Towards an AI-Era Human Resource Competency Framework for Sri Lanka's Private Sector: A Literature-Driven Conceptual Model and Empirical Validation Agenda

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ABSTRACT: Human resource (HR) competency frameworks translate the abstract demands of "good HR practice" into observable, trainable behaviours, yet no published framework specifically models the competencies expected of private-sector HR professionals in Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, artificial intelligence (AI), people analytics, hybrid work and a multigenerational workforce are reshaping what HR professionals must know and do, faster than institutional competency models such as SHRM's Body of Applied Skills and Knowledge, the CIPD Profession Map and the Ulrich/RBL HR Competency Study can be revised. This conceptual paper synthesizes post-2020 global and regional literature on HR competencies to construct a candidate competency pool for Sri Lankan private-sector HR professionals, using a transparent literature-convergence coding scheme across six source clusters. Twenty-six competencies are organized into six clusters (strategic/business, digital/analytical, relational/interpersonal, ethical/governance, personal/adaptive and technical/functional) and screened for theoretical importance rather than empirical prevalence. Several competencies with limited convergence across established frameworks – including AI governance stewardship, paradox navigation, statutory literacy and cross-generational leadership – are retained and defended as theoretically important departures from the popular understanding of HR competency. The paper closes by proposing a dual-rater (self and coworker), weighted-proficiency empirical methodology, adapted from a recent Sri Lankan competency-framework study, for testing and refining this framework in a subsequent full-scale study. No primary data were collected; the competency pool constitutes a set of literature-derived hypotheses for empirical validation.

Keywords: HR competency framework, competency modelling, Sri Lanka, South Asia, artificial intelligence in HR, Generation Z, people analytics

1 INTRODUCTION

Competency frameworks have become, in Bartram's words, close to a common language for human resource systems, translating strategic intent into observable, hireable, trainable behaviour [1]. Well-constructed frameworks require iterative testing, weighting of importance and trainability, and contextual grounding in the industry and country of use [2].

The HR profession itself is unusual: it builds competency frameworks for everyone else in the organization, yet its own competency base is now under strain. Artificial intelligence and algorithmic decision-making

are reshaping recruitment, performance management and workforce planning [3], exposing HR professionals who lack digital and analytical fluency [4]. Generation Z's entry into the workforce, accelerated by post-pandemic expectations of flexibility, purpose and psychological safety, is forcing a re-examination of engagement and reward competencies that pre-date this cohort [5], [6]. Meanwhile, HR functions in South Asia operate within statutory, collectivist and socio-cultural conditions that differ materially from the Anglo-American contexts in which most global competency models originate [7].

Despite this, no published, empirically grounded competency framework exists for HR professionals in Sri Lanka's private sector. Adjacent Sri Lankan competency-framework research exists for other roles – for example, site administrative officers in construction [8] – but none has yet been produced for the HR profession itself, despite HR being the function best placed methodologically to produce one.

This paper addresses that gap in three stages. First, it synthesises post-2020 global institutional and peer-reviewed literature on HR competencies – spanning SHRM, CIPD, Ulrich/RBL and emerging literature on AI, people analytics and generational change – into a candidate competency pool. Second, it applies a transparent literature-convergence coding scheme to theoretically prioritise the pool, explicitly identifying competencies that depart from the popular, framework-consensus understanding of HR competency. Third, it proposes a concrete empirical methodology, adapted from a recent Sri Lankan competency-framework study [8], for testing this model with practising HR professionals in a subsequent full-scale study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Competency and Competency Frameworks: Conceptual Foundations*

Competency is best understood as the underlying characteristics – knowledge, skill, self-concept, trait and motive – that predict effective or superior job performance [9]. A competency framework operationalizes this by specifying which competencies matter for a role, at what proficiency level, and how they are observed through behavioural indicators [1], [10]. Two lessons recur across recent competency-framework studies: frameworks gain utility when weighted by both contribution to successful performance and difficulty to improve, rather than treated as equally important or trainable [2], [8]; and frameworks travel poorly across contexts unless empirically re-tested in the population and industry to which they will be applied [8].

