

## **The Global Account Manager as Multidimensional Leader: Skills Required to Master Leadership Challenges**

### **ABSTRACT**

*International companies are increasingly adopting Global Account Management (GAM) to serve their global customers. The global account manager plays an important role at the customer–supplier interface. Some facets of the global account manager’s function and related commercial skills have been discussed in the extant literature. However, the leadership skills required of a global account manager deserve further study. Based on in-depth observation of global account managers participating in a certification and development program, we find that these sales executives face leadership challenges on multiple levels (self, team and organizational). We also identify the skills required to master those challenges (personal brand management, personal energy and drive, global team management, influence without authority, intrapreneurial behaviour, and change management).*

**Key words:** Business-to-Business Marketing, Global Account Management, Global Account Manager, International Management, Leadership.

Key account management (KAM) is a relationship-oriented marketing approach to managing key customers within the business-to-business marketing environment (Ojasalo 2001). In part, adoption of this approach reflects ‘the growth and use of services to differentiate a firm’s product offering’ and the resultant enhancement in the role of the sales force (Bradford et al. 2010: 240). The typical key account manager has responsibility for (1) business growth with one or more key customers, (2) coordination and customisation of the firm’s overall offerings to those customers, (3) facilitation of ‘multi-level, multi-functional exchange processes’, and (4) promotion of the KAM concept within his or her own firm (Millman and Wilson 1995: 17).

Global account management (GAM) is a special form of KAM in which global activities of a multinational firm supplying a global customer are coordinated by a salesperson or selling team, developed in response to globalisation of markets and global customers' demands for consistent service across different countries (Holt and McDonald 2000; Montgomery, Yip and Villalonga 1998). The global account manager operates in a dynamic and competitive environment, requiring strong, multi-faceted leadership to ensure successful management of company interactions with a global customer.

This paper focuses on multidimensional leadership challenges confronting the global account manager, and implications regarding leadership skills required in a GAM role. It also provides a framework to assist in future research regarding the effectiveness of different leadership behaviours.

The need for research in this area is supported by prior researchers, who agree that there is a lack of research regarding GAM, generally (Hui Shi, Zou and Cavusgil 2004; Wilson and Weilbaker 2004), and regarding KAM or GAM leadership issues, specifically. For example, Workman, Homburg and Jensen (2003: 3) assert that, 'while there is a significant amount of research on determinants of selling effectiveness for individual salespeople, there is a surprising lack of study of factors that affect selling effectiveness in team-selling situations'. Similarly, Guenzi, Pardo and Georges (2007: 122) suggest that most research on KAM has 'focused on strategic or organizational aspects', while 'the role played by the individual key account managers' behaviors in implementing it has been almost completely overlooked except for very few partial works'. Finally, according to Bradford et al. (2010: 242), 'most of the KAM research focuses on the responsibilities of KAMs, not on the skills and support they need to be effective'.

Following a review of the extant literature on the global account manager's role and general leadership tasks and skills, we present findings based on an in-depth observation of a sample of global account managers. Specifically, we report the self, team and organizational leadership challenges of global account managers, and the skills required for those managers to cope effectively with those challenges. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for research and practice.

## **LEADERSHIP TASKS AND REQUIRED SKILLS OF THE GLOBAL ACCOUNT MANAGER**

A global account manager has to undertake various roles, identified in Figures 1 and 2. The skills required to undertake those roles successfully have been identified by prior researchers (Holt and McDonald 2000; Lockau and Barth 1998). However, little emphasis has been given to the required *leadership* skills (Holt and McDonald 2000), the importance of which is explained below.

