

The Competence of Middle Management Teams in Korean Enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park, Vinh Phuc Province, Vietnam

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Abstract: This study investigates the competence of middle management teams in Korean enterprises operating in Ba Thien II Industrial Park, Vinh Phuc Province, Vietnam. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative data from 288 questionnaire responses and qualitative insights from 10 in-depth interviews, along with secondary data from local authorities and corporate reports. The findings reveal that middle managers are generally perceived as competent, particularly in terms of knowledge and skills. However, areas such as attitudes, soft skills, and internal team cohesion were rated at moderate levels, indicating the need for improvement. The study also highlights the critical role of middle managers in sustaining business growth, as evidenced by the increasing revenues and profits of Korean enterprises in the park. Based on these insights, the paper proposes five strategic solutions, including institutional reform, talent acquisition, targeted training, competency framework application, and digital transformation, to enhance managerial capacity and support sustainable enterprise development.

Keywords: Middle managers; Korean enterprises; Ba Thien II Industrial Park; managerial competence; Vietnam; human resource development; organizational performance.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON THE COMPETENCE OF MIDDLE MANAGERS IN ENTERPRISES

1.1. Middle Managers in Enterprises

Managers within enterprises are commonly classified based on hierarchical levels and their specific roles within the organizational structure. The most widely accepted classification divides managers into three levels: (1) Senior managers; (2) Middle managers (also referred to as intermediate-level managers); and (3) First-line or front-line managers.

According to Uyterhoeven (1989) and Wooldridge et al. (2008), middle managers (MMs) are those who operate at the intermediate level of the organizational hierarchy, possessing less authority than senior managers but ranking above first-line managers. These authors note that middle managers are responsible for reporting to senior managers while also overseeing and delegating tasks to front-line managers.

Mair and Thurner (2008) define middle managers as those in intermediate managerial positions within the company hierarchy, who are accountable for the performance outcomes of a particular business unit. Similarly, Harding et al. (2014) emphasize that middle managers occupy a central position within the organizational hierarchy. They play a crucial role in implementing corporate strategies by managing and monitoring the task execution of lower-level managers and frontline employees under their supervision.

The number of middle managers in an enterprise may vary depending on the company's size and organizational structure. The group of middle managers (MMG) in an enterprise comprises all individuals holding intermediate-level managerial positions. Despite differences in titles, functions, and specific responsibilities, all middle managers share a common goal: to contribute to the enterprise's overall objectives, thereby generating value not only for the business itself but also for its members and the broader community and society.

1.2. Competence

To date, there is no universally accepted definition of *competence*, as interpretations vary significantly across different professions and fields (Morgan, 2006).

McClelland (1973) described competence as “a fundamental characteristic required to perform a job.” Boyatzis (1982), on the other hand, proposed a broader view, stating that “competence is an underlying characteristic of an individual. It may be a motive, personal image, social role, or a set of skills and knowledge possessed by the individual.” In his continued research, Boyatzis (2008) later emphasized that “competence refers to a set of interrelated actions based on the performer’s intention and purpose.”

According to Spencer and Spencer (1993), the structure of individual competence consists of three core components: knowledge, skills, and attitude. Meanwhile, Wyne and Stringer (1997) defined competence as “the accumulated knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes that an individual applies to achieve desired work outcomes.” In a similar vein, Bratton (1998) argued that “competence refers to specific attributes of individuals - such as knowledge, skills, cognition, and mindset - which are used individually or in combination to ensure success in performing tasks.”

1.3. Competence of Middle Management Teams in Enterprises

According to Bass (1990), “The competence of middle managers refers to the combination of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that a middle manager in an enterprise must possess in order to effectively manage themselves, their subordinates, and the organization, thereby achieving the enterprise’s strategic goals within a given timeframe.”

Campbell and Dardis (2004) similarly define middle management competence as “a synthesis of knowledge, personal attributes, and actions that a middle manager needs in managing themselves, leading subordinates, and overseeing enterprise operations to accomplish defined objectives.”

