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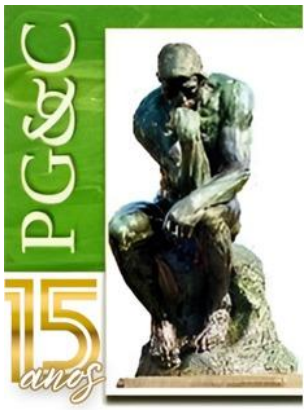

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES: THE CASE OF A JUNIOR ENTERPRISE

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Abstract
Working in a junior enterprise represents a valuable opportunity for professional development within the academic environment, as it contributes to the enrichment and enhancement of students' skills. In this context, the present article aims to analyze professional development within the junior enterprise (JE) of the International Relations (IR) program at the Federal University of Amapá (UNIFAP), using the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSA) framework as a theoretical foundation. To achieve this objective, a qualitative study was conducted, employing a case study approach, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with members of the junior enterprise under investigation. The results were interpreted through an analytical lens grounded in qualitative research methodology. The findings highlight the key learning outcomes—knowledge, skills, and attitudes (i.e., competencies)—as well as the challenges and advantages associated with participation in the junior enterprise. The study concludes that junior enterprises constitute promising spaces for learning that transcend traditional professional training, fostering comprehensive and differentiated vocational development.

Palavras-chave: Junior enterprise; KSA; Professional Development.

GESTÃO DO CONHECIMENTO NO DESENVOLVIMENTO DE COMPETÊNCIAS PROFISSIONAIS: O CASO DE UMA EMPRESA JÚNIOR

Resumo
A atuação em empresa júnior é uma das alternativas para desenvolvimento profissional no ambiente acadêmico, tendo em vista sua aplicabilidade no enriquecimento e otimização de competências na formação do discente. Sob esse entendimento, esse artigo teve como objetivo analisar o desenvolvimento profissional, baseado na abordagem de Conhecimentos, Habilidades e Atitudes (CHA), na empresa júnior do curso de Relações Internacionais da Universidade Federal do Amapá (UNIFAP). Para tanto, foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa, por meio de estudo de caso, análise documental e entrevista com membros da empresa júnior estudada. Os resultados foram discutidos a partir de um apanhado analítico para estudos qualitativos. Os achados revelam os principais aprendizados, conhecimentos, habilidades e atitudes desenvolvidas (competências), assim como carências e benefícios decorrentes da atuação na empresa júnior. Concluiu-se, então, que as empresas juniores constituem um

espaço promissor de aprendizado, que amplia a formação para além da profissionalização e atua no fomento de ensino profissional diferenciado.

Keywords: Empresa Júnior, CHA, Desenvolvimento Profissional.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, both in Brazil and globally, a new perspective on professional education has emerged—one in which the demands of the labor market and society have become central references for academic and vocational training (Fragoso *et al.*, 2019). This shift has underscored the need to bridge students' academic experiences with real-world professional practice (Kauer, 2021). Within this scenario, the academic training process has increasingly emphasized the practical application of classroom knowledge, given that such knowledge forms the foundation for effective professional performance and the optimized execution of tasks required by contemporary organizations.

In response to these demands, higher education institutions have adopted various strategies to enhance students' experiential learning, among which junior enterprises (JEs) have gained prominence (Silva *et al.*, 2023). These are nonprofit associations composed of undergraduate students, in which services and projects are developed to provide participants with professional training and preparation for the labor market (Moraes; Malischeski; Dandolini, 2023).

Junior enterprises are recognized by both students and faculty as dynamic learning environments that offer opportunities for skill development and professional networking. They foster practical knowledge acquisition in areas related to cognitive and proactive competencies (Cunha, 2015; Utami *et al.*, 2023), thereby promoting professional growth through hands-on learning experiences (Silva; Ghedin; Eda, 2017; Torres, 2020).

Indeed, participation in a JE facilitates the development of diverse skills (Silva; Azevedo, 2023), many of which align with the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSA) framework. This approach supports a holistic understanding of learning and performance by integrating theoretical knowledge, applied abilities, and behavioral attributes (Costa, 2018). The competencies acquired through JE engagement can prepare students for careers beyond their formal academic training, equipping them for interdisciplinary roles in various sectors (Fernandes; Ritter, 2018).

This context is particularly relevant to the Federal University of Amapá (UNIFAP), whose International Relations program maintains an active junior enterprise. The development and professional performance of its student members are further enhanced by the geographic positioning of the state of Amapá, which borders other South American countries such as French Guiana and Suriname—factors that increase opportunities for cross-border and multicultural engagement.

However, despite the well-documented benefits of junior enterprises, many institutions still lack adequate support for these initiatives. Barriers such as limited physical infrastructure, insufficient training, and a lack of pedagogical or advisory resources can discourage student participation (Aguiar; Sant'Anna; Teixeira, 2021). This situation is evident at UNIFAP as well, where, at the time of this study (November 2022), only one junior enterprise was operational.