Many multinational firms have become global customers, purchasing in a coordinated manner (Montgomery and Yip 1999) and expecting consistent, coordinated supply arrangements throughout their worldwide operations (Millman and Wilson 1996). Such expectations add to the complexity of the global account manager's role, as explained below and illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

*On one level, GAM can be seen as a more complex form of ... KAM ... . However, the 'global' dimension of GAM adds a number of fundamentally different aspects that are not so evident in KAM. These include ... cross-cultural issues ... , the management of globally dispersed and cross-cultural teams, the management of global versus local issues and conflict, managing global logistics competencies, the location of Global Account Managers and the management of global (and cross-cultural) communications. (Holt and McDonald 2000: 2)*

As firms position themselves as single, cohesive supplier organizations, the global account manager assumes a key role in integrating or 'orchestrating' company-wide activities to enhance the relationship between supplier and customer (Holt and McDonald 2000; Wilson and Millman 2003). Since many global customers want a single responsible point of contact within the supplier firm (Holt and McDonald 2000; Montgomery and Yip 1999), the role of the global account manager has developed into a 'boundary-spanning' role, in which the global account manager 'manages' supply-related aspects of supplier and customer organizations, to some extent (Holt and McDonald 2000).

Thus, leadership challenges of the global account manager have increased (Holt and McDonald 2000; Wilson and Millman 2003). Internal pressures include financial scrutiny and the resultant need to demonstrate the financial return of GAM programs. Also, it often is difficult for a global account manager to obtain access to adequate human resources or to motivate team members, perhaps because

team members already work in different GAM teams or because of staff reductions due to corporate financial pressures. External pressures include competition and the weight of expectations of global customers (Homburg, Workman and Jensen 2002). Many firms have reduced the number of suppliers they use, partly for efficiency reasons (Capon 2001). The remaining suppliers are expected to provide excellent products and customer service (Atanasova and Senn 2011). In turn, global account managers are expected to have the necessary authority and leadership skills to make and implement fast and reliable decisions in response to those customer needs (Millman and Wilson 1999).

The various tasks of a global account manager are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. Clearly, some tasks require effective leadership skills (Wilson and Millman 2003). With reference to Figure 1, the roles of 'team leader', 'strategic orchestrator' and 'culture manager' would require high levels of (informal) leadership expertise, as would tasks identified in Figure 2 relating to gaining 'internal commitment', 'changing culture', 'developing the global communication network', 'co-ordination and integration', and ensuring 'team competencies'. In addition, there are 'occupational competencies' that must be developed by a typical salesperson moving into a GAM role, perhaps involving termination of 'lone ranger' approaches to selling and commencement of team behaviour (and leadership). Further, the GAM team occasionally has members from the customer organization, not just the supply firm, adding further complexity to the team leadership function of the global account manager.

There are distinct differences in some personal attributes required for successful personal selling on an individual basis, on the one hand, and successful GAM roles, on the other. Firstly, some salespeople display 'lone wolf' behaviour, tending not to cooperate with others or to invest much effort to develop interpersonal relationships (Mulki, Jaramillo and Marshall 2007). While there is evidence that such salespeople are less successful than others, such attributes could be beneficial in transaction selling situations or in situations in which performance is likely to be strongly influenced by individual initiative and effort (ibid.). However, such attributes clearly would be detrimental to GAM roles, given the requirement for cooperation and team work in such roles. Indeed, effective global account managers would benefit by adopting the role of a 'spider in the network' (Olerup 2001), which requires a strong emphasis on cooperation and interpersonal relationships.

Wilson and Weilbaker (2004) argue that organizational, team and individual competencies are necessary to ensure effective GAM operations, the last of these being especially relevant to the global account manager. This suggests the appropriateness of viewing the leadership requirements of these sales executives as comprising the three components illustrated in Figure 3: organizational leadership, team leadership and self-leadership. In the following sections, we discuss challenges relevant to those three levels of leadership, based on observations of global account managers in a one-year certification and development program conducted by two leading institutions in the U.S. and Europe.

### RESEARCH METHODS

The information presented below is based on qualitative data collection methods, including observation of 52 participants from three cohorts of an executive education program for global account managers. Selected participant information is provided in Table 1.

The use of participant observation is supported by prior researchers (for example, Bouchard 1976; Iacono, Brown and Holtham 2009; Vinten 1994; Woodside and Wilson 2003), although there are limitations since the researcher's interactions could influence participant behaviour (Vinten 1994).

