Competencies - A Brief Overview of Development and Application to Public and Private Sectors[1]

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Abstract

Competencies and competency-based human resources management (CBHRM) are in common practice in many private sector areas and on the rise in many Canadian federal government departments and agencies. While organizations have used the idea of competencies for over fifty years, the expansion of the competency movement within the private sector and, now, into the public one, has resulted in a proliferation of definitions, tools, models and applications. All of which are not universally understood and applied.

This paper is a review of the competency literature and an attempt to shed some additional light on the field. It addresses some of the issues associated with the validity and quality of CBHRM implementation. It outlines the pros and cons of competency use through a discussion of the efficacy of competency models and the advantages and disadvantages of CBHRM.

The findings of the paper suggest CBHRM is most effective when competencies are linked closely to proven strategic planning processes and measurable organizational performance standards. In the current planning environment of the public sector, there is a concern that CBHRM may reinforce inappropriate HRM approaches and, therefore, not support the broader objectives of the government of Canada in the areas of globalization, social diversity, governance, and the knowledge economy. More work remains to be done to validate competency utilization in the Canadian federal public sector.

This paper examines competencies and competency use in competency-based human resource management (CBHRM). Considerable confusion has arisen with respect to the use of

Fitzgerald, 1997; Austin et al., 1996; Lado & Wilson, 1994) have expressed concern about the lack of clarity with respect to specific competency issues. What follows is a discussion of these

of human resources in the public sector.

The paper is intended to be a general inquiry into the competency movement, assessing current

of competency-based models in the public sector. Given the problematic nature of strategic

surprisingly, uncovered as many questions as it sought to answer.

In studying the competency area, one is immediately struck by the lack of uniform definitions,

very fine lines of definition distinction with terms such as competence, competency,

competence as the "power, ability, capacity to do, for a, task", whereas Merriam Webster defines

that competence and competency are synonymous as are competences and competencies. It

competencies then common parlance can't be far behind.

employee's capacity to meet (or exceed) a job's requirements by producing the job outputs at an

environments." He goes on to adapt Boyatzis' (1982) definition of competency and states that "a

of one's self-image, social role, or a body of knowledge— which results in effective and/or

Competency-based human resource management on the other hand takes the broad term of

competencies that make up an individual's overall competence and matches them with required

which competencies are available to an organization can help inform and direct HRM

culture.

Zemke (1982) interviewed several experts in the field to determine "precisely what makes a competency" and he captured his findings thusly:

> "Competency, competencies, competency models, and competency-based training are all Humpty Dumpty words meaning only what the definer wants them to mean. The problem comes not from malice, stupidity or marketing avarice, but instead from some basic procedural and philosophical differences among those racing to define the concept and to set the model for the way the rest of us will use competencies."

The American Compensation Association defines competencies as " . . . individual performance behaviours that are observable, measurable and critical to successful individual or corporate performance" (Canadian HR Reporter-Press Release, 1996).

Defining competency fully is not as simple as addressing the individual application. Other terms such as organizational competence and core competency emerge which potentially permit improved strategic human resource management but require defining nonetheless. Organizational competence and core competency link an organization's essential values and business to those of its employees. Core competency can refer to either an organization or an individual and resource-based analysis (Lado and Wilson, 1994) suggests a tight link between individual and organization core competencies is a good way to achieve sustained competitive advantage. One definition of employee core competency, for example, suggests "(it is) a principal or critically essential competency for successful job performance for a given job at a given level in an organization hierarchy" (Dubois, 1993).

Fogg (1994) defines organization core competency as "those few internal competencies at which you are very, very good, better than your competition, and that you will build on and use to beat the competition and to achieve your strategic objectives."

The present study is concerned more with establishing the linkages between organizational (core) competencies, individual (core) competencies, and job-specific competencies as these relate to organizational effectiveness and executive control of the human resources (HR) function.

Differences in definitions notwithstanding, Hendry and Maggio (1996) suggest that when competencies are linked to the broader goals of an organization, the following common elements emerge as outcomes of a comprehensive competency model:

- Identification of characteristics and behaviours that differentiate top performers from others in relation to their contribution to strategic objectives;

- Clarification, communication, assessment, and development of characteristics that focus individuals on core organization goals;

- Practical observation help prescribe and validate behavioural descriptions that achieve the desired results;

- Description of skills, attitudes, traits, and behaviours that can be attached to pay, performance measurement, hiring criteria, training, organizational staffing, career development, and succession planning.

Origin of Competency Profiling

Furnham (1990) states that "the term competence is new and fashionable, but the concept is old. Psychologists interested in personality and individual differences, organizational behaviour and psychometrics have long debated these questions of personality traits, intelligence and other abilities."

