gaps is particularly important given the country's efforts to improve labor market efficiency, increase workforce participation, and align educational outcomes with the requirements of a rapidly changing economy.

Existing studies have highlighted the growing importance of digital competencies and soft skills alongside traditional technical competencies. However, empirical evidence focusing specifically on the Romanian labor market remains relatively limited, particularly regarding employers' perceptions of the competencies considered essential for workforce performance. Therefore, further research is needed to identify the competencies that are most valued in the Romanian context and to provide evidence-based insights that may support educational reforms and labor market policies.

Against this background, the present study aims to investigate the competencies required in the Romanian labor market and to provide empirical evidence regarding their perceived importance. More specifically, the objectives of the research are: (i) to review the theoretical and empirical literature on labor market competencies; (ii) to identify the competencies considered most important by Romanian employers; (iii) to examine the existence of potential competency mismatches between labor market demand and workforce supply; and (iv) to formulate recommendations for educational institutions, employers, and policymakers aimed at improving the alignment between competency development and labor market needs.

By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on employability and skills development in Romania and offers practical implications for strengthening human capital and enhancing the adaptability of the Romanian workforce in the face of ongoing economic and technological transformations.

2. Literature review

The increasing complexity of contemporary labor markets has generated a growing interest in understanding the competencies that facilitate employability, organizational performance, and economic competitiveness. The concept of competence has evolved considerably over time, moving from a narrow understanding focused exclusively on technical expertise toward a multidimensional perspective encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and behavioral attributes required for effective performance in diverse occupational contexts.

One of the earliest and most influential contributions to competency theory was provided by Boyatzis (1982), who defined competencies as underlying characteristics of an individual that are causally related to effective or superior job performance. According to this perspective, competencies extend beyond formal qualifications and include motives, traits, self-concepts, social roles, and specific abilities that differentiate high-performing employees from average performers. Subsequently, Spencer and Spencer (1993) further developed the competency-based approach, emphasizing that competencies represent enduring personal characteristics that predict successful performance across a variety of professional situations.

The growing importance of competencies has also been explained through the lens of Human Capital Theory. According to Becker (1964), investments in education and training contribute to the accumulation of human capital, enhancing workers' productivity and generating economic returns both for individuals and society. Human capital has increasingly been recognized as a critical determinant of national competitiveness, particularly in economies characterized by rapid technological change and knowledge-intensive activities. Consequently, the ability of individuals to acquire, update, and adapt their competencies has become a prerequisite for sustainable employability.

In recent decades, technological progress and digital transformation have fundamentally altered the nature of work. The diffusion of automation, artificial intelligence, and information technologies has reduced the demand for routine tasks while increasing the importance of higher-order cognitive and socio-emotional competencies. International organizations have consistently emphasized that success in modern labor markets requires a combination of technical, digital, cognitive, and interpersonal skills rather than isolated occupational knowledge.

The competence framework proposed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights that individuals need a broad mix of skills to adapt successfully to the challenges of a digital economy. The OECD argues that digital transformation reshapes occupations and modifies skill requirements, making cognitive abilities, problem-solving capacities, socio-emotional competencies, and digital literacy increasingly valuable in the workplace (OECD, 2019). The organization further notes that workers must continuously update their competencies to facilitate occupational mobility and remain resilient in the face of technological disruption.

Similarly, the European Union has adopted a competence-based approach to education and employment policies through the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. This framework identifies eight key competences considered essential for personal fulfillment, active citizenship, social inclusion, and employability. These include literacy competence, multilingual competence, mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering, digital competence, personal and social competence, citizenship competence, entrepreneurial competence, and cultural awareness and expression (European Commission, 2018). The framework reflects the recognition that employability increasingly depends on the integration of transversal competencies with occupation-specific expertise.

The literature generally distinguishes between hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills refer to technical knowledge and occupation-specific abilities acquired through formal education, vocational training, and professional experience (Robles, 2012). These competencies are measurable and directly related to the execution of specific tasks. Examples include programming abilities, accounting techniques, engineering expertise, or foreign language proficiency.