Despite their acknowledged benefits, junior enterprises are underexplored in academic literature. No study to date has directly explored the intersection of junior enterprise participation, professional development, and competency management—specifically through the integrated lens of the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSA) framework—in academic databases such as SPELL and SciELO.

Given this gap, the following research question is posed: *How does participation in a junior enterprise contribute to the professional development of students in the International Relations program at UNIFAP?* To address this question, the present study aims to analyze the process of professional development within the junior enterprise of UNIFAP's International Relations course, guided by the KSA approach.

In this regard, the theory of organizational knowledge creation proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) serves as a relevant conceptual framework. It offers insights into how students, through practical experiences in collaborative settings such as junior enterprises, convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and internalize new skills, understandings, and attitudes. By integrating the KSA framework with the knowledge spiral, this study provides a nuanced analysis of how engagement in a junior enterprise can foster not only professional competency development but also effective knowledge management within a learning environment aligned with real-world labor market demands.

Thus, this research is particularly significant as it captures the perspectives of students participating in the junior enterprise and examines how such initiatives contribute to professional formation, offering both practical and theoretical insights into the value of experiential learning in higher education.

2 KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Given the high level of competition in the labor market, which promotes strong competition for vacancies among applicants for professional practice, searching for strategies and techniques to develop and expand the skills and qualifications of workers is beneficial. In this scenario, people have been looking for mechanisms to develop professionally and adapt to the needs and demands of the labor market.

In this context, professional development is a long-term process that integrates different types of opportunities and experiences that are systematically planned to promote the growth and development of the worker (Pylväs; Li; Nokelainen, 2022). The concept of professional development focuses on the combination of processes that include a range of formal and informal learning, focusing on cognitive, behavioral, and affective aspects (Mourão, Porto, & Puente-Palacios, 2014). This discussion emphasizes that professional development is a continuous learning process (Silva; Ghedin; Eda, 2017) and reflects the qualification in the form of competence, knowledge, feelings, and ethical attitude related to the profession (Silva; Azevedo, 2023).

Furthermore, the priority that used to be given to tasks, techniques, methods, and the physical structure has shifted to people whose knowledge, skills, and experience are now more valued and strategically used to gain or maintain a competitive advantage, giving rise to the concept of competence (Poláková *et al.*, 2023).

In this understanding, the coordination and integration between elements of knowledge, skills and experiences form the concept of competency-based management, characterized by the process of acquiring and improving knowledge, skills and attitudes that promote professional performance at work and individual career advancement (Cury; Veiga, 2021).

Moreover, the notion of competence has evolved in response to shifts in the socio-historical and economic context. This evolution has led to increased complexity in work processes, necessitating profound scientific and technical knowledge as well as the application of advanced cognitive skills. Such skills are developed through systematic engagement with formal theoretical knowledge (Araújo; Almeida, 2016).

In this sense, competency-based management is an organizational practice that aims to attract, retain, and develop individuals for continuous professional development in

organizations (Škrinjarić, 2022). From this perspective, promotes the development of expertise, the acquisition of knowledge, and the modelling of attitudes that optimize individuals' professional performance (Faller *et al.*, 2021) based on current work activities, previous experiences, and educational qualifications acquired throughout the professional career (Souza; Bahia; Vitorino, 2020).

In this way, the contemporary competence management model, known as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes approach - KSA emerged (Valadão Júnior; Almeida; Medeiros, 2014). In this discussion, knowledge is the transformation of information obtained during individuals' academic, professional, and personal lives, leading to organizational practices and norms to facilitate decision-making and the development of strategies that create positive conditions and competitive advantages in the market (Moraes; Malischeski; Dandolini, 2023).

Skill, in turn, is the attribution of the practical execution of acquired knowledge, the knowledge of how to do something, which refers to the individual's ability to implement knowledge and use it in action (Brandão; Bahry, 2022). Skills represent how one acts in practice and include technical skills (processes and methods), human skills (interpersonal and group relations), and conceptual skills (ideas, concepts, and abstractions for the analysis and decision-making) (Katz, 1974; Freitas; Odelius, 2018).

Attitudes are expressed in the way of doing and in the interest of wanting to do something (Durand, 2000). In line with this view, Myakava, Santos e Püschel (2021) define attitudes as complex states of the individual that influence his behavior concerning people, things and events and determine his direction. Attitudes must be linked to skills and knowledge when performing job tasks in specific work situations.

Since professional development is a strategy of continuous learning and competence-based management is a tool of personal and professional development within the KSA approach, these approaches can be integrated and better incorporated into the work in junior enterprises, which aim precisely to train, qualify, and facilitate the entry of skilled workers into the labor market.