*Participant observation ... involves participating in a situation, while, at the same time, recording what is being observed. [It] has been associated with qualitative methods, as the data collected by this technique tend to be predominantly qualitative. It is potentially rewarding ... . (Iacono et al. 2009: 39)*

Observations were conducted by three staff members (1) during interaction with participants in class (including role plays and competitive small-group case work to stimulate real-life work situations relating to aspects of GAM leadership), and (2) during supervision of individual participants undertaking their 'value creation' projects, each including an individual action plan as a 'customer-centric leader' (involving multiple meetings and telephone calls with each participant, and reviews of draft and final project documents). Notes were made by staff members during each class and following each supervision-related discussion, as part of the grading process in general and for the project, in particular. These notes constitute the observation data for this first stage of the study.

Each cohort participated in the executive program for a period of eight months, including four intensive one-week modules, providing a holistic coverage of the global account manager's role. The program provides an appropriate setting to study global account managers and their activities, since each participant is required to identify and implement a 'value creation project' for a global account, receiving supervision from a faculty staff member. Therefore, global account managers were observed while working on real-life projects over significant periods of time. Each participant also had to submit a comprehensive report on her/his project, including approval from senior management.

Faculty members also interacted with participants' managers and team members, obtaining their views of the global account managers' challenges, activities and skills. Interaction with management also included discussions directly relating to development and review of projects.

This approach enabled comprehensive observation of the challenges facing the global account managers and how those challenges were resolved (or not).

The sample comprises 52 global account managers from three executive programs conducted in 2008, 2009 and 2010. All cohorts are included since they appear to be comparable in terms of diversity and size, and since faculty members found no indication of qualitative differences. Program participants are considered to be representative of the wider population of global account managers given their diverse background in terms of industry representation, nationality and age, as summarised in Table 1.

### **THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL LEADERSHIP COMPLEXITY OF THE GLOBAL ACCOUNT MANAGER'S ROLE**

This section provides a discussion of major leadership challenges facing the global account manager and the leadership skills required to resolve those challenges, based on a distillation of the insights gained from observations during training and supervisory interactions with the sample of 52 participants. The focus is on leadership due to its lack of attention in prior research, as mentioned previously. In addition, the three components of leadership illustrated in Figure 3, self, team and organizational leadership, are used to provide an analytical framework.

### **Self-Leadership Challenges and Skills**

As discussed previously, the role of global account manager is pivotal because of its position at the supplier–customer interface, being the node in a global structure spanning geographical, functional and organizational boundaries. Whether the full potential of the role is achieved depends not only on commercial or technical skills, but also on the posture or stance taken by the global account manager. The stance taken can range from (1) passive – maintaining the current business and awaiting orders, much like a steward, to (2) active – pursuing new opportunities for value creation and taking ownership for this part of the supplier firm’s business. Being self-motivated and having self-leadership skills are essential prerequisites for an active stance.

The role often is in a state of flux, requiring an evolution in the stance of the global account manager. There often is much greater latitude to act than in traditional sales roles; goals may be longer-term and even visionary – such as establishing strategic dialogue with an account and developing a partnership to access global growth opportunities that far exceed typical non-global account growth opportunities. Frequently, the global account manager is left to determine her/his own strategies and tactics to reach those business goals. The role often results in high levels of ‘visibility’ and the risk of ‘stepping on someone’s turf’, such as when advocating a global approach that runs counter to national strategies.

It appears that global account managers who successfully cope with self-leadership challenges often develop ‘personal brand management’ and possess ‘personal energy and drive’. These people appear to understand and shape the nature of their ‘personal brand’ on diverse dimensions, including intellectual capital, performance, social networks, personality, mission and style. They also display high levels of passion and persistence in approaching business activities and making the best use of time and effort, inspiring supplier and customer organizations to aim for the highest standards, exceeding customer expectations. They inspire passion and persistence at all levels within supplier and customer organizations. They also promote and live the concept of continuous improvement.

Some of these issues are illustrated by the following two participants.\*

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\* Due to page constraints, illustrations are provided relating to just six of the 52 participants, in total.