In contrast, soft skills encompass interpersonal and behavioral competencies that facilitate effective interaction and adaptation within organizational environments. Robles (2012), based on executive perceptions, identified integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, teamwork, flexibility, professionalism, positive attitude, and work ethic among the most important soft skills demanded by employers. Likewise, Heckman and Kautz (2012) argued that non-cognitive skills significantly influence educational attainment, labor market success, and social outcomes, often complementing cognitive abilities in determining individual performance.

The growing relevance of transversal competencies has also been confirmed by studies examining graduate employability. Allen and van der Velden (2011) observed that knowledge societies increasingly require flexible professionals capable of applying disciplinary knowledge in changing contexts, learning continuously, solving complex problems, and collaborating effectively with others. Employers therefore seek individuals who demonstrate adaptability and readiness to engage in lifelong learning rather than merely possessing static technical expertise.

Another important strand of literature addresses the phenomenon of skills mismatch. Skills mismatch refers to discrepancies between the competencies possessed by workers and those required by employers (McGuinness, Pouliakas, & Redmond, 2018). Such mismatches may take different forms, including skills shortages, skills gaps, overqualification, and underqualification. Empirical evidence suggests that these imbalances negatively affect labor productivity, innovation capacity, job satisfaction, and wage outcomes, while also generating inefficiencies within labor markets.

Within the European context, concerns regarding competency mismatches have intensified as labor markets face simultaneous labor shortages and structural unemployment. The coexistence

of unfilled vacancies and unemployed individuals often reflects not a lack of jobs, but rather insufficient alignment between educational outcomes and labor market needs. Consequently, stronger cooperation among educational institutions, employers, and policymakers has been advocated to ensure that competency development responds effectively to changing economic demands.

In Romania, the debate surrounding labor market competencies has become increasingly relevant in the context of demographic decline, labor migration, and digital transformation. Romanian employers frequently report difficulties in recruiting adequately skilled workers despite the availability of potential candidates. Several studies have highlighted deficiencies related not only to technical competencies but also to communication abilities, teamwork, initiative, and problem-solving skills among graduates entering the labor market. These findings suggest that the Romanian education and training systems continue to face challenges in preparing individuals for the evolving requirements of employment.

Despite the increasing policy attention devoted to employability and lifelong learning, empirical evidence focusing specifically on competency requirements in the Romanian labor market remains relatively limited. Existing studies often emphasize particular sectors or occupational groups, while comprehensive analyses of employers' perceptions regarding the relative importance of different competencies are scarce. Therefore, further empirical investigation is needed to identify the competencies most valued by Romanian employers and to explore the extent to which competency mismatches persist across sectors.

Building upon the theoretical perspectives discussed above, the present study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing empirical evidence on labor market competencies in Romania. By examining employers' perceptions regarding the importance of various competencies, this research aims to enhance understanding of current labor market demands and to generate insights that may support the development of education, training, and employment policies better aligned with the realities of the Romanian economy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the competencies considered essential in the Romanian labor market and to explore employers' perceptions regarding potential competency gaps among employees and job applicants. Quantitative approaches are particularly appropriate for examining attitudes and perceptions across relatively large groups of respondents, allowing for the identification of patterns and relationships that can support generalizable conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The research adopted a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data at a single point in time from representatives of organizations operating in Romania. This approach enabled the assessment of the relative importance attributed to various competencies required in contemporary workplaces and provided empirical evidence regarding the alignment between labor market demand and workforce preparedness.

3.2. Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The empirical investigation was guided by the following objectives:

- ✓ to identify the competencies perceived as most important by Romanian employers;
- ✓ to compare the relative importance of technical competencies and transversal competencies;
- ✓ to examine whether employers perceive the existence of competency gaps among candidates and employees;
- ✓ to generate evidence-based recommendations for improving the alignment between education and labor market requirements.

Based on the existing literature on employability and skills mismatch, the study tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Romanian employers perceive transversal competencies (e.g., communication, adaptability, teamwork) as being at least as important as technical competencies.

