Importance of competences in communication by the opinion of business leaders
Evidences from a comparative study between Hungary and Slovakia

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Abstract

From the perspective of a hierarchically ordinated company, the expectations of company leaders about their employees' necessary competencies play a greater role than the opposite. This paper observes the expectations of leaders and sub-leaders of micro-, small and medium enterprises (with various scopes of activities) about the competencies of employees in neighbouring parts of Hungary and Slovakia.

The authors' research group collected 28 scientific resources on the issue of communication competencies in order to map up 21 "common denominators" from the competence lists. Based on this shortlist, a survey was conducted with 222 respondents to measure the subjective importance of these traits and to observe the attitudes towards the effectivity of communication trainings. On the Hungarian side, speech competence proved to be the most crucial competence for business leaders, followed by attention/reflection and interpersonal communication skills. In Slovakia, persuasion was reported to be the most crucial trait, the second is the application of confirmation and feedback, and the third is speech competence. Observing the correlations between Hungarian and Slovakian judgements of each competence, Pearson's chi-square tests show statistically significant correlations in 18 cases.

In terms of communication training experiences, the group communication competencies, the assertiveness and the leadership competencies were reported as main focuses. The overall satisfactory with communication trainings neither depends on the amount of leadership experience nor on the action assignments or the nationality (i.e. the venue) of the companies. The overall satisfactory rate is 2.53 in a four-grade scale among those who ever attended communication trainings.

Keywords

communication, competence, small and medium enterprises, SME, employer, employee, skill development, training, verbal skills, written communication skills, management competence, attitudes.

Disclaimer

Introduction

Competences, as individual traits which determine the person's behaviour and abilities and allows them to gain resources for a successful living, have got into the centre of pedagogy and psychology as well as the human resources. Competences are not only important in our everyday lives but play a crucial role at the workplace. In a company's hierarchy, leaders and subordinates, having their individual competencies, influence each other's workplace behaviour and functioning. Beside influence, they build up a mental picture from each other's competencies, creating expectations on what types of knowledge, skills and abilities the others should have to fit to their duties and how they should do their job in general.

From the perspective of a hierarchically ordinated company, the expectations of company leaders about their employees' necessary competencies play a greater role than the opinions of the employees about their leaders' abilities and competencies. Alongside with these concerns, we aim this paper at observing the expectations of leaders and sub-leaders of micro-, small and medium enterprises (with various scopes of activities) in certain neighbouring parts of Hungary and Slovakia about the competencies of employees. The outcome of such a research is to ascertain the potential differences between the leaders' thinking in the two observed countries. As a further means of the research, one can observe how practising leaders in small companies think about their subordinates' ideal competence set, forming recommendations for a more effective secondary education and vocational training system.

Person and organization are closely related to each other. Leadership is not only forming this relationship but is also a part of it. The most palpable result of the interaction and communication between managers and subordinates is the efficient functioning of the organization. Managers work on the basis of principles, methods, abilities, and techniques that enable the organization to function successfully and maintain long-term competitiveness. This basis includes practices and organisational habits as well.

Managers lead and evaluate employees in different ways. Some are rigorously guiding, aiming to the full control of the subordinates, while others have a much more liberal leadership style to allow employees to develop within the organization. Depending on the corporate circumstances, managers may, if necessary, use more kinds of leadership styles to create organizational efficiency. The analysis of the impact of leadership style on the organization has long been at the centre of economic and management research. Leadership has countless components, a leader's work can be evaluated from a number of viewpoints. However, perhaps the most important aspect is how to treat his subordinates, and two of the most important elements of this is the communication of the leader and their expectations towards their employees' abilities and skills.

Leadership, in this approach, focuses primarily on human resources, encouraging people to be engaged through mutual communication. It can be stated that leadership is a process that directs people in such a way that their actions contribute to the realization of specific organizational goals. Beside this, leadership can be defined as a skill that drives people into action even when they think of a different way. In fact, we can also state that leadership is a behavioural pattern by which the leader tries to influence the members of the organization and their activities. Višňovský and their co-authors say that leadership is effective if the subordinates are sufficiently motivated and have enough experience to carry out the tasks entrusted to them. In this case, the manager can provide more detailed information to his employees, who can better understand their importance, their role and the role of their specific

skills in the organization.