*Case 1:* This person was a successful area sales manager before being promoted to the position of global account manager, with global responsibility for one large customer with multi-million dollar revenues. The person was uncomfortable with the challenges of the GAM function – being in charge of just one customer instead of a portfolio as before; having more transparency regarding success and failure of personal actions; having to learn new skills, such as developing deeper customer strategies and value propositions, while undertaking less traditional selling in terms of relationship management activities (‘wine and dine’) with many different buyers; being required to make frequent presentations to senior management and to participate in strategy meetings. This person remained passive, tried not to ‘stand out’ or become visible in the organization, did the minimum required in the role, merely maintaining the current business, and did not leave her/his own comfort zone – neither identifying nor committing to any new ‘value creation projects’.

*Case 2:* This person understood the role of global account manager to be similar to that of a general manager, but with responsibility for a large customer instead of a country/market; actively sought platforms that allowed appropriate arguments or cases to be made and ‘buy-in’ to be created, both for account activities and the GAM program in general; participated in external education and industry association events; contributed to GAM newsletters and success stories; volunteered for presentations at cross-functional events, such as ‘innovation days’, in order to be noticed by senior management. The person understood that success was not in the title on the business card, but in visibility and a reputation of being both trustworthy and able to contribute to the success of others.

### **Team Leadership Challenges and Skills**

The global account manager is the orchestrator of activities that need to be performed by a team: translating customer and industry trends into account strategies, developing comprehensive, customised value propositions and business plans, matching supplier competencies with customer ‘value drivers’, and providing after-sales and advisory services to the account on a global basis. For this purpose, the global account manager needs to rally the right team, which usually consists of a core team (which has regular customer engagement, spending more time working on the account) and extended team (specialists who join the core team as required by customer needs).



GAM teams often are virtual entities; team members frequently are located in different countries and comprise different nationalities and functional backgrounds. Team members usually do not report directly to the global account manager, often being employees of a country-level subsidiary with somewhat different goals to the parent organization. Without formal authority, global account managers require subtle leadership skills to garner team support in a matrix management situation, having to contend with differences in priorities of team members' managers and themselves.

Global account managers who successfully cope with team leadership challenges often provide 'global team management' and 'influence without authority'. They also display the ability to build, lead, coach and develop an effective account team and to create alignment on strategy, responsibilities and expected contribution. They are effective coaches for their global account team members, both professionally and personally. They also are able to employ a variety of techniques to steer key stakeholders to a desired outcome without formal authority.

The most successful of these global account managers frequently drive team collaboration across all organizational units, act as role models to other global account managers, and contribute to the development of new human resource development tools and methodologies for the supplier's GAM practices. Not surprisingly, the most successful of these achieve impressive results through their ability to motivate – and collaborate with – the appropriate people. Consequently, they are sought out for advice regarding global account team competence, consistency and development. They also consistently stimulate significant, immediate and lasting change with key stakeholders both internally and within the account organization.

Again, some of these issues are illustrated by the following two participants.

**Case 3:** This person was not only a global account manager but also had part-time responsibility for marketing activities in a business line, having two direct reports for those marketing activities. When assigned the responsibility for a global account, this executive found it difficult to establish a global account team. Contrary to the marketing function, no team members were automatically assigned to the GAM operation; it was up to this global account manager to build a team.

After undertaking global account planning in isolation and pressing line management for resources, this global account manager was able to add team members to a GAM organizational chart. However, it then became clear that nominated staff members were unwilling to provide much GAM support and often were inappropriate for specific GAM tasks. Contrary to the marketing staff, GAM team members were more demanding, and constituted a difficult resource to access. In addition, this executive's approach of providing 'one-way assignments' to marketing staff did not work well with GAM team members.

*Case 4:* This global account manager had significant tenure with the company. Because of this, the executive was able to quickly identify appropriate support for the GAM team. Like Case 3, however, this person was not provided with direct authority and recognised that support drawn from the GAM team was at the expense of other units in the organization. This person resolved this problem by not only earning trust as a role model who 'walks the talk' for GAM, but also by creating value for those supporting the global account. This global account manager acknowledged that global account team members required coaching to develop into their new roles and to develop new skills. This executive also linked GAM activities to the organizational units in which team members were based and funded, also showing their line managers how their units would benefit from the GAM activities.