This dynamic environment of learning and knowledge application in Junior Enterprises can also be understood through the knowledge creation theory proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). According to the authors, knowledge is generated through a continuous, interactive cycle involving tacit and explicit knowledge — known as the SECI model (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization).

In this model, professional development occurs as individuals share personal experiences (socialization), articulate insights (externalization), integrate these into structured systems (combination), and reabsorb them into practice (internalization) (Castro; Giraldi, 2024). The interaction among Junior Enterprise members, coupled with real project execution and reflective learning, illustrates this spiral process and strengthens the transformation of knowledge into competencies aligned with the KSA framework.

3 METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

As for the approach, it is a qualitative study that seeks to understand the reality of certain phenomena from the perspective of the participants, that is, the members of the UNIFAP's international relations junior enterprise, using qualified data and seeking answers to understand, describe and interpret the facts (Cervo; Bervian, 2002).

As for the objectives, it is descriptive research since it has been tried to describe facts and phenomena of a given reality (Triviños, 1987), more precisely, the junior enterprise's contributions to its members through applying theoretical knowledge in practice. Moreover, the descriptive aspect of this study is highlighted by the description of processes, mechanisms, and relationships that exist in the reality of a phenomenon (Nassaji, 2015), i.e., in the empirical

evidence of performances in a junior enterprise that lead to new knowledge, skills, and attitudes of its members.

For this article, the case study was chosen as the research strategy. Referring to this method, Godoy (1995, p. 25) explains that it is "research whose objective is a unit that is analyzed in depth." This method was chosen because it is the most suitable for an intensive and detailed analysis of a phenomenon that has yet to be researched in junior enterprises, namely, professional development based on the KSA approach. In this sense, the unit of analysis was the junior enterprise of the International Relations course at the Federal University of Amapá, whose reasons for selection are presented at the end of this section.

The data collection technique used was the interview, which, according to Daher (2016), is important for the researcher to obtain knowledge, perceptions, and opinions from specific actors. The interview script consisted of 11 open-ended questions divided into categories of analysis composed of elements of professional development and the KSA approach (knowledge, skills, and attitudes), according to the discussions on the theoretical framework.

Considering the criterion of theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989), four interviews were conducted with three board members and one former member of the company. The latter was selected based on his education and previous work in the junior enterprise. The interviewees were selected based on their involvement, commitment, and previous history in the JE under study. The interviewees were named Junior enterprise Interviewees (EEJ) - EEJ 1 to EEJ 4 to preserve their identity.

Considering that the case study requires multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2015), a document analysis was also conducted. For this purpose, institutional and legal documents (Resolution 037/2026 – CONSU UNIFAP / 2017 and Law 12.267/2016) on the role and functioning of junior enterprises in UNIFAP and the legal provisions applicable to junior enterprises were analyzed.

Due to its didactic nature and ease of understanding, this article used the analytical overview of Birochi (2015) to analyze the evidence. In this way, the data obtained were analyzed with the steps of selection (identification of transcription errors), coding (highlighting and naming excerpts and statements in the transcription of the interview and analyzed documents linked to the analysis categories of the study), tabulation (creation of tables to facilitate comparison by the authors), analysis (integrated analysis and comparison with the literature), and interpretation (individually and collectively to unify conclusions, perceptions, and implications of the research).

3.1 Single case study: Junior International Relations Company

The research method chosen was the case study (Yin, 2015), which involves an empirical investigation based on a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context. The single case study chosen in this research is suitable for representative and typical situations of the phenomenon under analysis (Yin, 2015).

In this sense, the unit of analysis chosen is the junior enterprise of the international relations course at the Federal University of Amapá. This JE provides specialized consulting in market research, customer and supplier search, and export plans at the lowest cost in the Amapá market and under the guidance of qualified teachers and professionals.

The studied Junior enterprise was founded by students of International Relations course at the Federal University of Amapá. The company has 16 permanent members who strive for an entrepreneurial, proactive attitude with transparency, commitment, results orientation, and synergy. The company is divided into five directorates: the Marketing Directorate, Financial Directorate, Project Directorate, Commercial Directorate and Presidency.

Services offered include international consulting emphasizing the internationalization of companies, assistance in dual citizenship and export of products, prospecting, and market analysis.

In addition, this CJ was selected because it is the only one of its kind operating in this institution (November/2022). Therefore, based on the activities carried out, it can offer insights and contributions to the professional performance and expansion of the elements that make up the KSA approach among its members.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To facilitate understanding of the results, this section has been divided according to the established categories of analysis: Professional Skills: Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes; and Professional Development. Subsequently, an analytical framework was proposed based on the results and their integration with the organizational knowledge management process outlined by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995).