To become an effective leader, one needs to acquire critical leadership skills, such as:

- qualification: professional knowledge and skills required for the work.
- cognitive skills: the ability to recognize the problem, clear thinking, understanding relationships.
- implementation skills: proper distribution of work, motivation, and communication.
- networking skills: developing effective and cooperative working relationships, critical behaviour and social sense.

Furthermore, there are some specific leadership skills that are crucial to become a successful leader. According to Klein, these are the ability to work together, responsibility, result orientation, communication, creativity, innovation, presentation skills, collaboration, self-knowledge, risk taking.

At this point, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of skills and competencies, and enlighten the relations and differences between them. This paper does not shoulder the task to summarize the amazing amount of pedagogical and psychological approaches of these two concepts; only a brief overview of them is given, concentrating on the human resource concerns.

Since McClelland's study in the early 1970s, competence has been recognized as an important indicator of individual employee performance. Competence, in this approach, means the combination of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviours and their personal application, which helps the employees to successfully perform critical tasks, special functions, and the general duties of the position.

According to Machida-Kosuga, competence expresses ability, skill, knowledge and performance simultaneously. Competence enables the individual to constructively and successfully use the acquired knowledge and personality components. Competence is an ability by which an individual can meet expectations and successfully solve tasks.

1. Picture: Domains of the main competence elements.

Above the wavy line, one can find some components that are easier to recognize and develop, and below the line, those competency components can be seen that are more difficult to develop.

Spencer and Spencer's job competency vocabulary classifies the various characteristics into six groups: performance, action, support, assistance, influence on others, need for power; management activities, cognitive functions, personal efficiency.

Clearly, competence is a pool which includes – among others – general and specific skills. Furthermore, the concept of competence can be divided into two types. On the one hand, general competencies, features that are essential for good performance, regardless of organization and type of work, and, on the other hand, specific competencies, which are required only within the given organization to carry out a particular job. The competency model is the framework that links the organization, the individual, and the job together, serving as a basis for matching the job-related competency expectations and the individual competence set.

Changing market conditions, speeding information traffic and communication technologies also necessitate a change in school teaching methods, and the need to develop key competencies in the context of the requirement for organizations. According to Venables and

Tan, it is the responsibility of educational institutions to better prepare the graduates to enter the workplace. It is a real challenge for the education system to define what kinds of competencies to concentrate on, regarding its limitations in terms of time, the great number of students both in public and higher education as well as the overwhelmed curricula. That is why it is crucial for all types of schools to know the competence expectations of firms well, in order to give an effective preparation for their students.

In Goleman's approach, there are two basic groups of competence elements, namely personal competence and social competence. Personal competencies determine how we can deal with ourselves, while social competencies help us manage our social relationships. The study of competences in the job market has become an increasingly widespread method not only for selecting subordinates but also for defining managerial positions, as it provides an overview of management expectations in addition to a general description.

Competency-based Human Resource Management Applications began to be general in practice from 1990. The competency model application first appeared at the time of selection, with the aim of ensuring that the competencies required by the job and the competencies of the person performing the job were met. Later on, the importance of competency appears in other human resource management functions, for example, in training and human resource development (personalized development to ensure that the individual has all the competencies needed to get the job, in performance management (the worker receives feedback on the level of competence), in payment (competence-based payment).

Employers determine the competencies and skills expected from prospective employees in advance. According to the American Management Association (AMA), the most common skills expected from new employees are communication skills, collaboration skills/ susceptibility of teamwork, critical thinking/problem-solving ability, and creativity/ innovation.

In the AMA 2010 survey, more than 2,000 US leaders took part in a survey, the final finding of which was that managers expected their prospective employees to be able to read and write; but they also need the following skills: critical thinking (problem-solving), communication, willingness to cooperate, and creativity (innovation).

According to Prentice (1984), the competencies required for successful management include: leadership, attentive listening, communication, problem-solving, time management, adaptation to change, networking, presentation skills, stress management.

Of the above key competencies, management communication is one of the most important elements of the generally accepted model of the manager role of Mintzberg. In Mintzberg's model, managerial roles form three consecutive levels: 1) level of information, 2) level of people and 3) level of activity, both within the organizational unit and outside the organizational unit. Communication is the only competence within an organizational unit as well as outside of an organizational unit.