2.2 *Global HR Competency Models*

Three institutional models dominate the global HR competency landscape. SHRM's Body of Applied Skills and Knowledge (SHRM BASK), revised in 2021, defines nine behavioural competencies – HR expertise, ethical practice, business acumen, consultation, critical evaluation, communication, relationship management, global and cultural effectiveness, and leadership and navigation [11]. CIPD's Profession Map, developed with input from around 20,000 people professionals, structures competency around core knowledge (people practice, culture and behaviour, business acumen, analytics and creating value, digital working, and change), core behaviours (ethical practice, professional courage and influence, valuing people, working inclusively, passion for learning, insights-focused, situational decision-making, and commercial drive) and role-selected specialist knowledge [12]. The Ulrich/RBL HR Competency Study (HRCS), now in its eighth round, empirically derives nine competency domains from tens of thousands of multi-rater responses, organized around three core drivers – strategic positioner, credible activist and paradox navigator – and six enablers spanning culture and change, human capital, total rewards, technology, analytics and compliance [13], [14]. The evolution of HR competency modelling beyond these three institutional frameworks has itself been the subject of academic interest, tracing a shift from functional, transactional HR competencies toward more strategic ones over the past two decades [15].

These three frameworks converge strongly on business acumen, ethical practice, communication and change leadership. They diverge on tension-management (paradox navigator, unique to Ulrich/RBL), digital working as an explicit core-knowledge domain (CIPD), and whether analytics is a dis-

crete competency or embedded within critical evaluation (SHRM). None was designed with South Asian statutory or socio-cultural conditions, nor the post-2022 acceleration of generative AI, as a primary reference point.

2.3 *Disruptive Forces Reshaping HR Competency Demands After 2020*

AI and digital transformation. A systematic review of AI's competency demands on HR managers found that technical data-analysis skills must be paired with "institutional configuration capability" – leading digital-transformation change while remaining a credible people-facing partner [4]. A parallel systematic review of AI and automation in HR development concludes that HR professionals need new competencies in overseeing algorithmic fairness and reskilling the workforce, rather than simply operating new software [3]. Budhwar et al.'s review of AI in international HRM highlights persistent gaps in understanding of algorithmic bias, explainability and data governance – competencies barely represented in pre-2020 frameworks [16].

People analytics. Despite HR leaders widely endorsing analytics as central to HR's future, a 2023 industry survey found people analytics and data-driven decision-making to be HR's single largest skills gap across career levels [17], echoed in recent scoping reviews of people analytics from an HR development perspective, which identify persistent under-investment in statistical and data-storytelling capability [18], [19]. A rigorous, empirically-derived competency model for the emerging HR analyst role, built from job-advertisement analysis and practitioner interviews, similarly finds technical/analytical skill insufficient without accompanying business acumen and communication competency [20], directly paralleling this paper's own People Analytics & Evidence-Based Decisions and Digital Communication Agility items.

Generational and post-pandemic change. Conceptual work on Generation Z's entry into the post-COVID-19 workplace argues that established engagement and retention competencies must be supplemented with purpose-alignment, psychological safety and flexible-work design – secondary concerns in earlier models [5]. Related work on building a post-pandemic-resilient Generation Z workforce similarly foregrounds well-being stewardship and coaching-style leadership as competencies whose relative importance has risen sharply since 2020 [6].

2.4 *HR Competency Research in South Asia and Sri Lanka*

A regional synthesis of HRM practice across six South Asian countries – Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – found that HRM in the region is simultaneously converging with, and diverging from, Western practice, shaped by distinctive statutory regimes, collectivist social structures, and a large informal-economy interface that Western competency models do not address [7]. Within Sri Lanka specifically, competency-framework research exists for adjacent roles – notably a study developing an evidence-based framework for construction-site administrative officers using a weighted proficiency-rating (WPR) methodology combining desired/actual/gap analysis, contribution-to-performance and difficulty-to-improve scoring [8] – but no equivalent study has yet been conducted for the HR profession itself, despite HR practitioners operating under exactly the statutory and socio-cultural conditions the regional literature identifies as under-represented in global models [7].