From these perspectives, the competence of a middle management team in an enterprise can be understood as the aggregated competence of all individual middle managers within that organization. As society continues to advance and scientific and technological progress increasingly replaces manual labor, managerial functions - especially strategic decision-making - remain inseparable from the human element, particularly the middle management team. The competence of the managerial workforce (including middle managers), as an intangible intellectual asset, is becoming more vital than ever for the success and sustainability of enterprises.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, the author employed a mixed-methods approach, combining primary data collected through surveys and interviews with secondary data obtained from the Vinh Phuc Industrial Zones Authority, Ba Thien II Industrial Park Management Board, and Korean enterprises operating in Ba Thien II Industrial Park.

2.1. Survey and Interview Subjects

To collect primary data, the author conducted both a structured questionnaire survey and semi-structured in-depth interviews with managers at different levels and employees currently working at five Korean enterprises in Ba Thien II Industrial Park (Solum Vina Co., Ltd.; Sekonix Vina Co., Ltd.; Samjin LND Vina Co., Ltd.; Dongkwang Co., Ltd.; and Chemcos Vina Co., Ltd.):

1. **Questionnaire Survey:** A stratified random sampling method was applied. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, and after data cleaning, 288 valid responses were retained for analysis.
2. **In-depth Interviews:** The author conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 participants to gain deeper insights and complement the findings from the questionnaire data.

2.2. Research Instruments

The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale. In addition to collecting general demographic information, the questionnaire focused on respondents’ assessments of the current competence of middle management teams in Korean enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park through the following aspects:

1. Evaluation criteria for the components of managerial competence (knowledge, skills, and personal attributes/attitudes);
2. Criteria for assessing individual performance of middle managers;

3. Criteria for evaluating performance at the departmental/unit level; and
4. Criteria for measuring the overall business performance of the enterprise.

2.3. Data Analysis Methods

The author used SPSS version 20 to process the survey data. All interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate thorough qualitative analysis.

3. ASSESSMENT OF THE COMPETENCE OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN KOREAN ENTERPRISES AT BA THIEN II INDUSTRIAL PARK, VINH PHUC PROVINCE

3.1. Overview of Ba Thien II Industrial Park

Ba Thien II Industrial Park (IP) was officially incorporated into Vietnam’s national industrial park planning under Document No. 1821/TTg-CN dated November 26, 2007, issued by the Prime Minister. It was formally established by Decision No. 1625/QĐ-UBND dated July 2, 2019, of the People’s Committee of Vinh Phuc Province, with a planned area of 308.83 hectares, located in the communes of Ba Hien, Thien Ke, and Trung My, Binh Xuyen District, Vinh Phuc Province.

Ba Thien II is considered one of Vinh Phuc’s key industrial parks, attracting 100% foreign-invested enterprises. As of December 31, 2024, the total registered investment capital in the park exceeded USD 950 million. Oriented toward becoming a high-tech manufacturing zone - primarily focused on clean technology industries-Ba Thien II currently hosts 58 enterprises from developed countries. Among them, Korean enterprises represent 65.5% of the total (38 out of 58 companies), account for 70.8% of the total investment capital (USD 624 million out of USD 881 million), and employ 73.1% of the total workforce (25,468 out of 34,827 workers). Approximately 90% of these enterprises operate in the electronic component manufacturing sector, while the remaining 10% are involved in industries such as garment production, metal manufacturing, and plastic product manufacturing.

3.2. Overview of the Middle Management Team in Korean Enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park, Vinh Phuc Province

In terms of size, the middle management team in Korean enterprises has grown alongside the development of Ba Thien II Industrial Park. By the end of 2023, the number of middle managers in Korean enterprises operating in Ba Thien II reached 965 individuals - an increase of 13.7% compared to 2019 (see Table 1).

