Competency profiling: definition and implementation

By Stephen Shellabear, Consultant at ConsultSeven

Author's Biography
Steve Shellabear is a consultant at ConsultSeven. He holds a M.Sc. in Change Agent Skills and Strategies is a Master Practitioner in Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) and is currently completing doctoral research into the attributes, skills and support systems of customer-facing staff in contact centres. He has over 20 years in personal and professional development and has been designing and running corporate training programme since 1990

In this article the author defines competency profiling, the techniques and tools used in assessment, levels of competence, the role of performance management, personal development plans and competency based training (CBT) in ensuring its implementation. Pros and Cons are explored, with practical suggestions given for introduction. Key learning points can be found at the end of the article.

Introduction

Much has been written on Competency Profiling. It is a well-known term within HR circles in corporate organisations. As a training professional should you enquire about it's use to an HR or Training Manager of most well established companies you're likely to be told: "we've got all that in place". Yet, on closer examination you may find this is far from the case.

Why is it that the apparently simple concept of defining what's necessary to perform a job should be open to such wide interpretation and application? To answer that question it is necessary to define the terms used and then to explore the possible causes.

What is Competency Profiling?

Competency Profiling is typically a method for identifying specified skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour necessary to fulfilling a task, activity or career. In most commercial organisations it's ultimate purpose is to provide value to the external customer.

In categorising competence, some organisations make distinctions between competencies, which refer to desired personal attributes and behaviours and competences, which are the knowledge and skill required to bring about improved performance.

Over the last ten years, particularly within service industries utilising call and contact centres it has been reported that recruiting staff on the basis of their competencies has become mainstream practice. 'If you get the right person it's easy to give them the skills'.

Our experience at ConsultSeven suggests that making an assessment regarding how well the personal attributes of a potential employee match the requirements of a role has been central to many recruitment processes for much longer than that. Perhaps, the difference is that the processes have become more formalised, although many seasoned recruitment professionals still rely on an intuitive evaluation when interviewing and assessing new people. Attitudes, beliefs and values are more difficult to assess and can often be below the surface of conscious awareness of the candidate. They therefore require greater skills in elicitation and increasing sophisticated techniques and tools. Every organisation is different and so each develops a competency framework appropriate for their needs. The competencies and preferences of HR professionals who design the framework play a major part in the selection of the approach and methods. These can include tools and techniques such as: assessment centres, behavioural event interviewing, repertory grids and psychometric testing. Assessment of competencies is complex and reliance on any one method is likely to result in a bias. The best results are often achieved through triangulating a number of different techniques. Different disciplines and contexts generate different understandings leading to the range of definitions available.

Levels of competence

Much used in technical and further education fields most practitioners argue it is imperative to separate out the levels of competency to provide meaningful assessment. For example levels can include:

- practical competence: the demonstrated ability to perform a set of tasks

- foundational competence: demonstrated understanding of the what and why to carrying out the tasks

- reflexive competence: the ability to integrate actions with an understanding of action so that learning occurs and changes are made when necessary, and

- applied competence: the demonstrated ability to perform a set of tasks with understanding and reflexivity.

For many commercial organisations these terms are too formal to be commonly used by staff so they are adapted to increase likelihood of acceptance. For example, a more user friendly grading scale might involve:

- novice: a basic level of understanding but employee has not performed task before
- apprentice: employee has performed task with help or has understanding and limited practical experience
- competent: employee has depth of understanding and consistently performs task to required standard

- expert: consistently performs task to the required standard and looks at ways of improving ways of working, has in-depth understanding and could train others.

In using this type of scale it is also necessary to consider the importance of the task to the business and weight it accordingly.

Why is competency profiling necessary?

For most organisations, it is necessary to ensure that it's business outcomes are achieved. If standards and the means to achieving them are not well defined the organisation is unable to deliver products and services to customers to quality, deadline and price. As a commercial concern the business soon becomes economically unviable.

For existing staff, knowing specifically what skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour their employers seek enables them assess their ability to provide them. This gives them an opportunity to appreciate their own strengths and recognise development areas. Being aware of areas where they could improve enables them to consider and plan how to address gaps.

All organisations have periods of expansion, consolidation and renewal, during which it's necessary to recruit new members or carry out succession planning. These activities are not possible unless competencies have been defined.

How is it used?

Once the organisation has identified it's business objectives and defined their processes to deliver to customer requirements, they then have to define the time, cost and quality standards of each task. The competencies are then identified for each task in the key areas of skill, knowledge, attitude and behaviour. It is essential to have documented sensory specific, behavioural evidence of a competence having been achieved. Once defined, this framework provides the infrastructure for the approach to be rolled out throughout the organisation.