4.1 Professional competencies: knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Regarding knowledge, participants reported the learning they acquired during their participation in the junior enterprise. However, it is noteworthy that in some statements, knowledge is interspersed with other aspects of competence (attitudes and skills). Along these lines, when asked about the most important lessons learned from working at JE, one of the interviewees said the following:

> In the beginning, we acquired more knowledge about the legal subjects of the Junior enterprise Movement (MEJ), which enabled an exchange of information with other JEs, that gave us more empirical knowledge about job performance. [...] After joining the FEJEAP [*Federação das empresas Juniores do Amapá*], I had more contact with other professionals who were well positioned in the market, which facilitated the application of other knowledge (EEJ 4).

By emphasizing the role of information sharing, this interviewee confirms that one of the conducive processes for learning in the organization is the free flow of ideas and the possibility of facilitated communication among members, to share knowledge and innovative solutions (Senge, 2018).

Moreover, the learning reported by this respondent takes on the characteristic of organizational learning, which to Santiago and Dantas (2019) is a continuous process of acquiring and generating new knowledge at the individual, group, and organizational levels, involving all forms of learning (formal and informal) in the organizational. This dynamic involves reflection and action in problem situations and aims to develop skills (Maggi-da-Silva; Bido; Reatto, 2022).

Another interviewee said that "the "course does not prepare you for the labour market [...] the junior enterprise was much more an experience and collective consolidation of knowledge among the company members with rare support from our advising professor (EEJ 4)". On the other hand, the analysis of the documents, Resolution 31/2017 (Consu Unifap, 2017) and Law 13.267/2016 (Brasil, 2016), establishes the supervision, guidance, mentoring, and adequate support provided by teachers and specialized professionals, an aspect that, of course, according to the speech, needs to be better explored in the context of the JE course studied.

Complementing this discussion, including consideration of the comparison between knowledge acquired during graduation course and work experience, it was found that knowledge acquired elsewhere, both theoretical knowledge, methods, and one's professional attitude, benefits performance in the junior enterprise, as this learning transferred to other members and situations they experience, as can be seen in the following speech:

> The speech that is most preached during the presidency of JE is that we must teach people how to do things; we can not say, "take this". Then we said, “you do this, if you have questions, talk to me", [...] we will hold each other's hands and try to learn, so if there is a question, send a message, we are available 24 hours a day to teach you (EEJ 3).

This view is supported by the recognition that experiences in other environments create expectations for innovation, stimulate new ideas, and optimize the intellectual base of the organization (Gondim, 2019). In the perspective formulated by Senge (1990), the learning offered by the junior enterprise allows people to have continuous contact so that they can learn from each other and "increase "the capacity to create results", with the principle of learning together by all and developing individual and collective skills (Souza Júnior; Amaro, 2020).

In this reciprocal relationship between the higher education institution, students, faculty, and businesses, JE exchanges benefits with all stakeholders involved, making them a tool for teaching. Thus, the JE creates an environment for the application of the theories learned, the practical work experience of the students, the training of young entrepreneurs, the professional reality, and the generation of knowledge for the organizational scenario (Palassi; Martinelli; Paula, 2020).

Although the knowledge acquired in the classroom is irrevocable and irreplaceable, it cannot be imagined sufficient for a student's professional training, especially in such a competitive professional environment as today's (Silva; Ferreira; Rocha, 2023). Therefore, there are junior enterprises that bridge the gap between the labor market and the academic environment by offering students the opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge acquired during their studies, intending to support learning and train these students to become professionals better prepared for integration in a corporate environment (Lima; Cantarotti, 2010).

Regarding the knowledge required to work in the junior enterprise, which was not covered in the course subjects, the respondents noted that the theoretical knowledge in the junior enterprise was developed through practice in the services offered. For these students, learning resulted from applying knowledge such as business management standards and methods, customer retention, understanding how a sales funnel works (EEJ 1), adapting to the labor market (EEJ 1, EEJ 2), responsibility with demands, time management, knowledge sharing among members, and training practices for newcomers (EEJ3).

Another respondent agreed that "there should be more of this concept of how the International Relations professional can develop these activities at JE, and all other possibilities of professional activity" (EEJ 2). Another member reported that he misses this in the room, how internationalists can act in the labor market, in the company itself. They added that "the disciplines do not help as much as they should, [...] and the JE came exactly to fill that gap" (EEJ 2), "especially in the area of the marketplace, to really understand how it works. [...] it's very different having a JE and learning there than just learning in the classroom and taking it outside" (EEJ 4).

Apart from being a complaint of the respondents, this requirement is supported by the Law 13.267/2016 (Brasil, 2016), which states that the JE must promote the economic and

social development of the community while encouraging entrepreneurship among its members. The studied junior enterprise, despite the limitations in academic support, provides economic development (income generation), social development (provision of accessible services to the local community) and entrepreneurship through its members' self-managed and self-didact actions.

So, it is not enough for students to have knowledge, they also need to know how to put it into practice, which permeates another dimension of competence and skill.