H2: Adaptability and problem-solving are among the highest-rated competencies required in the Romanian labor market.

H3: Employers report significant difficulties in identifying candidates who simultaneously possess both technical expertise and well-developed soft skills.

3.3. Participants and Sampling Procedure

The target population consisted of employers and managerial representatives involved in recruitment and personnel selection processes within Romanian organizations. Respondents included human resource managers, company owners, department managers, recruitment specialists, and senior executives with direct experience in evaluating employees' competencies.

A non-probability convenience sampling technique was employed due to constraints related to time, accessibility, and organizational willingness to participate. Although convenience sampling limits the generalizability of findings, it is frequently used in exploratory studies examining perceptions and attitudes in organizational contexts (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

The final sample comprised **200 respondents** representing organizations from various sectors of economic activity, including manufacturing, services, trade, information technology, education, healthcare, and public administration. The diversity of sectors contributed to capturing a broader perspective on competency requirements across the Romanian labor market.

3.4. Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on previous studies examining employability skills and labor market competencies (Robles, 2012; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; OECD, 2019).

The questionnaire consisted of three sections.

The first section collected demographic and organizational information, including respondents' position within the organization, years of professional experience, economic sector, organization size, and ownership structure.

The second section assessed the perceived importance of selected labor market competencies. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they considered each competency important for employee performance using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not important at all") to 5 ("Very important").

The competencies evaluated included: technical expertise specific to the occupation; digital competencies; communication skills; teamwork; problem-solving abilities; analytical thinking; adaptability and flexibility; leadership skills; foreign language proficiency; initiative and proactivity; time management; willingness to engage in continuous learning.

The third section explored employers' perceptions regarding competency shortages and recruitment difficulties. Participants were asked to indicate whether they experienced challenges in identifying candidates possessing the competencies required for vacant positions and to identify the competencies they considered most frequently lacking among applicants.

3.5. Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was administered electronically using an online survey platform between January–March 2026. Potential respondents were contacted through professional networks, business associations, and direct organizational communication channels. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the academic purpose of the research.

Prior to data collection, participants received information regarding the objectives of the study, the estimated completion time, and the confidential treatment of responses. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all responses were analyzed in aggregate form.

3.6. Data Analysis

The collected data were processed and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

The analysis involved several stages.

First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages) were calculated to summarize respondents' characteristics and to identify the competencies perceived as most important.

Second, the internal consistency of the competency scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. According to Nunnally and Bernstein (1994), values exceeding 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability.

Third, inferential statistical techniques were employed to test the proposed hypotheses. Independent-samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to examine potential differences in competency evaluations across organizational characteristics, such as sector of activity or company size.

Finally, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to identify potential underlying dimensions of labor market competencies and to determine whether competencies clustered into broader categories, such as technical and transversal competencies.

Statistical significance was assessed using a threshold of $p < 0.05$.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to fundamental ethical principles governing social science research. Participation was entirely voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed throughout the research process. Data were used exclusively for academic purposes and were reported only in aggregated form, ensuring that neither individuals nor organizations could be identified.

4. Empirical Results

4.1. Sample Characteristics

The empirical analysis was based on responses collected from 200 employers operating in the South-West Oltenia Development Region of Romania, comprising the counties of Dolj, Gorj, Mehedinți, Olt, and Vâlcea. The respondents included company owners, human resource managers, department managers, and recruitment specialists directly involved in employee selection and evaluation processes.

Regarding the sector of activity, 28.0% of the respondents represented the services sector, followed by manufacturing (24.5%), trade (18.0%), information and communication technologies (11.0%), healthcare and social assistance (8.5%), education (5.5%), and public administration and other sectors (4.5%).

With respect to organizational size, 38.0% of the participating companies were small enterprises (10–49 employees), 34.5% were medium-sized enterprises (50–249 employees), and 27.5% were large organizations employing more than 250 individuals.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics of Labor Market Competencies

Employers were asked to assess the importance of twelve competencies using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Not important at all") to 5 ("Very important").