### **Organizational Leadership Challenges and Skills**

Collaboration required by effective GAM operations and goals pursued within a GAM approach often run counter to the traditional approach to conducting business in organizations that are more product- than customer-centric, and that have gradually expanded internationally, giving rise to influential country-level organizations. Therefore, the global account manager not only has to navigate through matrix management, but also needs to influence organizational development. Consistent with Wilson and Millman's (2003) concept of the global account manager as 'political entrepreneur', a global account manager should assist the evolution of the overall GAM organization and environment.

Those global account managers who successfully cope with organizational leadership challenges often demonstrate 'intrapreneurial behaviour' and 'change management'. They effectively act as entrepreneurs within the supplier firm and the global account manager role, displaying an opportunity

orientation, tolerance for uncertainty, ownership and adaptability. The most successful of these executives exhibit an ability to manage resources in turbulent business cycles, and to conduct complex, dynamic financial analysis to improve business for both the global account and the supplier firm. They also display an ability to drive change and to adapt to changing environments.

Again, some of these issues are illustrated by the following participants.

**Case 5:** This person was responsible for a global account with substantial potential due to policy changes in the energy sector. However, the global account demanded that the supplier should assist in constructing a finance vehicle and bank guarantee that would share certain risks and allow the customer to better manage cash flows. While the supplier firm had distinct service levels for customers depending on their account status, there had been no case in which such financial support was provided to a customer. Without any mandate, and against the advice of peers, the global account manager developed a business case for this expansionary project and, together with senior management from the customer organization, convinced the board of the supplier firm to engage with this project. The global account manager also helped to develop this customised financial services offering into a standard module offered to strategic global accounts.

**Case 6:** This global account manager had evolved into the role over many years, gradually moving from local sales to the management of two large global accounts without much change in processes or structures to formally support GAM. Due to the success of this executive's global accounts, attributed to individual personality and networking, the supplier firm appointed further global account managers. However, those executives struggled since they lacked the tenure and, therefore, the relationship network within the organization. Being a veteran global account manager, this global account manager assumed the role of mentor, and developed a guide for new global account managers that helped them to become better organized, learn what pitfalls to avoid, and how to develop themselves into the GAM role. This enhanced the executive's reputation throughout the organization and, in turn, increased the levels of support received from various organizational units.

## CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The aim of this paper was to build on extant research regarding skills of the global account manager by studying an increasingly important but relatively unexplored dimension, GAM leadership, albeit in an exploratory, preliminary manner. This has been achieved by observing global account managers to (1) understand what leadership challenges exist for them, and (2) identify skills utilized by them to cope with those challenges. Specifically, three levels of GAM leadership challenges were studied: self, team and organizational leadership. Global account managers who successfully cope with those challenges were found to show distinct skills that we have framed as personal brand management, personal energy and drive, global team management, influence without authority, intrapreneurial behaviour, and change management. This preliminary framework provides a foundation for further qualitative and quantitative research to fully define the skill set of effective global account managers.

There are some other implications from this research. First, global account managers face major leadership challenges. However, salespeople (without KAM or GAM responsibilities) typically gain little or no leadership experience in their traditional selling roles. Therefore, it seems likely that firms promoting traditional salespeople to GAM roles and providing training in leadership and management would have more successful global account managers than firms promoting salespeople without providing that training. Second, it seems likely that firms that promote traditional salespeople to GAM roles would benefit from including leadership potential within the recruitment and selection criteria. Third, while leadership and management training should be provided, global account managers should take responsibility for their own personal development.

There also are limitations regarding this research. Firstly, it applies to global account managers, but not necessarily to other global marketing managers or to key account managers. Further research would be required to determine whether similar leadership challenges are relevant to other executives. The study is exploratory, based only on in-depth observations, and relates to a sample of global account managers from large firms only, limited to mainly manufacturing-related industries.