4.2 Skills

The respondents verbalized several developed skills, and one of them said:

> I used to have much difficulty talking to the public, and when I came to JE, I was in the role that had the most to do with the public: commercial consulting. I had to contact the customer, which was very difficult for me. I did not understand that and other things in the commercial field, but I had to overcome my shyness to ask for help when I did not understand something. In other words, I had to communicate. My communication improved greatly because I knew how to position myself in these processes (EEJ 4).

She went on to say:

> I also had the problem of wanting to take all the responsibility because although I was very busy, I could manage it [...]. Then I understood that I was not working alone but that there were also people who worked with me who were ready to help me, and everything became easier to manage. With this my sense of responsibility has improved (EEJ 4).

The statements of this interviewee confirm the findings of Ribeiro *et al.*, (2021) according to which the members of the JEs have the elementary opportunity to get in touch with the labor market, taking advantage of the services offered by the company and acquiring experience and skills that are essential for their professional development. In addition, daily training optimizes the skills required to provide all services.

Moreover, the skills presented in this excerpt are supported by Fernandes and Ritter (2018, p. 11), which they summarize as "teamwork, public speaking, interpersonal relations, leadership, negotiation skills, and accountability." On the same topic, another interviewee said they gained skills in "creativity, public speaking, good writing, and negotiation skills" (EEJ 1). Considering that skills consist of developing practices and awareness of actions taken to perform well professionally (Bitencourt, 2005), the JE engages in a learning process that mobilizes the student like the protagonist of his professional career.

The negotiation process not only enhances oratory skills but also cultivates a critical mindset for assessing proposals that benefit the company. Kenett, Humphries, and Chatterjee (2023) assert that creativity arises from this ability, leading to the pursuit of new truths and sparking curiosity. It is believed that the combination of critical and creative thinking leads to two other skills: the ability to learn and to resolve conflicts, as individuals critically consider everything presented to them and use their imagination to innovate and learn (Becker; Silva, 2017). Such considerations confirm the contributions of the junior enterprise to its members since they were developed to allow students to advance skills such as interpersonal relations, decision-making, negotiation skills and the loss of fear of difficult situations.

As an organization, the junior enterprise is built by each group that forms to act in it, reflecting very specific contextual requirements since it is a voluntary activity developed based on the talents that the student himself discovers in terms of interests and academic results (Ziliotto; Berti, 2012). Some views of the interviewees underline this understanding:

> You must be dedicated and willing to learn. People are always suspicious because they think, "but I do not know how to do this in the company, I do not know that much about the International Relations course, I do not know that much about things." The idea is to learn within JE. So, the most important thing is to engage, even if the job is voluntary, because it adds professional value (EEJ 4).

> [In the board position] I was very insecure at first. I was very ashamed. The environment and the company members took me in and taught me what to do, which gave me confidence. Today, I do things I never thought I would do [courage]. I see it as a constant process of learning and development, and it is exciting to see all the things you can achieve for the company and the improvements you notice in yourself (EEJ 2).

Considering the report of EEJ 4 that she started as a commercial consultant at JE, worked in other leadership positions until she reached the highest position in the company, the above excerpts reveal commitment skills (commitment and willingness to learn), empathy (being welcomed by other members), and multidisciplinary (performing in different tasks) stimulated by immersion in real environments (Echos, 2018).

It is worth adding another skill, time management because although respondents did not mention it, they reported that they learned to manage their time better, prioritize, and balance their work at JE with their duties as students in the International Relations course.

It is undisputed that, on the one hand, companies have started to invest in the training of their members, and, on the other hand, the labor market demands more and more qualified professionals. Therefore, professional development is moving from simple training to the systematic development of skills (Rocha-Pinto, 2008). These skills are optimized and improved during the JE. One interviewee highlighted these assumptions:

> Have certainly improved. I remember that when I started, I was a completely inexperienced person, and I gained experience, and now I see [in my current position] that things in general have evolved. I could not do some things, and now I can do them with such ease, despite my shyness (EEJ 3).

When asked about the skills promoted in academic activities, the lack of improvement and development in the activities carried out in class is striking, as shown by the excerpt, “these skills are not promoted in the course” (EEJ 1). In the words of another interviewee:

> They are not encouraged; if they are, it happens so rarely that I do not notice it. Of course, it can vary from course to course. From the services that JE offers, in the reality of my course, I do not see that this is an incentive to put into practice our skills and the knowledge that we acquire. I do not see this interaction; this connection between our curriculum and the junior enterprise, there is no link (EEJ 2).

There is a deficit in stimulating skills in terms of activities within the academic environment, which results in their inability to develop and improve. However, students must

realize that in the learning environment of the junior enterprise, they must act as constructors of their experiences, seeking knowledge and developing their skills. Because, as in any learning space, if the student is passive, he will certainly not absorb everything he can and should learn.

In addition to the mentioned aspects, it is noticeable that the members of the junior enterprise studied have developed human, technical and intellectual abilities, and skills, i.e. they have qualified themselves to work with cognitive activities, with people and with manuals. Because of these skills, they can develop certain behaviors, such as the attitudes described below.