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for labor market competencies

Competency	Mean	Standard Deviation
Adaptability and flexibility	4.76	0.48
Problem-solving	4.69	0.53
Communication skills	4.63	0.57
Willingness to learn	4.59	0.60
Teamwork	4.54	0.61
Initiative and proactivity	4.47	0.68
Digital competencies	4.39	0.74
Analytical thinking	4.35	0.71
Technical expertise	4.28	0.77
Time management	4.21	0.75
Foreign language proficiency	3.84	0.93
Leadership skills	3.71	0.96

The findings indicate that employers place the greatest emphasis on adaptability ($M = 4.76$), problem-solving ($M = 4.69$), and communication skills ($M = 4.63$). Conversely, leadership abilities and foreign language proficiency received comparatively lower evaluations. Overall, transversal competencies were rated more highly than occupation-specific technical competencies.

These results support Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, suggesting that employers in South-West Oltenia increasingly value employees capable of adapting to changing work environments and solving complex problems.

4.3. Recruitment Difficulties and Competency Gaps

Respondents were also asked whether they encountered difficulties in identifying candidates possessing the competencies required for available positions.

The results revealed that:

- ✓ 72.5% reported frequent recruitment difficulties;
- ✓ 19.5% reported occasional difficulties;
- ✓ only 8.0% indicated that they rarely encountered such problems.

The competencies most frequently perceived as lacking among candidates were:

- ✓ adaptability and flexibility (61.5%);
- ✓ problem-solving abilities (56.0%);
- ✓ initiative and proactivity (51.0%);
- ✓ communication skills (47.5%);
- ✓ technical expertise (42.0%);
- ✓ digital competencies (35.0%).

These findings confirm Hypothesis 3 and indicate the persistence of competency mismatches within the regional labor market.

4.4. Differences According to Organization Size: ANOVA Results

One-way ANOVA analyses were conducted to determine whether competency evaluations differed according to company size.

Table 2. ANOVA results by organizational size

Competency	F	p-value
Digital competencies	5.82	0.004
Foreign language proficiency	4.37	0.014
Technical expertise	1.89	0.154
Communication skills	0.97	0.382
Adaptability	1.12	0.329

Statistically significant differences emerged only for digital competencies and foreign language proficiency. Large organizations reported higher expectations regarding these competencies compared to small enterprises.

No statistically significant differences were identified for communication skills, adaptability, or technical expertise, suggesting broad consensus among employers concerning their importance.

4.5. Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationships among the assessed competencies.

Table 3. Correlations between selected competencies

Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Communication skills	1			
2. Teamwork	.68**	1		
3. Adaptability	.61**	.58**	1	
4. Problem-solving	.54**	.49**	.65**	1

Note: ** $p < 0.01$.

The analysis revealed moderate to strong positive correlations among transversal competencies. The strongest association was observed between communication and teamwork ($r = .68$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that employers perceive these competencies as complementary attributes contributing to effective workplace performance.

Similarly, adaptability was strongly correlated with problem-solving ($r = .65$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that employees capable of adjusting to changing circumstances are also perceived as better equipped to address workplace challenges.

The empirical evidence indicates that employers in South-West Oltenia prioritize transversal competencies over purely technical skills. Adaptability, problem-solving, communication, and willingness to learn emerged as the most valued competencies in the contemporary labor market.

At the same time, the high proportion of employers reporting recruitment difficulties highlights the existence of persistent competency gaps, particularly in relation to soft skills and behavioral attributes. These findings emphasize the necessity of strengthening cooperation between educational institutions and employers to ensure that graduates acquire competencies aligned with labor market expectations.

Mean importance of labor market competencies

Average ratings assigned by employers from South-West Oltenia (N=200).

