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Roadmap for success

Competency models can foster excellence in your firm

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, *For Small Business Times*

Question: I've been seeing more and more about competency models. The message I'm hearing is that if I want to be sure our HR practices are aligned with the company's business objectives, a competency model is a good place to start. So, how do I get started? And, realistically, what am I getting myself into? Just how complicated is the process of building a competency model?

Answer: Building a competency model for your company is no small undertaking. Depending upon how large your company is, how sophisticated your HR practices are, and how far you want to push the envelope, you could be looking at several months (or even several years) of effort.

Don't be discouraged by that general comment, though. With focused effort, the basic foundation of a competency-based approach to HR can be laid fairly quickly if you follow a basic roadmap. That will be the focus of this article: a road map for building a competency model.

First, let's start with defining the term competency. Just what does that term mean? Put simply, a competency reflects possession of both the knowledge and the behavioral capacity to perform a job successfully. To develop competencies, individuals must have been introduced to the relevant subject matter and have had the opportunity to practice it or "try it out." When an organization builds a competency model, what it is doing is saying, in essence, "These are the attributes

that form the foundation for success in this work environment." Examples of core competencies that some organizations have used include: working productively, planning, communicating, resolving conflicts, and managing projects.

Quite frankly, this is where things can get complicated. If you've done some reading in this area or attended a seminar or workshop on the topic, you know that there are any number of competency models from which to choose. And, if you decide to build your own model, how will you ever be sure you've identified the right competencies? From a universe of literally hundreds of possibilities, how can be sure you've selected the right ones?

Well, from where I sit, in some ways, it isn't so important which competency model you use, so long as it is germane to your setting, has operational definitions of the competencies, and becomes an integral aspect of your HR practices. A three-step process of basic research will ensure that this happens: 1) Conduct job analyses, 2) Identify the relevant knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes (i.e., KSAPs) and, 3) Group/categorize the competencies that emerge.

The place to start is with the job analysis and the identification of KSAPs. In doing so, you will cover a wide territory and define these job aspects:

- Specific tasks performed
- Specific behaviors required
- Core competencies
- Critical situations that may be confronted
- Level of responsibility
- Reporting relationships
- Tools/equipment used
- Operations performed
- Education/training requirements
- Required certifications
- Safety requirements
- Physical requirements
- Consequences of errors (critical incidents)

How might this work with a real job in a real setting? Here's a quick and simplistic example. Let's say we want to study the position of order taker at a fast food restaurant. In analyzing this job, we might

arrive at the following list of tasks:

- Listens to customers communicate orders
- Enters orders into register
- Repeats orders back to customers
- Asks if there will be any other items ordered
- Answers menu-related questions
- Tells customers order totals
- Receives money from customers and makes change
- Provides cups for beverages
- Produces ordered items, places in bags, and verifies orders

Additionally, the following KSAPs might be identified for this role:

- Punctuality
- Honesty
- Basic math skills
- Ability to monitor order accuracy
- Communication skills
- Customer service orientation

You can see how the information from this kind of research begins to paint a vivid picture of what successful job performance “looks like.” That’s the idea—to begin to define the jobs that are studied in ways that can be measured. And, by looking across the jobs that have studied (i.e., Step 3 in the research process), common elements (i.e., competencies) can be identified. Then, they can be stratified so that various jobs are defined in terms of the specific competency levels that are relevant.

Let’s spend a moment on this last idea. Let’s say that based on your research, you identify that Communication is a competency that is germane to your company. You might further decide that there are four levels of communication:

Level 1 – Prepares messages which are comprehensible

Level 2 – Prepares communications by assessing audiences

Level 3 – Communicates with assertion and enthusiasm.

Level 4 - Communicates with maximum influence, drive, and action.

In this example, to stratify the competency, you might decide that every employee must possess Level 1. Team leaders must also possess Level 2. Managers must also possess Level 3. Finally, top

managers must possess all levels, 1-4.

I hope you see the power that attaches to this approach. I hope you see the alignment possibilities and the manner in which a variety of HR practices can be provided with better targets at which to aim. I hope you see the potential widespread applications for this information, including:

- Job descriptions
- Job design/Redesign
- Safety guidelines
- Wage/Salary administration
- Employee Selection/Placement
- Performance appraisal
- Performance coaching/Feedback
- Career planning
- Succession planning
- Employee training/development
- Legal protection

So, in the final analysis, is building a competency model a lot of work? Sure, it can be. To build a competency and then pursue refinements to the list of HR-related processes listed above will obviously take a long time. But, Rome wasn’t built in a day, either. Start with the basic research of defining competencies that cut across your company’s jobs. Then, in terms of HR process improvements, start with one that will where you can make an immediate impact. Which one is most in need or repair? Which one, if improved, will put your competency model “on the map?”

I think in doing so, you’ll find that your contributions will become more systematic and sophisticated. I think you’ll find that your colleagues will feel the same way.



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