Competency-based methodology was pioneered by Hay-McBer company founder David McClelland, a Harvard University psychologist in the late 1960's and early 1970's (Czarnecki, 1995). McClelland set out to define competency variables that could be used in predicting job performance and that were not biased by race, gender, or socioeconomic factors. His research helped identify performance aspects not attributable to a worker's intelligence or degree of knowledge and skill. McClelland's article, appearing in American Psychologist in 1973, entitled "Testing for Competence Rather Than for Intelligence," was a key point of development of the competency movement as an alternative to the intelligence testing movement.

McClelland's (1973) competency methodology can be summed up in two factors: "Use of Criterion Samples" or systematically comparing superior performing persons with less successful persons to identify successful characteristics and "Identification of Operative Thoughts and Behaviours that are Causally Related to Successful Outcomes" or the best predictor of what persons can and will do in present and future situations is what they have actually done in similar past situations.

Competency Profiling

A competency profile is generally composed of five to ten competencies but can include as many or as few as are required to accurately reflect performance variations in the position. For example, a competency model for a public servant might include initiative, cooperation, analytical thinking, and a desire to help the client. Competency-based models are used to recruit, select, train, and develop employees. Unfortunately, the aforementioned lack of rigour in terminology can lead to loosely defined and improperly implemented CBHRM.

Competency profile development can be handled in a number of ways, two of which are the top-down and bottom-up approaches. The top-down approach generally involves picking, based on a strategic analysis of the organization's performance objectives, an array of competencies from a dictionary of competencies and assessing those for a particular position or class of positions. The

shortcoming associated with this approach is that the competencies survey is carried out as an additional step separate from the creation of the profile. The top-down process has the potential to reduce the applied face validity of the profile and, subsequently, reduce employee buy-in.

The bottom-up approach on the other hand involves exploratory checklist surveys and subsequent confirmatory interviews to derive the competencies from employees, thereby increasing the face-validity and simultaneously developing the assessment questions to tap into them. In addition to these potential benefits, bottom-up approaches may result in employees being directly involved in the development of competency profiles that will describe behaviours that are relevant to their tasks. This is useful for gaining employee understanding of, input to, buy-in, and loyalty to the process (North, 1993).

Competency-Based HRM Models

Defining Models in General

Typically, a model is defined as "an imitation or an abstraction from reality that is intended to order and simplify our view of that reality while still capturing its essential characteristics" (Forcese & Richer, 1973). It is a logical structure. Models can be either implicit or explicit. Implicit models do not clearly specify the interrelationships involved in the model but merely assume or imply their presence and, to this extent, are based on intuition. By contrast, an explicit model forces the individual to think clearly about and account for all the important interrelationships involved in a problem.

In good model design it is crucial that both the model and the individual relationships involved be tested or validated. This objective is not met when there is complete reliance on intuition and this has the potential of building a model with poorly specified or, in some cases, erroneously specified relationships. As a result, explicit models are preferred to implicit ones (Pindyck and Rubinfeld, 1976).

Defining Competency Models

Dubois (1993) in defining competency models states that they "provide the adhesion or "glue" that is necessary among the elements of an organization's human resource management system. By this I mean that competency models help organizations take a unified and coordinated approach to designing the human resource management system, including job design, hiring, performance improvement, employee development, career planning or pathing, succession planning, performance appraisals, and the selection and compensation systems for a job. Therefore, any investment an organization makes in competency model development work has benefits beyond the usefulness of the results for HRD purposes."

He further describes a competency model as being able to capture "those competencies that are required for satisfactory or exemplary job performance within the context of a person's job roles,

responsibilities, and relationships in an organization and its internal and external environments" and is ". . . generally very detailed and might include, for example, a description of the job setting, the job tasks and activities, the job outputs, the employee competencies that are required the job tasks, and the quality standards for outputs . . . the contents of the competency model (models) are then converted, in a highly systematic manner, to a curriculum plan."

Dubois (1996) suggests the following minimum standards needed to be established and maintained when competency modelling research and development methods are adopted and practiced:

1. Competency models that result from the research and development processes must be aligned with the organisations's strategic goals and business objectives.

2. Research and development methods used should produce valid and reliable competency models.

3. Organization leaders must consistently endorse and support the use of a competency-driven approach as a key ingredient to the organization's strategic success.

4. Competency models must be sufficiently comprehensive to identify the competencies that distinguish exemplary employee performance.