4.3 Attitudes

The analysis of the interview transcripts showed that acquired attitudes are related to other elements of competence (knowledge and skills) and are confused in most of the interviewees' statements. This clarification is to make clear that knowledge, skills, and attitudes are elements of the same phenomenon (competence) and that, for this reason, they may sound repetitive. However, they are not, since skills reveal know-how, while attitudes refer to execution.

Since respondents repeated several aspects of capabilities (and shared that attitudes are everyday behaviors resulting from their capabilities in their activities), only some are highlighted here to avoid repetition. In this sense, it was said that:

> Because of my current position, I must have much self-control because it is not just about me. Things affect other people, the other members of the JE, so I must work so that they can work too [harmonious environment] and get that out there, to the clients, to other people who want to talk to us to ask for help, mentoring, training, something along those lines. I think that is the main thing (EEJ 4).

The generation of self-control leading to a proactive attitude is also a clear result of working in a junior enterprise, developing general aspects of proactivity, self-knowledge, tolerance of uncertainty, perseverance, and the desire to overcome obstacles through entrepreneurial training (Cortez; Veiga; Salvador, 2019). Similar perceptions are also found in the excerpt “Being patient, dealing with different situations, and adapting to a diverse audience” (EEJ 3).

The multidisciplinary culture of the junior enterprise environment allows members to meet points of view other than their own when analyzing a particular situation. These complementary considerations expose students to generalizations and teach them to consider other elements in their attitudes to reconstruct the images that influence their view of the world and their behavior (Ferreira-da-Silva; Pinto, 2011). One interviewee said that their attitudes are based on:

> It is about knowing how to behave in an environment, how to distinguish between work and play with colleagues, and that is something that develops because when we get in, we know almost nothing or no one. However, after a while, you are addressed as a professional with responsibilities, deadlines, and results, which is good (EEJ 2).

Regarding the attitudes resulting from their skills and experiences in the junior enterprise, the respondents also stated that “you must have a commitment to pass it on to others, you must have patience, communication, self-control, know how to talk, ethics is essential in our environment [...]. Commitment, responsibility” (EEJ 4), “being more proactive

and learning more about tools and methods that can improve the functioning of the company" (EEJ 1), "knowing how to deal with bad moments and recognizing them, because if we manage to solve them as a group, it motivates us all" (EEJ 2). Another respondent said his attitude was based on starting teamwork, dividing time well between tasks, taking the initiative to manage the JE, and doing other activities in the work environment (EEJ 1).

Thus, attitudes such as proactivity, communication, motivation, determination, responsibility, patience, resilience, and empathy are prevalent in the JE studied. These attitudes are considered as the stock of resources that individuals possess. They form a set that is part of people's intelligence and personality and contribute to good professional performance (Fernandes; Silva, 2017).

These results highlight the importance of the experiences that the junior enterprise environment allows, as the attitudes through participation in the organization's projects are stimulated, promoting new attitudes consistent with the organizational environment and meeting market demands work (Luna *et al.*, 2014).

As in the previous categories, no attitudes resulting from the teachings (entrepreneurship) were found in international relations course. This absence was understood as a technical deficiency since entrepreneurship is a basic principle for creating a junior enterprise. On this topic, it was said that "JC was created precisely to compensate for a lack of entrepreneurial attitudes" (EEJ 3).