Table 1. *Statistics on the Number of Managers and Middle Managers, 2019–2023*

No	Category	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
1	Total number of managers					
	Ba Thien II Industrial Park	2,957	3,045	3,118	3,697	3,709
	Korean enterprises	2,048	2,115	2,207	2,674	2,658
2	Number of middle managers					
	Ba Thien II Industrial Park	1,115	1,209	1,218	1,465	1,460
	Korean enterprises	849	855	861	979	965

Source: Compiled from data provided by Ba Thien II Industrial Park Management Board

Unit: Person

The structure of the middle management team in Korean enterprises remained relatively stable during the period from 2019 to 2023 (see Table 2):

- By gender: Due to the nature of managerial roles and the characteristics of the electronic components and equipment manufacturing industry, the majority of middle managers were male - accounting for over 80%.
- By educational qualification: Most middle managers held at least a university degree (approximately 92%), with around 20% holding postgraduate qualifications. However, the proportion of those with doctoral degrees remained low (below 2%).
- By years of service: Nearly 90% of middle managers had between 3 and 20 years of professional experience, with the 5–10-year group representing the highest proportion, at approximately 40%.

Table 2. Structure of the Middle Management Team (2019–2023)

No	Classification	2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
		Quantity	(%)								
1	<i>By Gender</i>										
	Male	702	82.69	706	82.57	715	83.04	798	81.51	785	81.35
	Female	147	17.31	149	17.43	146	16.96	181	18.49	180	18.65
2	<i>By Age Group</i>										
	Under 35	251	29.56	256	29.94	259	30.08	297	30.34	290	30.05
	35 - 45	476	56.07	482	56.37	485	56.33	558	57.00	549	56.89
	Over 45	122	14.37	117	13.68	117	13.59	124	12.67	126	13.06
3	<i>By Educational Level</i>										
	Doctoral degree	12	1.41	15	1.75	17	1.97	18	1.84	19	1.97
	Master’s degree	148	17.43	159	18.60	162	18.82	185	18.90	188	19.48
	Bachelor’s degree	614	72.32	613	71.70	615	71.43	685	69.97	686	71.09
	Other	75	8.83	68	7.95	67	7.78	91	9.30	72	7.46
4	<i>By Years of Service</i>										
	Less than 3 years	60	7.07	58	6.78	60	6.97	65	6.64	66	6.84
	3-5 years	201	23.67	215	25.15	220	25.55	275	28.09	278	28.81
	5-10 years	332	39.10	340	39.77	339	39.37	390	39.84	382	39.59
	10-20 years	185	21.79	190	22.22	191	22.18	196	20.02	190	19.69
	Over 20 years	71	8.36	52	6.08	51	5.92	53	5.41	49	5.08
	Total	849	100	855	100	861	100	979	100	965	100

Source: Compiled from data provided by Ba Thien II Industrial Park Management Board

The data in Table 2 presents a detailed overview of the structural composition of middle managers in Korean enterprises over a five-year period, from 2019 to 2023, based on four criteria: gender, age, educational background, and years of service.

Gender Composition: Throughout the period, male middle managers consistently made up the majority, accounting for over 80% each year. This trend is attributable to the nature of managerial roles and the predominance of the electronics manufacturing sector, which traditionally employs more men in management positions. Female middle managers remained a minority, ranging from 16.96% to 18.65%, with a slight upward trend in recent years, suggesting modest progress in gender representation.

Age Distribution: The majority of middle managers fell within the 35–45 age group, which accounted for more than 56% of the total workforce each year. This reflects the maturity and experience typically required for mid-level management positions. The under-35 group represented around 30%, showing a stable influx of younger managers. The proportion of managers over 45 remained relatively low and stable, averaging around 13%, indicating that middle management in these enterprises is predominantly composed of early- and mid-career professionals.

Educational Background: A high proportion of middle managers held university-level qualifications. In 2023, 71.09% of the managers held a bachelor’s degree, while 19.48% held a master’s degree. The share of doctoral degree holders remained modest, at under 2% throughout the period. These figures suggest a strong emphasis on formal education in managerial recruitment, although advanced degrees are not yet widespread. The category labeled “Other” (including vocational training and non-university qualifications) accounted for a decreasing share, reflecting a shift toward higher academic qualifications.