3 LITERATURE-SYNTHESIS METHODOLOGY

This paper is a conceptual and review contribution, without empirical claims. The competency pool below was constructed through a purposive, framework-triangulation synthesis rather than a formal PRISMA-style systematic review, consistent with the literature-plus-panel-convergence approach used in comparable recent competency-framework studies [2], [21], [8]. Search sources comprised: (i) the three institutional frameworks in Section 2.2 [11], [12], [13], [14]; (ii) post-2020 journal literature on AI, digital transformation and people analytics [3], [4], [16], [18], [19], [20]; (iii) literature on generational and post-pandemic workforce change [5], [6]; and (iv) South Asian and Sri Lankan HRM literature [7], [8]. Pre-2020 sources were retained only where they anchor a still-current institutional framework – e.g., the 2016/2017 Ulrich/RBL round underlying Round 8 [13],

[14], or Dreyfus's proficiency-staging model, still used in recent competency-scoring methodologies [22], [8]. Consistent with its stated aim as a conceptual synthesis rather than a systematic review, this identification process was not conducted as a registered, reproducible database query with a documented search string or a PRISMA-style screening count; it reflects the authors' purposive judgement of relevance, a boundary made explicit as a limitation in Section 7.

Each competency was coded against six source clusters: SHRM BASK (S), CIPD Profession Map (C), Ulrich/RBL HRCS (U), post-2020 AI/digital-HR literature (A), generational/post-pandemic workforce literature (G), and South Asian/Sri Lankan regional literature (R). A competency's convergence count – the number of clusters in which it is independently identified – is reported in Table 1, in place of the empirically-derived "contribution to successful performance" (CSP) score used in comparable Sri Lankan studies [8]; it functions analogously, as a provisional importance signal to be replaced by empirical CSP scoring in the follow-up study proposed in Section 6. Low-convergence competencies were not discarded automatically; several are retained and defended in Section 5 precisely because their theoretical justification appears strong even where not yet reflected in institutional consensus. The convergence count should accordingly be read as a heuristic literature-synthesis indicator, reflecting the authors' own classification of the reviewed sources, rather than an empirical or independently validated measure of competency importance; no formal inter-rater reliability check was conducted on the coding.

3.1 *Conceptual Model*

Figure 1 summarises how the four contextual drivers identified in the literature above – AI and digital transformation, generational and post-pandemic workforce change, South Asian statutory and socio-cultural context, and changing work arrangements – are hypothesized to shape the six competency clusters in Table 1. They are in turn hypothesized to influence HR effectiveness and organizational outcomes. This model is not tested in the present paper; it is offered as an explicit statement of the causal logic underlying the taxonomy, to be examined alongside the competency pool itself in the empirical study proposed in Section 6.

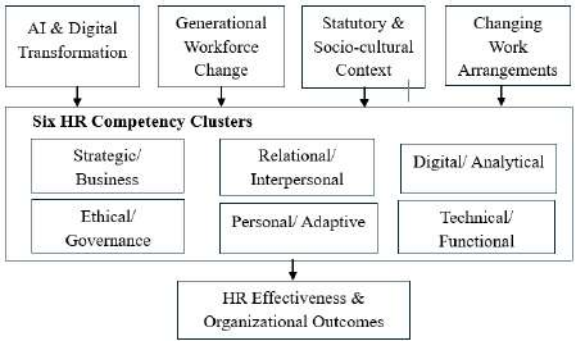

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model linking contextual drivers to HR competency clusters and hypothesized organizational outcomes

4 PROPOSED HR PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY TAXONOMY

Table 1 presents the resulting pool of 26 competencies for private-sector HR professionals in Sri Lanka, organized into six clusters: strategic/business-alignment; digital/analytical; relational/interpersonal; ethical/legal/governance; personal/adaptive; and HR technical/functional expertise. This structure mirrors, without exactly replicating, the personal/social competency-group architecture used in adjacent Sri Lankan competency research [8], while foregrounding the digital, ethical-AI and generational-leadership competencies from Section 2.3 as clusters in their own right. Source-cluster codes follow Section 3: S = SHRM BASK, C = CIPD Profession Map, U = Ulrich/RBL HRCS, A = post-2020 AI/digital-HR literature, G = generational/post-pandemic workforce literature, R = South Asian/Sri Lankan regional literature. Four digitally-adjacent competencies – AI Fluency, AI Governance, HR Technology Stewardship, and Data Privacy Stewardship – and two strategic/adaptive pairs – Business Acumen/Strategic Workforce Positioning and Adaptability/Paradox Navigation – are deliberately differentiated rather than merged; Table 1's indicator wording is written to keep each pair conceptually distinct.