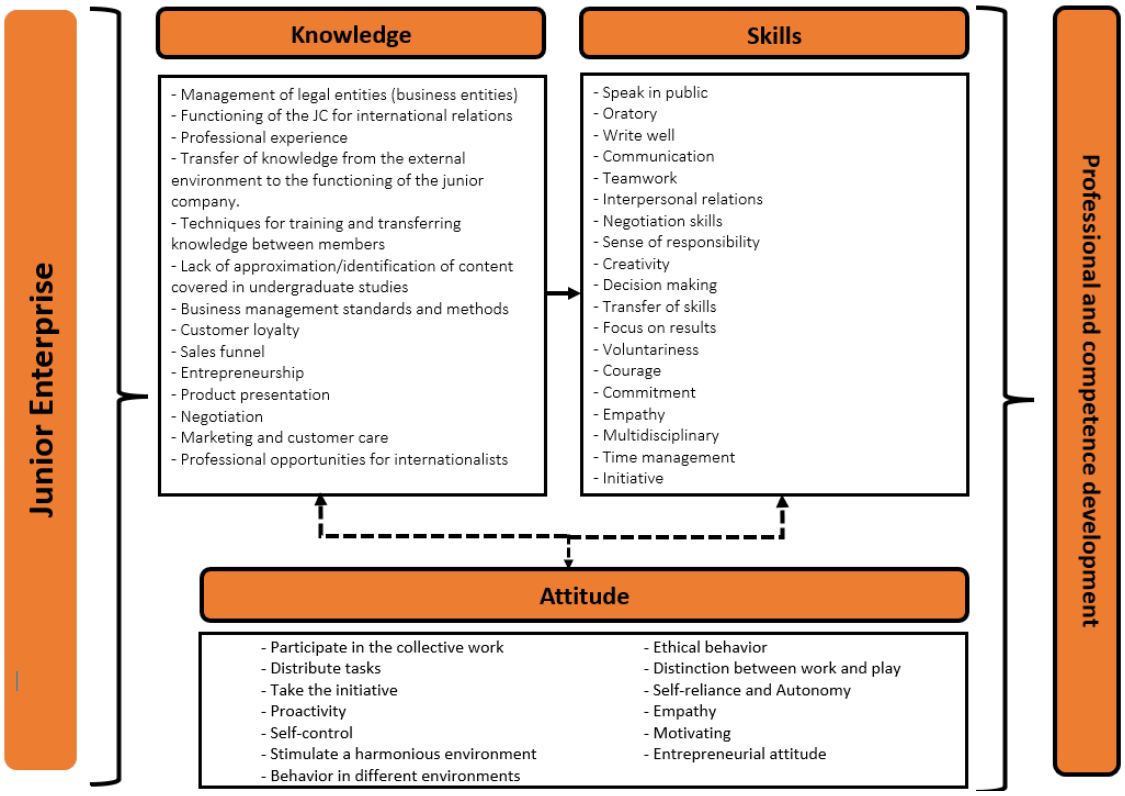
4.4 Knowledge Management and Professional Development in a Junior Enterprise: A Competency-Based Analysis with Theoretical and Practical Contributions from the SECI Model

The results discussed in the previously topic show the contribution of working in a junior enterprise in the context of competence management with its elements of knowledge, skills and attitudes to the training and development of academics. These aspects are integrated and summarized in Figure 1.

As shown in the analytical structure of the results, the junior enterprise provides the student with knowledge, skills, and attitudes developed through academic training and direct work in the junior enterprise. These elements act in an integrated way so that knowledge stimulates competencies, and skills are translated into attitudes, which are also influenced by knowledge. This process, at least in the case analyzed, promotes professional and skill development.

This highlights the importance of the junior enterprise experience, which is a high-quality experience for students because it places them in an environment that provides them with the autonomy to put into practice what they have learned in class and to develop innovative solutions to complex problems.

Figure 1: Analytical structure of the results - Professional development through the development of competencies in knowledge, skills, and attitudes



Source: Prepared by the authors (2024)

In this way, With the constant changes in the labor market, it has become essential for professionals to have skills that include theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, and the ability to act at the right time. In this context, students who enter a junior enterprise receive an extensive “baggage” of experience at the end of their studies, as they have the opportunity to act as leaders, make decisions, develop management skills, speak in public, be creative, lead, be proactive, work in groups and negotiate - an experience that anticipates the professional roles that are established in the labor market and organizations.

Empirical evidence and participant narratives suggest that junior enterprises offer a dynamic environment for organizational learning, as outlined in Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) SECI model. This model conceptualizes knowledge as a continuous process of conversion between tacit and explicit knowledge, occurring through interactions among individuals and groups within specific social contexts.

In the case of the junior enterprise analyzed, the four stages of this process are clearly identifiable: during socialization, members share experiences and learn from one another through cohabitation and joint practice (as evidenced by accounts of peer support and teamwork); in externalization, they articulate their experiences into models, guidelines, and procedures (as reflected in the practice of "showing the way" to new members); through combination, they organize and systematize this knowledge into collective routines (such as internal training, reports, and management practices); and in internalization, individuals absorb this knowledge and translate it into new attitudes, skills, and competencies, which become part of their professional repertoire. Thus, the knowledge spiral enhances the understanding of how the junior enterprise transcends the role of merely applying academic theory in practice, functioning instead as a genuine laboratory for the creation and reinvention of knowledge that fosters students’ professional development and employability.

In this sense, the SECI model of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) and Lemos *et al.*, (2024) helps explain how the junior enterprise operates as a microenvironment of organizational knowledge creation. It systematically fosters the conversion of individual tacit knowledge into collective knowledge, facilitates the transformation of classroom learning into practical competence, and promotes professional development that is incremental, participatory, and situated in real-world challenges.

This study offers significant empirical and theoretical contributions to the literature on organizational learning, professional development, and competency-based education. Firstly, it provides a contextualized validation of the SECI model (Socialization, Externalization, Combination, and Internalization), originally proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), within a higher education setting. By analyzing the dynamics of knowledge creation among members of a junior enterprise, the research demonstrates how experiential learning and peer interaction catalyze the transformation of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge and, subsequently, into individual and organizational competencies.