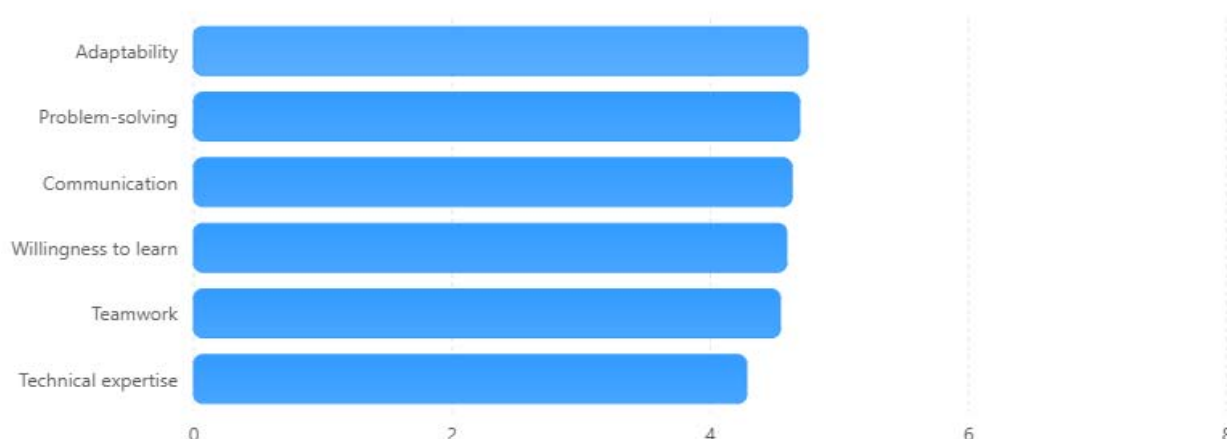


Fig 1. Mean importance of labor market competencies
Average ratings assigned by employers from South-West Oltenia (N=200).

Recruitment difficulties reported by employers

Perceived difficulties in finding adequately skilled candidates.



Fig 2. Recruitment difficulties reported by employers
Perceived difficulties in finding adequately skilled candidates.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the competencies currently valued by employers in the South-West Oltenia region of Romania and contribute to the growing body of literature examining the alignment between workforce capabilities and labor market demands. Overall, the results indicate that employers place considerable emphasis on transversal competencies, particularly adaptability, problem-solving, communication skills, and willingness to engage in continuous learning. These findings support the argument that the changing nature of

work has expanded the range of competencies required for successful job performance beyond traditional occupation-specific knowledge.

One of the most notable findings is that adaptability emerged as the highest-rated competency among employers. This result reflects the increasingly dynamic and uncertain business environment in which organizations operate. Technological innovation, evolving organizational structures, changing customer expectations, and economic fluctuations require employees who can adjust rapidly to new circumstances, acquire new knowledge, and assume diverse responsibilities. Similar conclusions have been reported by the OECD (2019), which emphasizes that adaptability and lifelong learning are essential for workforce resilience in the digital economy. Likewise, the Future of Jobs reports published by the World Economic Forum consistently identify flexibility, resilience, and the ability to respond to change as among the most critical competencies for the future labor market.

The prominence of problem-solving and communication skills among the most valued competencies further reinforces the shift from routine task execution toward more complex and interactive forms of work. Employers increasingly seek individuals who can analyze situations, identify solutions, make informed decisions, and collaborate effectively with colleagues, clients, and stakeholders. These findings are consistent with those of Robles (2012), who identified communication as one of the most important soft skills demanded by executives, and with the work of Heckman and Kautz (2012), who demonstrated that non-cognitive competencies substantially influence labor market success and complement technical abilities in predicting job performance.

Another significant finding concerns the comparatively lower ranking assigned to technical expertise relative to several transversal competencies. Although technical knowledge remains important, employers in the present study appear to view it as insufficient in the absence of interpersonal and behavioral attributes. This observation supports the argument advanced by Allen and van der Velden (2011), according to which contemporary knowledge societies require "flexible professionals" capable of applying their expertise in diverse and changing contexts. Consequently, employability increasingly depends on an individual's ability to integrate disciplinary knowledge with communication, teamwork, adaptability, and self-management skills.