Table 1. Proposed HR professional competency taxonomy for Sri Lanka's private sector, with literature-convergence codes and counts (max. 6)

Competency (Cluster)	Illustrative Behavioural Indicator	Convergence (codes / count)
1. Business Acumen (Strategic)	Translates business/market drivers into workforce decisions.	S,C,U,R / 4
2. Strategic Workforce Positioner (Strategic)	Translates business strategy into future workforce architecture and talent plans.	C,U / 2
3. Change Leadership (Strategic)	Leads and embeds change and culture transformation.	C,U / 2
4. Paradox Navigation (Strategic)	Knowingly reconciles two competing goods (e.g., cost vs. care), not just coping with ambiguity.	U / 1
5. People Analytics & Evidence-Based Decisions (Digital)	Uses workforce data to diagnose problems and justify decisions.	C,U,A / 3
6. AI Fluency & Algorithmic Literacy (Digital)	Knows what AI-enabled HR tools can/cannot do; does not itself govern their use.	A / 1
7. AI Governance & Ethics Stewardship (Digital)	Governs how AI is used in people decisions: fairness, transparency, bias-mitigation.	A / 1
8. HR Technology Stewardship (Digital)	Configures/administers the broader HR technology stack (HRIS, payroll, ATS), AI included.	C,U,A / 3
9. Digital Communication Agility (Digital)	Communicates effectively across hybrid/remote channels.	A,G / 2
10. Trust-Building / Credible Activism (Relational)	Builds credibility through consistent, principled action.	S,U / 2
11. Cross-Generational Leadership (Relational)	Adapts coaching/feedback style across generational cohorts.	G / 1
12. Cultural & Social Sensitivity (Relational)	Works effectively across South Asia's ethnic/religious/linguistic diversity.	R,S / 2
13. Conflict Mediation & Negotiation (Relational)	Resolves workplace and industrial-relations disputes fairly.	S,R / 2
14. Inclusive Communication (Relational)	Listens actively; adapts message to diverse audiences.	S,C / 2
15. Ethical Practice & Integrity (Governance)	Upholds confidentiality, fairness and professional standards.	S,C / 2
16. Statutory & Labour Law Literacy (Governance)	Applies local employment law (EPF/ETF, termination, disputes).	R / 1
17. Data Privacy Stewardship (Governance)	Protects confidentiality/security of employee data, distinct from AI Governance's fairness focus.	A,C / 2
18. Compliance Management (Governance)	Ensures HR practice meets regulatory/audit requirements.	U / 1
19. Continuous Learning Agility (Adaptive)	Proactively updates own skills as technology/market shifts.	C,A / 2
20. Resilience & Stress Tolerance (Adaptive)	Sustains performance and composure under pressure.	S,G / 2
21. Emotional Intelligence & Self-Awareness (Adaptive)	Recognises and regulates own and others' emotions.	S,C,G / 3
22. Adaptability to Ambiguity (Adaptive)	Functions effectively amid incomplete information, rapid change.	U,A / 2
23. Talent Acquisition & Employer Branding (Technical)	Attracts the right talent, including for gig/hybrid roles.	S,G / 2
24. Total Rewards & Well-Being Design (Technical)	Designs reward/well-being propositions valued across generations.	U,G / 2
25. Learning & Capability Building (Technical)	Builds capability, including reskilling for automation.	S,C,A / 3
26. Performance & Productivity Enablement (Technical)	Balances accountability with a growth mindset.	S,U / 2

5 DISCUSSION: DEPARTURES FROM THE POPULAR UNDERSTANDING OF HR COMPETENCY

Table 1 shows a skewed convergence distribution: five competencies (19%) converge across three or more source clusters, fifteen (58%) converge across exactly two, and six (23%) are identified in only a single cluster. The five high-convergence competencies – Business Acumen, People Analytics & Evidence-Based Decisions, HR Technology Stewardship, Emotional Intelligence & Self-Awareness, and Learning & Capability Building – correspond closely to the popular, SHRM/CIPD/Ulrich-consensus understanding of HR competence. The six single-cluster competencies are treated separately below: three are single-cluster for essentially definitional reasons, and three are retained as theoretically consequential departures from institutional consensus.

AI Governance & Ethics Stewardship has no direct counterpart in SHRM BASK, CIPD's Profession Map or the current Ulrich/RBL model, all of which pre-date or only partially absorb the generative-AI literature of 2022 onward. Its inclusion rests on convergent findings that HR professionals are already accountable for algorithmic fairness, explainability and data governance in AI-assisted decisions, whether or not their training has caught up [3], [4], [16]. Given the rapid diffusion of AI-enabled HR tools even in organizations without formal AI governance policy, treating this as a peripheral sub-skill of "HR expertise" understates the risk it manages.