Years of Service: With respect to tenure, the largest group comprised those with 5–10 years of experience, accounting for nearly 40% of the workforce across all five years. This indicates a relatively stable and experienced managerial base. Managers with 3–5 years of service constituted the second largest group (about 25–28%), suggesting a regular pipeline of emerging managers. Meanwhile, only about 6–7% had less than 3 years of service, and less than 6% had more than 20 years of experience, implying that middle management remains dynamic and is continuously renewed.

The structural data highlights a stable and relatively young middle management workforce with high levels of academic qualification and professional experience. However, the underrepresentation of women and the low proportion of advanced degree holders (particularly PhDs) suggest areas for improvement in terms of gender equality and leadership development through advanced education.

3.3. Current Status of the Competence of Middle Management Teams in Korean Enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park, Vinh Phuc Province

The survey results indicate that respondents rated the competence of middle managers in Korean enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park as relatively high or good, with average scores ranging from 3.4 to 4.2 on a 5-point Likert scale (see Table 3). Specific findings are as follows:

3.3.1. Regarding the core components of competence

Middle managers were generally assessed as having solid knowledge and skills, while their personal attributes/attitudes were rated only average.

- **Knowledge:** The highest-rated areas were industry-specific knowledge and understanding of business operations, with average scores of 3.68 and 3.61, respectively. In contrast, knowledge of modern technologies was rated significantly lower, at an average of 3.33. This disparity was explained by one respondent (A., male, 40 years old, senior manager), who noted: “...Some middle managers have advanced in their careers through long-term contributions and loyalty to the company. However, the nature of their positions—such as production supervisors or deputy supervisors—does not require them to be well-versed in modern technologies.”
- **Skills:** Among the skill-related indicators, conflict management and negotiation and communication skills were rated the highest (3.58 and 3.55, respectively). Meanwhile, time management and meeting organization skills received the lowest scores within this category (3.46 and 3.45, respectively), indicating areas where improvement is needed.

Table 3. Assessment of the Current Competence of Middle Management Teams

No	Evaluation Criteria Groups	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
1	Competence Components		
	- Knowledge	3.54	0.94
	- Skills	3.50	1.01
	- Personal Attributes/Attitudes	3.35	1.06
2	Individual Job Performance of Middle Managers	3.46	1.05
3	Departmental/Unit Performance	3.47	0.98
4	Overall Business Performance of the Enterprise	3.71	0.95

Source: Author's survey results (2024)

The data presented in Table 3 provides a comprehensive overview of the perceived competence of middle managers in Korean enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park, assessed across four major dimensions.

Firstly, in terms of the core components of competence, middle managers were rated highest in knowledge (mean = 3.54; SD = 0.94) and skills (mean = 3.50; SD = 1.01), indicating that respondents generally perceive these managers as professionally capable and technically proficient. However, the dimension of personal attributes and attitudes received the lowest score in this group (mean = 3.35; SD = 1.06), suggesting relative weaknesses in aspects such as motivation, accountability, and interpersonal attitude - key traits that often influence leadership effectiveness and team dynamics. Secondly, regarding individual job performance, middle managers were evaluated at a moderate level (mean = 3.46; SD = 1.05). This score aligns with the ratings for knowledge and skills, indicating a reasonable correlation between competence and performance outcomes at the individual level.

Thirdly, the performance of departments or units overseen by these managers received a similar average score (mean = 3.47; SD = 0.98). This suggests that, while performance is stable, there remains room for improvement, particularly in leadership practices that could enhance team efficiency and internal coordination. Most notably, the highest rating was given to the overall business performance of the enterprise (mean = 3.71; SD = 0.95). This result may reflect the broader contributions of middle managers to organizational success - particularly in production quality, adherence to corporate strategy, and operational stability. It also implies that despite certain individual-level limitations, the cumulative effect of middle management on enterprise performance is generally positive.

In summary, the results indicate a relatively strong knowledge and skill base among middle managers, but highlight the need for targeted interventions to enhance their behavioral and attitudinal

competencies. Improving these aspects may help elevate both individual and collective performance within the enterprises.