Communication can be found everywhere: we communicate constantly and play a decisive role in the life and development of humanity. Communication itself, as a word, comes from the Latin word "communicare", which means to make something common, with the radix "mun(us)", in English: duty, task, service. Communication can be defined either as information transfer and exchange or as participation in the creation of mutual knowledge in order to solve problems. (Information, in this regard, is any data, fact, or news that is relevant to us, and that expands our knowledge or reduces our ignorance. Problem, furthermore, can be defined as any condition which exceeds the stimulation threshold of the person, causing discomfort for them).

Communication of the organization is the multidirectional exchange of information (external

and internal) in business processes through a specific signal system. Effective communication is essential for an organization to achieve its goals.

In organizational communication, we define external and internal communication areas. External communication is also covered by the company's external relations. Here it is important to mention that an organization's external communication has a major impact on the organization's relationship with other actors in the economy. The internal communication of the organization is the basic tool of leadership, which plays a role in all management styles, as it exercises leadership functions through the communication process and strengthens its relationships within the organization.

In the next chapter, we detail the results of a comparative study between the leaders of Hungarian and Slovakian micro-, small and medium enterprises, observing how they think about the importance of the different competencies of their employees'. The scope of this study is narrowed down to those competences that relate to communication in a broad sense.

Methods

Competencies of communication – due to their complexity in terms of verbal and nonverbal channels, as well as of psychological and applied aspects – can be defined only in broad lines. If researchers seek for a stable framework of competence analysis, they find a perplexing amount of resources. Most of the literature items apply different approaches and models to give a structure to the competence system of communication. Thus, the first crucial problem in conducting a survey about the judgement of importance of different competencies in communication is to give a reasonable definition and limitation to the observed factors.

Corvinus University of Budapest (CUB) launched a research project named "Institutional Developments for Smart Specialization at the Székesfehérvár Campus of Corvinus University of Budapest" in 2016, in order to serve several research aims and broaden their perspective in business network research. In this umbrella project, 13 research groups were founded with different focuses on management and network researches. Five members of the research group named "KommKomp" (formally called "Efficiency in Business Communication") shouldered the task to measure business leaders' attitudes towards the importance of different competencies in mediated and non-mediated workplace communication, taking into consideration that more than half of the GDP in Hungary is produced by the SME sector.

The group collected 28 scientific resources on the issue of communication competencies. By comparing them in a meta-analysis, the aim was to find the 'common denominators' among the competence lists by picking those competences mentioned in at least two different resources. From the analysed papers, each with different approaches and components, 21 well-definable competence elements could be highlighted as follows: appearance, assertive communication and confrontation, attention and reflection, competence in foreign languages, confirmation and feedback, emotional control, explanatory skills, group communication competence, intercultural competence, interpersonal communication, negotiation, non-verbal behaviour, persuasion, presentation skills, proactivity, self-disclosure, self-management, sense of humour, speech competence, usage of ICT and written communication skills.

The aim of the research was the observation and measurement of the company leaders' opinions and attitudes towards the importance of different communication competencies, to measure their previous experiences and, in case of having the latter, their satisfaction with communication trainings. The target group was firmly defined: specifically, the business leaders of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) of up to 250 employees. As for the

geographical limitations, the project had regional limits due to the project description framework. That is the reason why only one region with three counties (the Central Transdanubian region, with Fejér, Komárom-Esztergom and Veszprém counties) were eligible on the Hungarian side. In order to choose a suitable Slovakian region to compare, the involved partner institution (Jan Selye University, Komárno) chose the neighbouring area, the District of Komárno for involving SMEs from the left bank of the Danube, on the Slovakian side.

The 21 factors listed above gave the base of the questionnaire, which was supplemented by questions concerning the duration of the respondents' leadership experience, as well as the category, size and scope of their enterprises. In addition, sociodemographic variables like gender and age have been recorded. After finalising the questionnaire, a Google Form was created in order to generate a short hyperlink to the survey with 30 questions.

On the Hungarian side, two data resources were used to reach out to business leaders. On the one hand, the own regional contact list of CUB with about 250 contact numbers and e-mail addresses was firstly refreshed by cold calls, and then applied as a means of up-to-date contacts. On the other hand, the National Association of Young Entrepreneurs (FIVOSZ) and the Hungarian Foundation for Enterprise Promotion (MVA) helped the research group to spread the questionnaire link among a regionally filtered target group of entrepreneurs via eDM (electronic direct marketing message). After an A/B testing, the more applicable variation of eDM was sent out to the segmented mailing list. The data recording period ran in July, 2018.