Paradox Navigation, present only in the Ulrich/RBL model [13], [14], is retained as a distinct competency rather than folded into "adaptability", because the AI and generational literature each surface new instances of this tension – algorithmic efficiency versus human judgement, or flexible, purpose-driven Gen Z expectations versus operational discipline – that older frameworks did not anticipate needing to reconcile simultaneously [3], [5].

The remaining three single-cluster competencies – AI Fluency & Algorithmic Literacy, Cross-Generational Leadership, and Compliance Management – are single-cluster for a more mundane reason than theoretical novelty, and are distinguished here from the three discussed above and below. AI Fluency and Cross-Generational Leadership are, in effect, definitionally confined to their respective literature: competency about AI-tool capability can only be surfaced by AI-focused literature, and a competency about generational cohorts can only be surfaced by generational-workforce literature. Compliance Management's single-cluster status is better read as a labelling difference than a substantive gap: SHRM and CIPD distribute compliance-related behaviour across "ethical practice" and general "core knowledge" rather than naming it as a discrete competency, whereas Ulrich/RBL names it explicitly. These three items are retained in Table 1 for completeness but are not treated as evidence of a gap in institutional consensus in the way the three competencies discussed here are.

Statutory & Labour Law Literacy is the only governance-cluster competency identified in a single source cluster (R). It has no standalone counterpart in SHRM, CIPD or Ulrich/RBL, likely because those frameworks were developed primarily from North American and Western European samples. The South Asian regional literature, however, identifies statutory complexity, collectivist social structure and a large informal-economy interface as defining, not incidental, features of the HR role in the region [7] – consistent with the country-specific demands documented in adjacent Sri Lankan competency research [8]. Elevating this to core-competency status reflects the regional literature more faithfully than direct adoption of a Western framework would.

Cultural & Social Sensitivity converges across two clusters (R, S) rather than one, but neither is an institutional "big three" framework: it is present in SHRM's broad "global and cultural effectiveness" item and in the South Asian regional literature, but absent from CIPD and Ulrich/RBL. Its retention as a distinct competency, rather than a sub-item of communication or business acumen, reflects the same regional literature as Statutory & Labour Law Literacy, even though its convergence profile is less extreme.

Perhaps the most consequential departure is a deliberate non-inclusion: popular understanding of HR competency, reinforced by decades of SHRM/CIPD framing, treats HR-process administration – payroll, leave ad-

ministration, records management – as foundational "HR knowledge". The post-2020 AI/automation literature suggests this is precisely the layer of HR work being automated fastest [3], [4], a pattern a recent review of robotic process automation in HR specifically confirms, identifying payroll processing, leave administration, onboarding and compliance reporting as the HR sub-processes most amenable to automation [23], so retaining it as a standalone core competency risks anchoring training and recruitment priorities to work being progressively displaced. This taxonomy folds transactional administration into "HR Technology Stewardship" (competency 8), reframing the underlying skill as configuring and governing the systems that perform administration, rather than performing it manually – an intentional and, it is argued here, defensible departure that should be tested, not assumed, in the empirical study proposed in Section 6.

6 METHODOLOGY

The taxonomy in Table 1 constitutes literature-derived hypotheses; it has not been tested against the judgement of practising HR professionals and should not be treated as an empirical finding. This section proposes a concrete design, adapted from a recent Sri Lankan competency-framework study [8], for a subsequent full-scale empirical paper.

Instrumentation. Following the Cycloid-style, single-statement behavioural-indicator format used in adjacent competency research [8] each of the 26 competencies would be operationalised as one first-person statement, rated on a 1–5 Likert scale for both actual and desired behaviour. Proficiency would be scored against Dreyfus's five-stage novice-to-expert model, consistent with its use in comparable methodologies [22], [8]. Formally, for competency i,

$$WPRi = CSPi \times DIi \times PRi,$$

where CSP_i is the empirically-derived contribution-to-successful-performance score (from desired/actual/gap ranking, scored 1–3), DI_i is the expert-panel difficulty-to-improve score (1–3), and PR_i is the mean Dreyfus proficiency rating (1–5) across self- and coworker raters – directly following the method demonstrated for an adjacent Sri Lankan role [8].