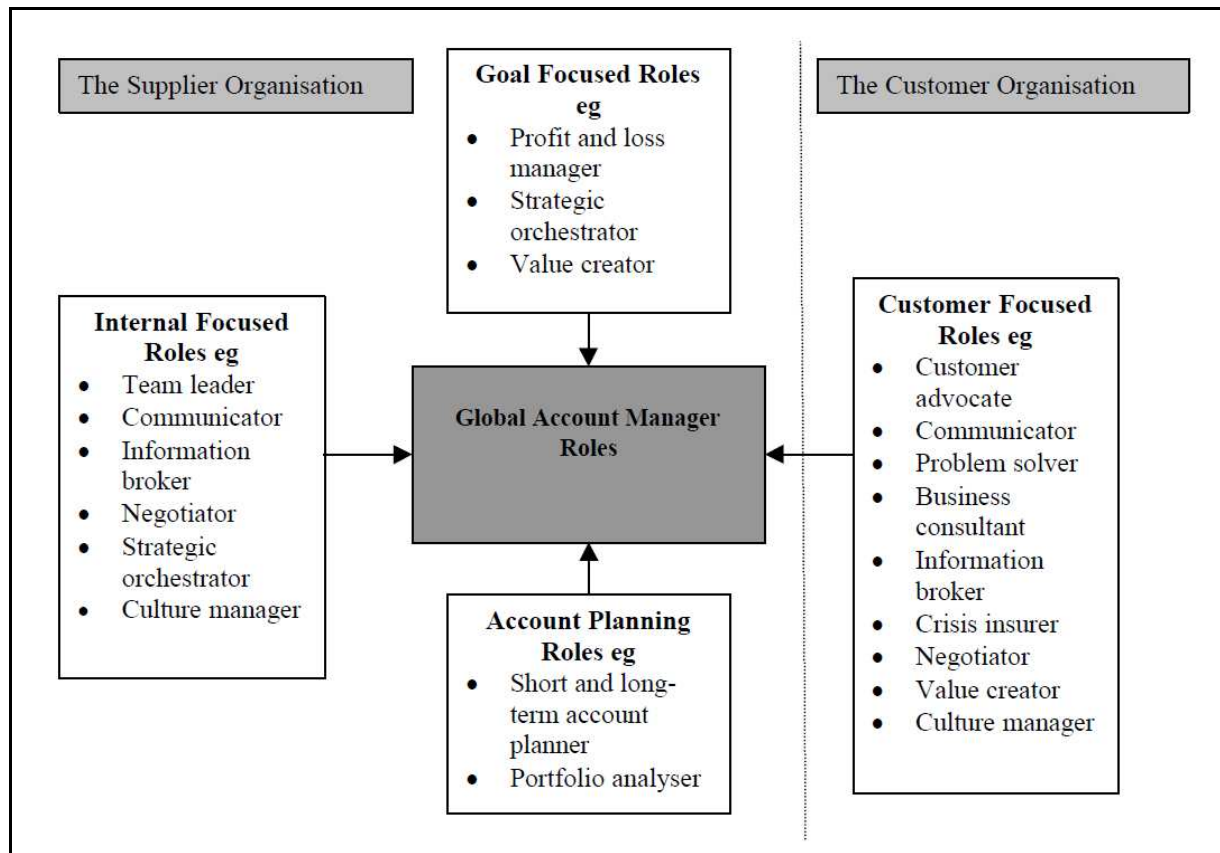
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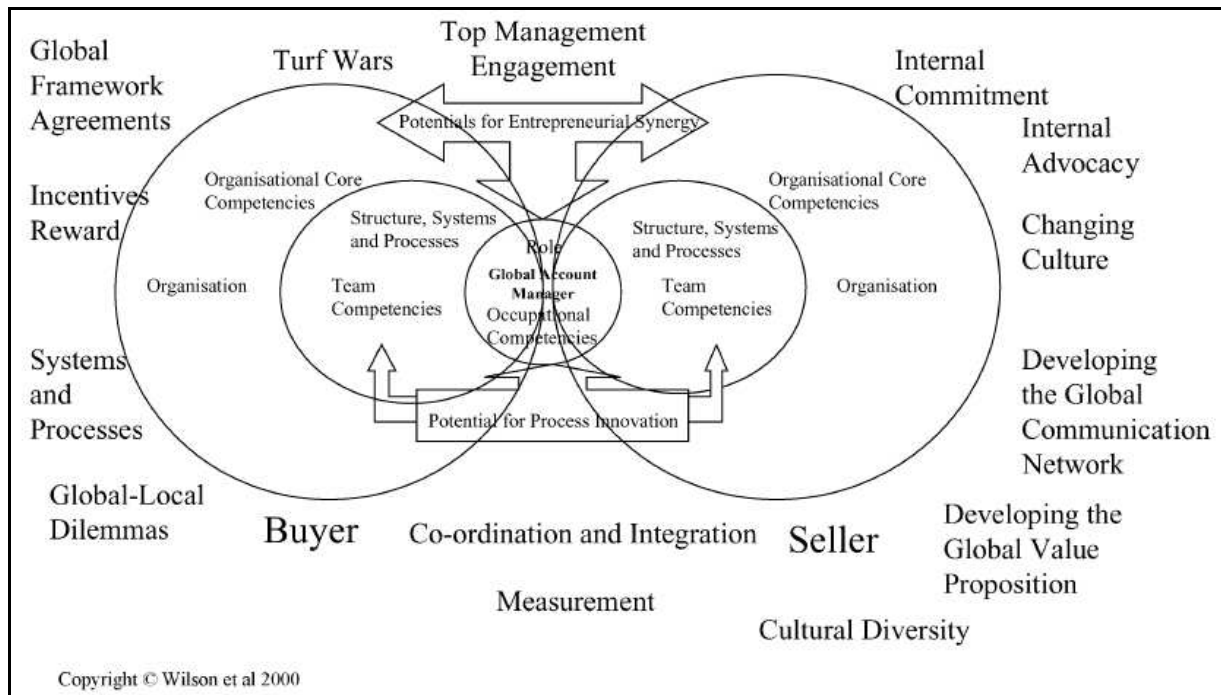
**Figure 1: Roles of Global Account Managers**

