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# Competencies and New Challenges in XXI Century

## *Healthy Competencies and Sustainable Talents: Contributions to Decent Work, Healthy Work, and Healthy Lives*

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The scenario of the 21st century is characterized by complexity (Bauman, 2013; Blustein & Flores, 2023; Luhmann, 1984; Morin, 1990; Peiró, 2025; Peiró et al., 2025), acceleration (Kurzweil, 2001; McNeill & Engelke, 2016; Rosa, 2010), change (Beck, 1992; Di Fabio & Gori, 2016b; Drucke, 2012; Toffler, 1970), from Industry 4.0 (Breque et al., 2021; Majerník et al., 2022) to Industry 5.0 (Kause et al., 2024; Leng et al., 2022). In a positive psychology perspective (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000), in particular following Di Fabio & Saklofske (2021) for a strengths-based prevention perspective, taking care of building, supporting and enhancing healthy competencies can make a significant difference. It means to concretely invest in the well-being of workers and organizations, also in terms of healthy business as well as to secure employability of people from when they are students and potential workers as well as in the progressive subsequent stages of their careers. This is a positive path to pave with solidity and foresight, the well-being of people, workers and communities, also in terms of *contributions to decent work, healthy work, and healthy lives for the competitiveness, flourishing and health of human capital and planet in the contexts of education, training, and organizations.*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Subtitle of the recent invited lecture «Competencies and New Challenges in XXI Century. Healthy Competencies and Sustainable Talents» by INAPP (Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche) for the Meeting of the Board of *European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training* (EQAVET) on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2026.

A first consideration to take into account in the background is the difference between «skills» and «competencies». If skills traditionally refer to specific abilities, competencies refer more to integrated capabilities (skills + knowledge + behaviors + attitudes).

Furthermore, regarding competencies, another articulation to be considered takes into account a range that contemplates intra-competencies, inter-competencies and flexible competencies (Di Fabio, 2022, 2026a, 2026b).

Applied psychology is committed to offering worthy contributions for a positive culture of skills and competencies, up to the point of supporting flexible competencies. In the Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development (PS&SD) framework (Di Fabio, 2017, 2021; Di Fabio & Cooper, 2023; Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018, 2023; Di Fabio & Rosen, 2018, 2020; Rosen & Di Fabio, 2023), new keywords and new narratives useful for the pact for skills and competencies are introduced: promotion, enrichment, development and flexible change (Di Fabio, 2017, 2019, 2026a, 2026b). Skills and competencies for a sustainable development (Di Fabio & Maree, 2016, Di Fabio, 2026a, 2026b) include the flexibility regarding skills in the current scenario as the pillar for assuring healthy competencies.

If in the 21st century some skills are no longer needed, it is necessary to: re-skill (upgrade with new skills); up-skill (teach and learn new skills); crea(te)-skill; (create new skills) ensuring flexibility competencies in the restructuring of the skills themselves (Di Fabio & Maree, 2016, Di Fabio, 2026a, 2026b).

The PS&SD gives a special and crucial value to taking care of contributions from a broad preventive perspective. There is a shift from reparative strategies, useful but not the spearhead, to fully preventive strategies valorizing strength-based prevention perspectives (Di Fabio & Saklofske, 2021). The psychology of sustainability and sustainable development advocates for research and interventions also from a primary preventive perspective (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2016; Di Fabio et al., 2017) and in particular for strength-based prevention perspectives, enhancing proactive prevention, even including secondary and tertiary prevention.

There are many challenges for competencies in the current moments we have to face. A traditional taxonomy useful

is the plural narrative quadrature of competencies (Di Fabio, 2022, 2014b, 2023), distinguishing among Aware competencies, Unaware competencies, Aware incompetencies and Unaware incompetencies. On another level, focusing on challenges for intra-competencies and inter-competencies, new construct and scales developed in the two International Research and Intervention Laboratories (Director Annamaria Di Fabio) at the University of Florence (UNIFI) could offer some useful contributions: 1) Intrapreneurial Self-Capital; 2) Acceptance of Change; 3) Positive Relational Management; 4) Life Project Reflexivity; 5) Workplace Relational Civility; 6) Human Capital Sustainability Leadership.