The study also highlights the persistence of competency mismatches within the regional labor market. More than two-thirds of the participating employers reported frequent difficulties in identifying candidates possessing the competencies required for available positions. Interestingly, the deficiencies identified by respondents referred primarily to soft skills, including adaptability, initiative, communication, and problem-solving, rather than exclusively to technical expertise. These findings suggest that labor shortages cannot be explained solely by an insufficient number of job seekers but may also reflect discrepancies between the competencies developed through formal education and those expected in professional settings.

This interpretation is consistent with previous research on skills mismatch. McGuinness, Pouliakas, and Redmond (2018) argue that mismatches between labor market demand and workforce supply generate inefficiencies that affect productivity, wages, and organizational performance. In the Romanian context, the coexistence of recruitment difficulties and the underutilization of available human resources has been documented in several reports addressing employability and workforce development. The present study extends this evidence by demonstrating that such mismatches are also evident at the regional level in South-West Oltenia.

The ANOVA results revealed significant differences between organizations of different sizes regarding the importance attributed to digital competencies and foreign language proficiency. Large organizations reported higher expectations in these areas than small enterprises. One possible explanation is that larger firms are more likely to operate in international markets, adopt advanced technologies, and engage in complex organizational processes that require employees to interact across linguistic and digital environments. In contrast, smaller organizations may prioritize

immediate operational competencies and interpersonal characteristics that facilitate integration into relatively stable work settings.

At the same time, the absence of statistically significant differences in the evaluation of communication skills, adaptability, and technical expertise suggests a shared understanding among employers regarding the central role of these competencies in employee performance. Regardless of organizational size, respondents consistently recognized the importance of employees who can communicate effectively, respond to changing circumstances, and perform occupation-specific tasks competently.

The positive correlations identified among transversal competencies provide additional evidence supporting the interconnected nature of employability skills. The strong relationship observed between communication and teamwork indicates that these competencies are often perceived as mutually reinforcing dimensions of effective collaboration. Similarly, the association between adaptability and problem-solving suggests that employees capable of adjusting to new situations are also more likely to identify and implement effective responses to workplace challenges. These findings align with competency frameworks proposed by international organizations, which conceptualize employability as the result of an integrated set of cognitive, social, and behavioral attributes rather than isolated skills.

From a practical perspective, the findings of this study have important implications for education providers, employers, and policymakers. Educational institutions should place greater emphasis on competency-based learning approaches that promote critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and experiential learning opportunities. Strengthening partnerships between universities, vocational training providers, and employers could facilitate a better understanding of labor market expectations and contribute to the development of curricula that reflect current and emerging competency requirements.

Employers, in turn, should consider investing more systematically in workplace learning and continuous professional development initiatives aimed at enhancing both technical and transversal competencies. Mentoring programs, on-the-job training, and structured opportunities for skills development may help reduce competency gaps and improve employee adaptability.

Finally, policymakers should continue to support lifelong learning policies and regional workforce development strategies designed to anticipate changes in skill demand and facilitate the continuous upskilling and reskilling of the labor force. Such measures are particularly relevant in regions such as South-West Oltenia, where demographic challenges, labor migration, and economic restructuring may further intensify existing recruitment difficulties.

Although the present study contributes empirical evidence regarding labor market competencies in Romania, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of convenience sampling restricts the generalizability of the findings beyond the surveyed organizations. Furthermore, the study relied exclusively on employers' perceptions and did not incorporate the perspectives of employees, graduates, or educational institutions. Future research could employ larger and more representative samples, adopt longitudinal designs, and integrate multiple stakeholder perspectives to provide a more comprehensive understanding of competency development and labor market dynamics in Romania.

Overall, the findings underscore the necessity of rethinking competency development in response to the evolving demands of the labor market. In addition to technical expertise, the Romanian workforce increasingly requires adaptability, communication abilities, problem-solving capacities, and a commitment to continuous learning. Addressing these challenges through coordinated efforts involving employers, educational institutions, and policymakers may contribute to reducing competency mismatches and strengthening the competitiveness and resilience of the national labor market.