Part of a PMS

It is well known that whatever an organisation measures is regarded as important by staff. Correspondingly, the degree of importance given to an objective largely determines whether it's achieved or not.

For a competency framework to be effective it needs to be used by line managers and staff within a performance management system. Performance management is the continuous process of developing both competencies and competences to improve individual, group, and organisational performance.

It involves agreeing objectives, targets and standards of performance with all individuals and then supporting staff to achieve them through monitoring and development. Regular

performance reviews and personal development plans are required if the process is to succeed.

Incorporating PDPS

Once the individual has agreed departmental business targets and identified their competence gaps they are able to write a development plan to address them. Attention is typically focused on the competence gaps with the highest weighting of importance for the organisation. Although these plans are usually called 'Personal', they tend to refer to the achievement of professional development of the employee at work. This is in contrast to Patton's (1990) use of the term 'personal development' where 'thoughts, feelings, behaviours and knowledge' is about the person outside of a work context. Perhaps, common usage of the phrase "Personal development plans' within corporate life has emerged as a way of conveying a sense of ownership of the plan by the individual.

Some staff may feel defensive regarding acknowledging their development needs, believing that they are indicative of poor performance or infer loss of professional credibility. However, it is often the case that competency gaps are be caused by organisational factors, including changes in infrastructure, new job roles and responsibilities or a new focus for the business.
Assessment of current competencies in comparison with future competencies produces the gap analysis on which competency based training (CBT) is based. Re-assessment after the training programme provides the organisation with measures of gain and evaluation of transfer of learning to the workplace.

Competency-based training (CBT)

CBT Programmes are used to address gaps in both competences and competencies. UK Government NVQ's and SVQ's are based on both. In many corporate organisations a CBT system tends to focus on providing the skills and knowledge an individual needs to do their job. The focus is on fulfilling workplace expectations rather than on the learning process itself. This has led to CBT being criticised for failing to achieve competences necessary to promote a learning organisation.

Peter Senge's (1990) concept of a learning organisation promotes the ideal of high emotional involvement of staff, an environment where people continually expand their capacity to create results they genuinely desire. It seeks to encourage innovative and expansive ways of thinking. Expanding upon the shortcomings of CBT vis a vis characteristics of a learning organisation, Macfarlane and Lomas (1994) argue that it tends to address current rather than future practice, promotes conformity, has an inward focus, discourages reflection and is control rather than empowerment based.

For some, CBT by focusing on component parts rather than a more holistic, systemic view of an organisations needs appears to be reminiscent of Taylorism and Scientific Management. Our experience at ConsultSeven is that this is too simplistic a comparison, discounting the positive aspects of corporate culture. However, the debate is a healthy

one as it encourages a critical perspective of management philosophy and the organisation from which improvements can be made.

A competency-based approach: the pros and cons

PROS

- An organisation that invests in defining competence sends out a clear message to everyone about the behavioural indicators upon which they will be assessed.

- Through getting involved staff soon understand the objectives and processes of the business and their own role and responsibilities relevant to it.

- Staff are able to track their competence development against a plan and see themselves develop. This can be both meaningful and motivational.

- Training needs are more easily identified and monetary value of applied learning and behaviour assessed.

- Managers are assisted to select and develop staff.

CONS

- Some staff react to being categorised, particularly at a lower level than their colleagues and resent a perceived reduced status.

- Low management commitment, infrequent performance appraisals and lack of ownership can result in some staff viewing it as a 'tick box operation' they conform to or seek to manipulate to justify a pay increase.

Implementation: practical suggestions

In the enthusiasm to improve performance it's easy to underestimate the impact of introducing competency profiling. Staff will require reassurance regarding it's use and benefits. Forward thinking management, HR and training professionals should consider change management methods to introduce a programme.

Many employers have embraced the concept of competency profiling, commissioned a firm of specialist consultants to design a competency framework only to have it rejected by staff. This can often be caused by inaccurate design and lack of staff ownership. The most effective applications have been where staff have been involved in all stages of design and implementation. To facilitate this requires a collaborative approach by the designer that allows staff to contribute their experience and technical expertise.

For the system to be effective it must be:

1. representative of skills, knowledge, attitude and behaviour.

2. easy to use and communicate

3. co-designed and owned by the people who use it

4. can be modified to include upgrades to role

5. assessment processes made transparent to the individual, and include self-assessment.

6. provide validity of impact upon business objectives.

Conclusion

Competency profiling, if designed and managed effectively is a valuable tool for both the individual and organisation. It has the potential to facilitate training, development and learning, making a measurable increase to performance and profits. To maximise return at all levels the steps outlined should be considered within the context of the evolving needs of the business and culture.

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