Intrapreneurial Self-Capital (Di Fabio, 2014a) is a resource that includes many facets to positively cope with the continuous challenges, focused on generating innovation for new solutions in relation to constraints, also deriving new opportunities from constraints.

Acceptance of Change (Di Fabio & Gori, 2016b) is another resource that expresses the attitude to positively embrace change, considering acceptance of change able to promote a better confrontation with the challenges on one hand, and on the other to be able to contribute to enhancing the well-being of the person.

Positive Relational Management (Di Fabio, 2016b) considers the positive adaptation to relationships and contexts in terms of a resource for productive outcomes. It includes 3 dimensions, Respect, Caring and Connectedness, each examined on three different levels: my ... for others, the ... of others for me, my ... for myself.

Life Project Reflexivity (Di Fabio et al., 2018) regards processes of reflexivity connected to the construction of work-life positive projectuality considering Authenticity as an important ingredient anchored to the personal most authentic meaning and values; Acquiescence, as the propensity to passively acquire an «other-directed» plan of possibilities; and Clarity/projectuality, as the full awareness regarding own plans and trajectories, including consequences of the relative choices.

Workplace Relational Civility (Di Fabio & Gori, 2016a) represents a resource for relationships underlying the value of respect and interest for both themselves as well as other

people, sensitive attitudes and behaviors at an interpersonal level, good and kind manners on the basis of three dimensions: relational decency, relational culture, and relational readiness evaluated using a mirror scale (me toward others and others towards me).

The challenges for intra-competencies, inter-competencies and flexible-competencies in an increasingly virtual world (Di Fabio, 2026a, 2026b) also include digitalized competences that have to be adequately considered in addition to digital competences (Peiró & Martínez-Tur, 2022). If digital competences are essential in the current work scenario, surely, they are not sufficient alone. The authors underline that traditional non-digital competences in general have to be reshaped if transferred into digitally mediated environments. These new environments can usually create different conditions that negatively affect workers' performances if acted with traditional competences. For this reason, it is important to consider how crucial paying attention to these digital transformations is for adapting consequently the spectrum of core, professional, and transversal skills available for the previous contexts. Once the new configuration of the skills possessed has been achieved with the adaptation to the new context, they become digitalized competences (Peiró & Martínez-Tur, 2022). So, digitalized competences refer to «non-digital competences that, when carried out in digital contexts (e.g., telework or virtual teamwork) and/or in cooperation with digital devices or «actors» (e.g., cobots, or artificial intelligence algorithms), are deeply transformed in order to be effective» (Peiró & Martínez-Tur, 2022, p. 192). They are articulated by the authors in the following tripartition: digitalized *core cognitive* competences, digitalized *transversal* competences and digitalized *leadership* competences.

This attentive, preventive and proactive care in terms of the responsibility to support the development and the continuous updating as well as the appropriate enrichment of skills and competencies, constructs a positive culture of healthy competencies. This culture asks for continuously being committed to reinforcing skills and competencies that become «healthy» because they are prepared to be able to adequately respond to the new demands and challenges of ever-changing scenarios. This positive culture of

healthy competencies also requires advanced leadership styles. Based on this awareness, new forms of leadership and management of human resources were needed. An example of an advanced leadership style is Human Capital Sustainability Leadership (HCSL) (Di Fabio & Peiró, 2018). HCSL is a higher order construct encompassing four leadership facets: Ethical leadership; Sustainable leadership; Mindful leadership; and Servant leadership.