3.3.2. Individual Job Performance of Middle Managers

Respondents rated the individual job performance of middle managers at a relatively high level, with an average score of 3.46. However, specific criteria such as “Subordinates’ trust and respect” and “Internal customer satisfaction” received only moderate scores of 3.35 and 3.37, respectively. These scores reflect the reality reported by the five surveyed Korean enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park, which indicated that 86.67% of middle managers were assessed as having met, well met, or excellently fulfilled their responsibilities. In contrast, 11.11% were rated as having performed at a low level, and 2.22% failed to meet their job expectations.

3.3.3. Departmental/Unit Performance

The performance of departments or units under the supervision of middle managers was also positively evaluated, with an average score of 3.47. Nonetheless, the criterion “Team cohesion within the department/unit” was rated lower, at 3.38, indicating moderate levels of perceived internal harmony. As one respondent (M., male, 34, middle manager) noted:

“...Employees within departments often vary greatly in terms of qualifications, personality, and cultural background. As a result, unity is not always strong, and conflicts or disagreements may arise during work processes. This directly impacts the progress and quality of team and organizational performance.”

3.3.4. Overall Business Performance of the Enterprise

The surveyed respondents gave the highest rating to overall enterprise performance, with an average score of 3.71. This assessment aligns with the actual achievements of Korean enterprises operating at Ba Thien II Industrial Park in recent years. Despite the prolonged impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Vietnam’s economy, these companies experienced strong growth in both revenue and profit during the assessment period (see Table 4).

Table 4. Business Performance of Selected Korean Enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park Unit: Million USD

No	Company	Revenue			Profit		
		2021	2022	2023	2021	2022	2023
1	Solum Vina Co., Ltd.	2,568.5	2,925.6	3,412.5	150.1	152.5	194.6
2	Sekonix Vina Co., Ltd.	1,481.6	1,605.3	1,928.4	82.6	85.8	108.3
3	Samjin LND Vina Co., Ltd.	320.8	366.5	459.0	20.1	20.8	25.2
4	Dongkwang Co., Ltd.	227.6	258.9	301.6	12.5	13.2	15.9
5	Chemcos Vina Co., Ltd.	159.7	178.6	218.2	9.0	9.6	12.2

Source: Compiled from enterprise reports

Table 4 presents the revenue and profit data of five representative Korean enterprises operating at Ba Thien II Industrial Park from 2021 to 2023. The data indicates consistent and substantial growth in both revenue and profitability across all companies during the three-year period, reflecting the resilience and adaptability of these enterprises despite external challenges, particularly the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Solum Vina Co., Ltd. recorded the highest revenue among the five enterprises, rising from USD 2,568.5 million in 2021 to USD 3,412.5 million in 2023, with a corresponding increase in profit from USD 150.1 million to USD 194.6 million. Sekonix Vina also demonstrated significant growth, with revenue increasing by nearly USD 447 million and profit rising by USD 25.7 million over the same period. The three other companies - Samjin LND Vina, Dongkwang, and Chemcos Vina - though smaller in scale, exhibited similar upward trends. For instance, Chemcos Vina’s revenue grew by over USD 58 million from 2021 to 2023, while its profit increased by more than 35%, from USD 9.0 million to USD 12.2 million.

These positive business outcomes are consistent with the high evaluations of middle management competence reported in the earlier analysis. The results suggest that the contributions of middle managers - particularly in maintaining operational continuity, ensuring workforce performance, and translating strategies into practice - play a critical role in sustaining and enhancing enterprise growth.

Overall, the upward trajectory in financial indicators strongly supports the assertion that a competent and stable middle management team significantly contributes to the operational success of Korean enterprises in Ba Thien II Industrial Park.

4. SOLUTIONS TO ENHANCE THE COMPETENCE OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN KOREAN ENTERPRISES AT BA THIEN II INDUSTRIAL PARK, VINH PHUC PROVINCE

In order to improve the competence of middle management teams in Korean enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park in the coming period - better responding to practical demands and contributing to enhanced competitiveness and sustainable development - the author proposes the following integrated solutions:

4.1. Improve Policies and Institutional Frameworks Related to Middle Management Development

Enterprises should proactively cooperate with state labor management agencies, the Vinh Phuc Industrial Zones Authority, and the Ba Thien II Industrial Park Management Board to propose tailored mechanisms and policies. These should aim to address existing challenges and create a favorable business environment that supports the long-term development of middle management competence.