On the Komárno side, experts of J. Selye University translated the Hungarian questionnaire into Slovakian (taking the necessary content and language changes into account), then hard copy questionnaires were brought out directly to the enterprises of the university's connection network by students. The data recording period ran in September, 2018.

As it can be seen, the sampling method was different in two significant points: 1.) phone call and e-mail vs. phone call, then interpersonal visit to let the questionnaire be filled out; 2.) online vs. hard copy questionnaires. Drawing the conclusion based on these differences, it can be stated that the use of an interpersonal network with an offline visit resulted in a significantly higher rate of successful response collection, even in a smaller population. On the Hungarian side, 116 respondents took part in the survey from about 12,500 potential business leaders, while from about more than 4000 potential Slovakian respondents, the research group collected 106 relevant and usable responses.

1. Diagram: Size of the enterprises in the sample. Source: Own processing

Results

The sample was focused on enterprises with a maximum employee number of 250, which is a limit of the "small and medium enterprises" category in economic law. Due to the spreading method (eDM and personal network), some major enterprises also appear in the sample: 15-17% of the respondents work for or in these kinds of firms. While in Hungary, 82 respondents work in an enterprise with less than 50 employees (from 116 total respondents), the Slovakian sample part contains 60 enterprises with less than 50 employees of the 106 micro and small enterprises. Only a minor part (34 of 116 in Hungary, 46 of 106 in Slovakia) count as medium or major enterprises.

As for the main assignment of the respondents' firms, 19% are indefinite (given that the answer for this question was not required in the questionnaire), the four main function areas are the financial and insurance sectors (14.41%), manufacturing (11.71%), other services (9.01%), and trade (9.01%), according to the Hungarian unified classification sectors of activities.

The questionnaire measured the age category of the respondents, and the amount of their leadership experience (in years). From these answers, researchers learnt that a good two-thirds of the respondents are between 25-44 years old, while, regarding their work experience, the Slovakian part of the sample tilts towards the lowest possible leadership experience: almost half of the respondents have spent less than two years in leading positions (in the Hungarian sample, this is nearly one-third of the respondents).

2. Diagram: Age categories of the leaders. Source: Own processing

3. Diagram: Leadership experience of the respondents by gender. Source: Own processing

Discussion

As the core of the questionnaire, the workplace relevance of 21 different types of communication competencies had to be assessed by company leaders, each on a five-degree scale, where 1 meant the least important while 5 expressed the highest importance. Given that this method handles the assessment of competencies as separated opinions, the results (i.e., the scaling) of each competence is independent from each other. Overall ranking, in other words, is: a list based on the relative importance of these 21 traits that could lead to a more structured judgement assessment. However, this solution could have blurred the similarities of the importance of some competences because of the need of ranking without any ties.

While observing the assessment of the above-mentioned 21 traits, several minor but significant differences were outlined between the Hungarian and Slovakian attitudes. Starting with the univariate analysis of the results, the overall Slovakian assessment of the importance of various communication competencies seems to be lower than the Hungarian one. While the

former respondents (SK) attributed an average of 3.71, with a dispersion of 0.14, to the listed traits overall, the latter group's (HU) overall average was 4.19, with a dispersion of 0.24. The variances are also significantly different, 0.02 in Slovakia and 0.06 in Hungary. The correlation of the two importance lists is r=0.33, showing a quite weak but evincible correlation between the two nations' attitudes (0.3<r<0.7). This means that the preference list of these two groups moves more or less together, while the general judgement of the importance of the listed traits is a bit stricter among Slovakian respondents than among Hungarian ones.