6. Conclusions

The present study investigated the competencies perceived as essential by employers operating in the South-West Oltenia region of Romania and explored the existence of potential competency mismatches within the regional labor market. Against the backdrop of rapid technological change, digitalization, demographic challenges, and increasing labor market complexity, understanding the competencies required for successful workforce participation has become an important concern for researchers, employers, and policymakers alike.

The empirical findings indicate that employers increasingly value transversal competencies alongside technical expertise. Adaptability and flexibility emerged as the most important competencies, followed closely by problem-solving abilities, communication skills, willingness to learn, and teamwork. These results suggest that, although occupation-specific knowledge remains relevant, employers place particular emphasis on employees' capacity to adjust to changing work environments, collaborate effectively, and continuously develop their skills.

The study further revealed that recruitment difficulties remain a significant challenge for organizations in the South-West Oltenia region. More than two-thirds of the surveyed employers reported frequent difficulties in identifying candidates who possess the competencies required for available positions. Interestingly, the competencies perceived as lacking were predominantly related to soft skills, such as adaptability, initiative, communication, and problem-solving, rather than exclusively to technical expertise. This finding provides empirical support for the existence of competency mismatches between labor market demand and workforce supply.

The results also demonstrated that organizational characteristics influence employers' expectations to a certain extent. Significant differences were identified with respect to digital competencies and foreign language proficiency, with larger organizations assigning greater importance to these competencies. However, the absence of substantial differences regarding communication skills, adaptability, and technical expertise indicates a relatively broad consensus among employers concerning the competencies considered fundamental for employee performance.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the existing literature on employability and labor market competencies by providing empirical evidence from a Romanian regional context that remains underexplored. While international research has increasingly emphasized the importance of transversal competencies, studies focusing specifically on Romanian employers' perceptions are relatively limited. By examining the views of employers from different sectors of economic activity, the present research extends current knowledge regarding the competency profile demanded in contemporary workplaces.

The findings also generate several practical implications. First, educational institutions should strengthen competency-based approaches to teaching and learning by integrating opportunities for the development of communication, teamwork, critical thinking, adaptability, and problem-solving skills into curricula at all educational levels. Greater emphasis should be placed on experiential learning methods, internships, project-based activities, and collaboration with employers to ensure that graduates acquire competencies relevant to labor market realities.

Second, employers should continue to invest in lifelong learning and professional development initiatives that facilitate the continuous updating of employees' competencies. In a context characterized by rapid technological advancement and evolving job requirements, workplace learning, mentoring, and structured training programs may play a crucial role in reducing competency gaps and enhancing organizational resilience.

Third, policymakers should promote closer cooperation among educational institutions, employers, regional development agencies, and labor market stakeholders to improve the alignment between workforce preparation and economic needs. Regional strategies focused on upskilling and reskilling initiatives, career guidance, and anticipation of future skill needs could contribute to mitigating recruitment difficulties and strengthening labor market adaptability.

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. The use of a convenience sample restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the surveyed organizations. Furthermore, the analysis relied exclusively on employers' perceptions and did not incorporate the perspectives of employees, graduates, students, or educational providers. Future research should employ larger and more representative samples, include multiple stakeholder groups, and consider longitudinal approaches capable of capturing changes in competency requirements over time. Comparative studies across Romanian development regions may also provide a more comprehensive understanding of regional differences in labor market needs.

In conclusion, the evidence presented in this study suggests that the Romanian labor market, exemplified by the case of the South-West Oltenia region, is increasingly characterized by a demand for employees who combine technical expertise with strong transversal competencies. Adaptability, communication, problem-solving, and continuous learning appear to constitute key attributes of employability in contemporary organizations. Addressing the competency gaps identified by employers requires coordinated efforts from educational institutions, businesses, and public authorities. Such efforts are essential not only for improving individual employability and organizational performance but also for enhancing the competitiveness, resilience, and long-term sustainability of the Romanian labor market.

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