4.2. Strengthen the recruitment and attraction of high-quality human resources into middle management roles.

Each enterprise should adopt effective strategies to attract potential candidates, not only from the local labor market but also from neighboring provinces, major cities, and, where appropriate, international sources. This is particularly important for specialized managerial positions in high-tech manufacturing and electronic component assembly.

4.3. Improve the quality and effectiveness of training, development, and motivation programs for middle managers.

Companies should integrate awareness-raising initiatives with well-structured training, professional development, and coaching programs for middle managers. Simultaneously, efforts should be made to refine internal policies that encourage participation in such programs. Revising compensation schemes to include more diversified benefits and support services for the workforce in general—and middle managers in particular - will also serve as a critical incentive.

4.4. Develop and Apply a Competency Framework in Middle Management Enhancement.

Korean enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park should consider developing a structured competency framework based on relevant theories and best practices from leading Vietnamese corporations such as FPT Group, Doji Group, or TPBank. This framework can then be applied to core human resource functions, including recruitment, training, performance evaluation, and compensation, thereby contributing to sustained improvements in managerial capacity.

4.5. Accelerate digital transformation across enterprises.

Each enterprise should formulate a clear digital transformation strategy aligned with its specific conditions and business model. This includes providing targeted training on digital skills for middle managers, increasing investment in information technology, and embedding innovation-oriented values into the organizational culture. These efforts will enhance management agility and adaptability in the face of evolving economic and technological challenges.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the pivotal role played by middle managers in the operational and strategic success of Korean enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park. The results affirm that, overall, middle managers in these enterprises possess solid knowledge and skills and contribute meaningfully to individual, departmental, and organizational performance. However, several areas still warrant further development.

Notably, the dimension of personal attributes and attitudes was rated lower compared to knowledge and skills. This suggests that while technical competencies are well-developed, aspects such as leadership mindset, emotional intelligence, and adaptability may still be underdeveloped. These soft skills are increasingly crucial in modern work environments characterized by multicultural teams, rapid technological change, and complex human dynamics.

Additionally, while overall business performance was rated highly, internal indicators such as team cohesion and trust from subordinates were assessed at only moderate levels. This highlights the need for more inclusive and communicative leadership approaches, especially in environments where diversity of skills, personalities, and cultural backgrounds can create potential for conflict or misalignment.

Furthermore, the low proportion of managers with postgraduate degrees - particularly doctoral qualifications - suggests an opportunity for long-term investment in advanced managerial training and leadership development programs. Integrating formal education with experiential learning and mentorship may strengthen the strategic thinking capabilities of future middle managers.

This study contributes to existing literature by offering empirical evidence from a high-density foreign-invested industrial zone in Vietnam and highlighting practical implications for both corporate policy and government support in talent development.

6. CONCLUSION

This research has explored the competence of middle management teams in Korean enterprises at Ba Thien II Industrial Park, Vinh Phuc Province, through both qualitative and quantitative methods. The analysis revealed that while middle managers are generally well-equipped in terms of knowledge and skills, there remain limitations in soft skills and internal team dynamics that may affect organizational cohesion and leadership effectiveness.

The consistently growing business performance of these enterprises, even under challenging conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the significant contributions of middle managers. Nevertheless, for these enterprises to sustain competitive advantages and move toward sustainable development, a strategic focus on capacity-building for middle managers is essential.

To this end, the study proposes a set of integrated solutions, including improvements in institutional policy, high-quality recruitment, targeted training and motivation programs, competency framework development, and digital transformation initiatives. These strategies not only aim to enhance individual competencies but also promote more effective management systems aligned with the demands of a dynamic and globally competitive environment.

Future research could expand this study by conducting comparative analyses with other industrial zones in Vietnam or other ASEAN countries, and by exploring the longitudinal effects of competency development on business outcomes.

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