Eligibility criteria. Eligible respondents are HR professionals currently employed in a private-sector organization registered or operating in Sri Lanka, in any HR role from executive to CHRO, with a minimum of one year of HR experience to support informed self-rating. Each respondent is asked to nominate one same-level coworker – not a supervisor or subordinate – who has observed their day-to-day HR behaviour for at least six months.

Dual-rater design – a deliberate modification. Where the precedent study paired self-ratings from administrative officers with supervisor ratings from project managers [8], this design substitutes a same-level coworker as the second rater, to reduce power-distance-related response bias plausible in supervisor-rated designs within Sri Lanka's comparatively high-power-distance organizational culture, and to capture how HR competence is perceived laterally rather than only hierarchically. Sri Lanka scores 80 on Hofstede's Power Distance Index, indicating a comparatively hierarchical society in which subordinates are less likely to rate a superior candidly [24]; a recent study of Sri Lankan professional settings confirms this dynamic empirically – albeit in an adjacent field, medical education, rather than HR specifically – finding that hierarchical position measurably shapes how openly individuals engage with those above them [25].

Coworker nomination procedure. After providing consent, respondents nominate a coworker by name; the nominated coworker is contacted separately, provides independent consent, and completes the coworker-rating instrument anonymously. Responses are paired using a respondent-generated code rather than names, so that neither party's individual ratings are visible to the other or to the respondent's employer.

Instrument development and pilot testing. The 26 behavioural-indicator statements will be piloted with 5–8 HR professionals using cognitive interviewing to check clarity, length and face validity, with wording revised accordingly. A small pilot administration ($n \approx 15–20$) will then assess completion time and preliminary reliability before the main data collection round. Given this paper's own observation that non-English-language HR literature and practice are under-represented in the current synthesis

(Section 7), the instrument will also be translated into Sinhala and Tamil, with back-translation used to check equivalence.

Content validity and reliability. Content validity will be assessed by convening a panel of 5–7 senior HR practitioners and academics to rate each competency's relevance and clarity, following Lawshe's content validity ratio (CVR) method; items falling below the panel-size-appropriate CVR threshold will be revised or dropped before the main round. Internal consistency will be assessed via Cronbach's alpha within each of the six competency clusters, and self–coworker agreement via the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC).

Sampling. The target population is private-sector HR professionals in Sri Lanka, best reached through HR professional bodies and cross-organizational networks. A convenience frame with quota targets across gender, generational cohort, and organization type/industry would approximate representativeness in the absence of a formal sampling frame. Both self- and coworker-rated proficiency scores will be reported; the mean of the two will serve as the primary proficiency estimate, but any competency showing a discrepancy of two or more points on the five-point scale between rater types will be flagged and reported separately rather than silently averaged, consistent with this paper's own argument that lateral and hierarchical perceptions of competence may genuinely differ.

Statistical analysis and retention criteria. Analysis will report descriptive statistics per competency; paired comparisons (Wilcoxon signed-rank, given the ordinal Likert data) between desired and actual ratings; WPR-based ranking; and subgroup comparisons (e.g., multinational vs. SME, generational cohort) via Kruskal–Wallis tests where subsample sizes permit. Consistent with the precedent study [8], competencies will be retained in the final framework if they appear among the top-ranked WPR competencies for both HR and coworker-rated groups; competencies with negligible empirical CSP in both groups will be flagged as candidates for merging or removal in a subsequent validation round, with this decision rule stated here in advance rather than applied post hoc.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper is explicitly conceptual: the competency pool and convergence coding in Table 1 reflect the authors' literature-based judgement. The search was purposive and rather than a systematic database search with a documented protocol. It relies predominantly on English-language, Scopus-indexed and institutional sources. not predominantly as a systematic search interface. Therefore, no database-level search string, screening count, or coder-agreement statistics can be reported for the synthesis as a whole. Practitioner literature in local language and unpublished Sri Lankan organizational frameworks were not considered and may surface additional, locally specific competencies not captured here. The taxonomy should be treated as provisional hypotheses pending the empirical study proposed in Section 6.

Global HR competency frameworks – SHRM's BASK, CIPD's Profession Map and the Ulrich/RBL HRCS – remain the dominant reference points for HR competency, yet none was built with post-2020 AI diffusion, Generation Z's workforce entry, or South Asian conditions as a primary design input, and none has been empirically tested against Sri Lankan private-sector HR professionals.

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