4. Diagram: Summary about the evaluation of the importance of different competences in Hungary and in Slovakia. Source: Own processing

Competence	Average (HU)	Rank (HU)	Average (SK)	Rank (SK)
Appearance	4,328	6.	3,764	10.
Assertive communication and confrontation	4,250	10.	3,538	18.
Attention, reflection	4,552	2.	3,821	4.
Competence in foreign languages	3,586	21.	3,660	15.
Confirmation / feedback	4,233	11.	3,896	2.
Emotional control	4,138	14.	3,689	13.
Explanatory skills	4,336	5.	3,783	7.
Group communication competence	4,129	15.	3,774	9.
Intercultural competence	4,155	13.	3,434	21.
Interpersonal communication	4,500	3.	3,802	5.
Negotiation	4,319	8.	3,774	8.
Non-verbal behavior	4,319	7.	3,651	16.
Persuasion	4,190	12.	4,019	1.
Presentation skills	4,000	17.	3,679	14.
Proactivity	4,284	9.	3,566	17.
Self-disclosure	3,966	18.	3,472	20.
Self-management	3,836	20.	3,792	6.
Sense of humour	3,957	19.	3,500	19.
Speech competence	4,621	1.	3,830	3.
Usage of ICT	4,017	16.	3,717	11.
Written communication skills	4,345	4.	3,698	12.

1. Table: Competence ranking in Hungary and in Slovakia. Source: Own processing

On the Hungarian side, speech competence, with its 4.62 average points, has proved to be the most crucial competence for business leaders, followed by attention and reflection (4.55) and interpersonal communication skills (4.50). In Slovakia, persuasion was reported to be the most crucial trait (average: 4.02), while the second is the application of confirmation and feedback (3.90) and the third is speech competence (3.83).

Observing the potential correlations between Hungarian and Slovakian judgements of each competence, Pearson's chi-square tests show statistically significant correlations in 18 cases. Only three traits confirmed the null hypothesis, which means that, in these cases, there is no significant correlation between the two national groups' opinions. These traits are (1) self-management ($\chi2(1) = 0.59$, $p < .05$.), (2) competences in foreign languages ($\chi2(1) = 0.35$, $p < .05$.) and (3) persuasion skills ($\chi2(1) = 0.10$, $p < .05$.). A fourth competence (ICT skills) is on the edge of verifying the null hypothesis ($\chi2(1) = 0.049$, $p < .05$.); however, technically, the test shows a negative result, suggesting no correlations between the assessment of the

importance of ICT skills.

There cannot be found any other statistically significant correlations neither between the focus of the firms and the leaders' attitudes, nor between the age of the leaders and their opinions about the importance of communication competencies. Minor differences could be mapped up, however, the small subsample did not allow researchers to define these as significant ones. A fruitful approach to evaluate the experiences about and attitudes towards communication-centred trainings is to measure if the respondent has already had an individual experience with regards to training. Therefore, the questionnaire included a Yes/No question on the respondents' previous (existing) training experiences. Moreover, another open-ended question was built into the questionnaire about the respondents' training experiences, and what they have learnt in these trainings. In summary, 30 respondents reported they have already attended trainings.

The evaluation of the results was carried out by reducing the responses to clearly identifiable competences mentioned in the short answer texts. In 14 cases, the mentioned competences could not be clearly identified, while the respondents reflected on their training experiences in general, highlighting their positive or negative opinions. In two cases, the respondents reported that they have already attended communication trainings; however, they did not give details or any reflections about them. These answers were categorised as "zero" content. Overall, 7 categorically positive, and just as many negative feedbacks could be counted without any direct reference to communication competences. Those answers which were referenced directly, group communication competence, assertiveness and leadership, have got more than one mention among the respondents. Given that spontaneous mentions cannot thoroughly describe the respondents' opinions, these questions can only be regarded as "scratching the surface", and are even less applicable for measuring the efficiency of trainings and vocational courses.

Furthermore, data analysis showed that there is no significant correlation between the businessmen's leadership experience and their attitudes towards communication competence trainings ($r=0.2$). The overall average satisfaction with communication trainings among those businessmen who have ever attended communication trainings is 2.53 on a 0-3 scale. This result can be interpreted as follows: those businessmen who have already attended training courses concerning communication skills evaluated their experiences averagely between "partially useful" and "quite useful". The answers may be distorted by the previous questions (importance of different skills) that pre-strain the opinions about the usefulness of developing these competences. Moreover, the focus of this questionnaire has been put on measuring the assessment of the importance of various skills, instead of judging the role and importance of on-the-job trainings and other vocational courses. Therefore, the explicitly positive and negative approaches can only be evaluated as anecdotic supplementary.