Source: Holt and McDonald, 2000: 9.



**Figure 2: The Global Account Manager as Political Entrepreneur**

Source: Wilson and Millman, 2003: 153.





**Figure 3: The Global Account Manager as Multidimensional Leader**



**Table 1: Characteristics of Participating Global Account Managers**

Nationality	Industry	Age	Nationality	Industry	Age
<b>2008 Program</b>			<b>2009 Program (cont'd)</b>		
American	Financial Services	53	German	Chemicals	38
American	Information Technology	37	German	Chemicals	41
American	Information Technology	43	German	Information Technology	47
American	Packaging	56	German	Telecommunication	43
Argentine	Chemicals	N/A	New Zealand	FMCG	31
Brazilian	Chemicals	36	Not available (N/A)	Information Technology	40
British	Machinery	45	Swedish	Logistics	40
Canadian	Packaging	41	<b>2010 Program</b>		
French/Norwegian	Packaging	40	American	Chemicals	N/A
French/Tunisian	Packaging	37	American	Media	N/A
German	Chemicals	41	Columbian	Logistics	36
German	Chemicals	49	French	Chemicals	N/A
German	Life Sciences	47	German	Chemicals	N/A
Indian	Machinery	N/A	German	Chemicals	N/A
Irish	Financial Services	48	German	Chemicals	N/A
Philippines	Chemicals	44	German	Chemicals	25
Portuguese	FMCG	34	German	Chemicals	48
Portuguese	FMCG	35	German	Information Technology	43
Spanish/Swiss	Information Technology	47	German	Information Technology	45
<b>2009 Program</b>			German	Life Sciences	N/A
American	Chemicals	N/A	Hungarian	FMCG	34
American	Logistics	N/A	Irish	FMCG	48
Belgian	Chemicals	47	Polish	FMCG	49
British	Packaging	N/A	South African	FMCG	27
Danish	Telecommunication	N/A	Spanish	FMCG	N/A
Finnish	Logistics	51	Swedish	Logistics	36
German	Chemicals	N/A	Swiss	Life Sciences	45

N/A = Not available.