Ethical leadership is characterized by fairness, integrity, and coherence between declared values and concrete actions. It promotes the empowerment of organizational members while encouraging ethical behaviors such as compassion, responsibility, and concern for others in decision-making, recognition, and interpersonal relations. Sustainable leadership emphasizes continuous learning, the protection of long-term goals, support for employees' growth, social equity, and development that preserves both human and material resources, as well as the well-being of individuals and communities. Mindful leadership focuses on awareness of the present moment, acknowledging emotions and personal feelings without being dominated by them, particularly under pressure, while also understanding how one's presence and behavior influence others. Servant leadership prioritizes the development and support of people within the organization, placing their interests and needs alongside, or even before, organizational advantage, and fostering responsibility, listening, and moral commitment toward others.

Currently the interest for Human Capital Sustainability Leadership has been extended in many countries, also in Eastern countries, and many adapted versions have been published: a Malaysian version (Seok et al., 2021); a Japanese version (Tsuda et al. 2023); and an Argentine version (Vaamonde & Peiró, 2025), and other versions are in preparation in the world for valuable cross-cultural comparison.

In the end, we also have to introduce the importance of the sustainable talent valorization in a positive culture of healthy skills and competencies. Regarding talents, we have to cope with many challenges (What is a talent? How to recognize talents?) as well as the complexity in the definition of talent and different perspectives on the nature of

talent, the dialectic between performance and potential, and reliability of measures and procedures. Following Di Fabio (2022), the mosaic requires dialectics between many contributions: from educational psychology talent as giftedness (Gagné, 2000, 2004, 2010; Meyers, et al., 2013); from work and organizational psychology talent as individual difference (Hough & Oswald, 2000) or as competence (Boyatzis, 2008); from social psychology talent as perception of talent (Dominick & Gabriel, 2009); from positive psychology talent as strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wood et al., 2011); from vocational & counseling psychology talent as identity (Guichard, 2004, 2009; Di Fabio, 2014b; Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2014; Whitty, 2002); and from psychology of sustainability and sustainable development sustainable talent (Di Fabio, 2017, 2022, 2026a, 2026b).

Sustainable talent (Di Fabio, 2016b, 2022) can be defined as the integration of individuals' talents and potentials, including both objective abilities and subjective perceptions of what people feel capable of expressing and achieving (Guichard, 2013; Di Fabio, 2014b). It encompasses the elements that energize and motivate individuals, linking personal aspirations, resources, and inner drives with the pursuit of excellent performance and flourishing (Di Fabio, 2016b, 2022). Within this perspective, self-attunement represents a key dimension, referring to awareness of one's authentic self, values, and deeper life purposes, fostering sustainable development and well-being over time (Di Fabio, 2014b). Furthermore, sustainable talent is deeply linked to meaningfulness, fostering a purposeful identitarian awareness (Di Fabio, 2014b) that helps individuals recognize and develop their authentic aspirations, values, and directions in both life and work (Di Fabio, 2022). Moreover, Sustainability of talent/s (Di Fabio, 2017b; Di Fabio & Maree, 2016) regards sustainable personal/life project, fair and sustainable development for themselves, others and the environment/s, respect the talent/s of ourselves and of people and of the planet for decent work, decent lives, healthy lives and the benefit of the person as well as community/ies and of the natural world. Sustainability of talent/s is aimed at promoting decent work (Blustein et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2017), decent lives (Di Fabio et al., 2023)

and healthy lives (Kenny & Di Fabio, 2023) also through decent education in a preventive perspective (Duffy et al., 2022; Kenny et al., 2023).

The proactive challenges of awareness in education, in training, in culture, in organizations, and in policies for flourishing of individual/student/worker of system/s of community/ies of each country system emerge as crucial. Furthermore, it is fundamental to enhance research and evidence-based intervention in real contexts (Roodbari et al., 2021).

This reminds us of the challenges in contributing to a positive culture of healthy competencies and sustainable talents, always following the pathways of empirical research and evidence-based intervention to contribute all together for policies and practices.

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