Conclusions

Hungarian company leaders and decision makers named speech competencies, attention / reflection, and interpersonal communication skills as the most crucial ones in communication. In Slovakia, persuasion, communicative feedback and speech competencies proved to be the most important communication traits. Scanning through the low-end of the importance list, Hungarian respondents think that the sense of humour, the self-management and the foreign language skills may be the most irrelevant among their employees. At the same time, Slovakian leaders regard the sense of humour, the self-disclosure and the intercultural

competencies as the less important knowledge, abilities well skills at their workplaces.

We can inevitably state that the biggest differences between Hungarian and Slovakian assessments (speech competence 0.79; attention/reflection 0.73; intercultural competence 0.72; proactivity 0.72; assertive communication and confrontation 0.71) are outside the statistical margin of error, showing a significant discrepancy between the two different nationalities.

The total importance score, just like the overall average of importance assessment of each competence category is lower on the Slovakian side. (The dispersion of Hungarian category averages is 0.238, their variance is 0.057, in comparison with the Slovakian dispersion of 0.142, var=0.02.) This can be interpreted so that the respondents judge generally stricter in terms of the importance of competencies, or they regard the indicated competencies not as important as their Hungarian colleagues, or they might can name other (more important) competencies – unfortunately, the latter question was not included into the survey. Interestingly, only the competence in foreign languages proved to be more important in Slovakian companies (ave=3.66) than in Hungarian ones (ave=3.59).

The reason of this general judgement difference can also be explained with the differences of the observed companies' working profile. However, both on the Hungarian and on the Slovakian side, we managed to create a miscellaneous sample in terms of assignment, from information and communication sector through financial and insurance companies to building industry and manufacturing.

One limitation of this study is the unsatisfactory selection of action assignments. A more thorough and more differentiated sampling of assignments could result in finer differences of competence assessment.

The second concern is the small sample size. During the research period, it has been proved that company leaders are difficult to reach for a survey longer than five minutes, which bold fact hindered the numeric extension of the sample. Furthermore, according to the public administrational categories of the Hungarian enterprises – the researchers decided to put individual proprietorships into the same sample pool as the bigger companies, with respect of subcategories (one-man entrepreneurships, micro-enterprises, small enterprises, medium enterprises). Another study, dealing with only one of the above-mentioned categories and involving a larger number of such enterprises could result in a clearer measurement and more reliable results.

In terms of communication training experiences, the group communication competencies, the assertiveness and the leadership competencies were reported as main focuses, according to the leaders. The strong presence of group communication skills on professional trainings is easy to interpret: by involving a smaller or bigger amount of employees, it is practical to concentrate on how they work together – logically, mainly in medium enterprises, and sometimes in small ones. Leadership skills on trainings appear mainly in specific trainings when a group of leaders are present. However, we can imagine coaching and counselling situations as well, where these skills stand in the middle. Assertiveness, however, is a universal behavioural pattern which should be developed among leaders and also among their subordinates.

Clearly, the satisfactory with communication trainings neither depends on the amount of leadership experience nor on the action assignments or the nationality (venue) of the companies. The overall satisfactory rate is 2.53 in a four-grade scale among those who ever attended in communication trainings (their proportion was 51,8% in the whole sample).

The study did not observed what proportion of companies involve communication trainings into their on-the-job learning and developing activities countrywide, therefore, we cannot

compare our results to other existing resources. The main reason for this is the unsatisfactory operationalisation of the concept and content of "communication trainings": a group-building weekend outdoor activity can be included in this topic just as much as a specific small-group coaching with a strong focus. Besides identifying this limitation, we can state that a hands-on categorization of the professional communication training scene would be desirable.

As a final statement, we emphasize the pleasing result: a surprisingly large amount of the leaders and sub-leaders of the observed micro-, small and medium enterprises have already attended communication trainings. (A possible limitation is given by the fact that those leaders who have some interest in communication skills can be easier involved into filling such a questionnaire about communication than ones who cannot be triggered by the topic.) Their overall satisfactory (63.25%) shows that most of them think these opportunities were useful for the development of their working skills. Alongside with this, further studies could be carried out to observe if they think the same way in terms of their subordinates' development, or, in other words, if they think that spending money on the employees' communication training is a recoverable cost.

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Portrait photography of the authors

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