Secondly, the study bridges the SECI model with the Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSA) framework, proposing an integrated perspective wherein knowledge aligns with the combination stage, skills emerge predominantly from internalization, and attitudes are cultivated throughout the entire knowledge spiral, particularly in socialization and internalization. This articulation offers a robust analytical lens for examining how learning environments grounded in real-world practice—such as junior enterprises—can serve as microenvironments for knowledge creation and professional capacity building.

More broadly, the findings advance literature by demonstrating the applicability of the SECI model beyond traditional corporate settings, contributing to its theoretical expansion into experiential learning ecosystems. The research also reinforces the pedagogical value of junior enterprises as platforms for competency development, suggesting their strategic potential for enhancing employability, fostering entrepreneurial behavior, and addressing the gap between academic training and labor market demands.

5 FINAL REMARKS

In response to the proposed problem, the research shows the importance of a junior enterprise in developing professional identity formation since this work environment promotes the application of knowledge acquired in the classroom. In addition, it provides benefits such as skill development and expanding the network of contacts while placing participants in real-life business management situations. These aspects underscore the need to promote junior enterprises at universities.

Moreover, knowledge is not an isolated resource, for it must be linked to skills and attitudes integrated into professional competencies essential to the organizational environment. These skills provide students with knowledge and opportunities, ensuring they become prepared, qualified, and confident professionals for the corporate environment.

Furthermore, the results confirm that JE is an excellent pedagogical strategy to reconcile theoretical knowledge and practice and to create new knowledge and experiences that are treated little/ superficially in the classroom. Considering this superficiality, based on the results, curriculum components such as business management and entrepreneurship should be better explored in courses that are not directly related to management, such as International Relations.

Besides, even though the international relations course is presented, this study raises the question of how these approaches have been addressed in college courses because just as important as discussing the content in the classroom is teaching how its application should be done in organizational environment. According to participant reports, the organizational

environment is a bottleneck in the course studied. This finding becomes even more relevant when considering that society comprises institutions and that, regardless of the modality and type of activities, almost all professionals are always employed in organizations and must implement a minimum of management aspects.

Given these considerations, the Junior enterprise movement should be more prominent and encouraged in the university environment (classroom) of academic learning. It also follows that courses need to build curricular matrices with aspects that discuss not only conceptual approaches and positions but also practical directions.

To truly promote participation in junior enterprise, overcome the didactic limitations identified in this study, and promote professional development and entry into the labor market, it is proposed to establish partnerships with institutions that promote entrepreneurship, such as SEBRAE, Junior Achievement and the *Confederação Brasileira de Empresas juniores*.

The implementation of such partnerships focused on management and entrepreneurial activities does not represent a risk or a distortion of the objectives and practice of the under graduation programs but rather a practical increase and a potential strategy of alignment between the specific approaches of each college degree course with professional development, competency-based management, entry into the labor market, social/economic management and entrepreneurship, elements that the labor market constantly demands.

Thus, considering that the participants indicated several benefits such as skill development, knowledge of business methods, overcoming personal traits, and expanding their network of contacts by participating in the junior enterprise, this study achieved its objective. As a suggestion for future work, even though the importance of a junior enterprise for professional development has been presented, there is a gap in the forms of support that higher education institutions implement to make JEs effective. In addition, new research can examine teaching-learning methods that provide practical knowledge. In addition, other courses need to be researched to provide an overview of the benefits and professional advantages that result from the junior enterprise in various educational settings.

Moreover, the study opens new avenues for research by proposing that the knowledge creation process can be similarly analyzed in other experiential and entrepreneurial academic environments, such as university incubators, extension projects, and collaborative innovation hubs. These implications underline the importance of designing educational policies and curricula that value practical learning as a core component of professional formation.

The limitations of this research are related to the fact that only one junior enterprise was studied and that the influential actors in the functioning of junior enterprises were not studied in UNIFAP, aspects that can be discussed in future research. However, the results of this article reflect a scenario of benefits and optimization opportunities for the operation of junior enterprises within the framework of this educational institution.

Finally, this study identifies a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes relevant to JE work that may be useful for the construction, performance, and functioning of similar organizations. In this way, this study primarily contributes to theoretical knowledge about skills management, the KSA approach, and junior enterprise performance. The findings can be explored and challenged in new research and used by managers and members of junior enterprises to optimize the performance of these institutions.

We conclude, in an increasingly dynamic and competitive world, the importance of vocational training that goes beyond classrooms is undeniable. The junior enterprise plays a crucial role in this scenario, offering students the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-life situations, preparing them for the challenges of the labor market. Moreover, this enriching experience is not limited to the development of technical skills but

also encompasses the personal development of students by helping them develop entrepreneurial, leadership, and problem-solving skills. In this context, this study represents a valuable contribution to a better understanding of the positive impact of junior enterprises on the professional development of students in the International Relations course at UNIFAP and it highlights the relevance of this educational approach in today's context.

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