5. Outputs from the competency model must be technically reliable and valid and acceptable to the client.

Competency-Based HRM - Advantages

Valid and reliable competency-based HRM models can produce a number of positive outcomes. For example, CBHRM models can:

*   directly link individual competencies to organizational strategies and goals
*   develop competencies profiles for specific positions or roles, matching the correct individuals to task sets and responsibilities
*   enable continual monitoring and refinement of competency profiles
*   facilitate employee selection, evaluation, training, and development
*   assist employers in hiring individuals with rare or unique competencies that are difficult and costly to develop
*   assist organizations in ranking competencies for compensation and performance management

Competency-based HRM - Disadvantages

However, less valid and reliable competency-based HRM models can result in negative

outcomes. For example, they can:
- develop less meaningful competencies in organizations without clear visions of their goals or strategies
- be quite expensive and time-consuming to administer
- reduce core organizational competencies understanding as a result of poor employee buy-in
- preserve the organizational status quo and in adequately address soft, integrative and/or innovative competencies such as intercultural or cross-cultural competency
- add nothing in organizations that have difficulty in differentiating between successful and unsuccessful performance and when the competencies are too "generic"

Competency Experience - General

The American Compensation Association (1996) conducted a major survey of 217 mid to large size organizations to determine their use and experience with competencies. The survey pointed to wide use of competencies, but to varying degrees of rigour and application. The survey found organizations using competencies for:

- Communicating valued behaviours and organizational culture (75% agreed competencies have a positive effect)

- "Raising the bar" of performance for all employees (59% agreed)

- Emphasizing people (rather than job) capabilities as a way to gain competitive advantage (42% agreed)

- Encouraging cross-functional and team behaviour (34% agreed)

The survey authors cautioned that "for many of these goals, however, the jury is still out as to whether competency-based HR applications are doing what senior HR practitioners would like."

Close to 60% of responding organizations with competency-based applications for staffing, training, and performance management had the programs in place for less than a year when the survey was conducted in 1996. Sixty-nine percent of competency-based compensation systems were in development or still in their first year of implementation. The report points out that competency-based HR applications are evolutionary rather than revolutionary, in that they are treated as add-ons to existing HR practices. "They are clearly not throwing away their existing systems, they are using competencies as a way to clarify what performance matters."

Respondents in the research study listed senior management, high performers, and functional experts as the top three sources of information to develop competencies. The study also noted that competencies tended to highlight organizational behaviours rather than job-related skills. Zeroing in on those competencies which add real value to the business is key. "If you get the

competency model wrong you do not add value . . . organizations must ask themselves if they're being as rigorous as they need to be" (American Compensation Association, 1996).

Competency Experience - Private Sector

Recent surveys indicate widespread use of competency-based human resource models by banks, insurance companies, management consulting firms, technology companies, transportation companies, utility companies, delivery companies, retail eating outlets, manufacturing industries, and mining companies. Industry publications suggest ongoing use of competencies in the private sector, but the extent of use remains uncertain.

For example, North American Life (NAL) used the Hay system in 1995 (Orr, 1995) to link competency, performance management, and pay. They came up with a short list of 10 competencies — analytical thinking, conceptual thinking, customer focus, developing people, flexibility, information seeking, listening and understanding and responding, performance excellence, team leadership, and teamwork — specific to NAL using a standardized menu of competencies to survey employees and identify proficiencies relevant to each job

Other private sector initiatives reported by Czarnecki (1995) include the finance department of McDonald's Canada which introduced competency modelling for its 50 employees and Purolator Courier which used a project team to identify 10 to 30 technical competencies (e.g. keyboard, software skills) and five to eight behavioural competencies (e.g. time planning, initiative, telephone presence).

Winter (1996) has described how Guardian Insurance uses competencies to assess and reward individual performance in terms of core competencies that reflect the company's strategic focus and priorities and how Bell Sygma applies the notion of competencies to all aspects of human resources management, starting with the HR plan. In the latter case, gap analysis provides the basis for behavioural-based interviews to select candidates who fit with their core competencies, for an individual development process, for succession planning, and for job definition determined by the competencies an employee applies.

Competency Experience - Public Sector

Current Prospects for the Competency Movement in the Public Sector

A wide variety of generic competency models are available for performance improvement when driven by a strategic planning process in both the private and public sectors (Bryson, 1995; Dror, 1997; Dubois, 1996; Lado and Wilson, 1994; Snell & Youndt, 1995). These models typically link organizational core competencies with employee core competencies, as distinguished from employee job-specific competencies, in order to establish a direct linkage between the organization's priorities and employee behaviours. Creating effective linkages can be problematic and the above mentioned potential advantages and disadvantages of the competency

approach also apply to competency programs in the public sector. For example, the British civil service designed a competence checklist to replace its traditional, centrally-controlled selection criteria and it resulted in a pattern of strengths and weaknesses similar to those reported in the North American literature on competencies (North, 1993).

Bryson (1995) describes several methods by which public sector and nonprofit organizations can identify their organizational core competencies as a significant output of the strategic planning process. For example, a strategic consideration of a public sector organization's strengths and weaknesses can identify its organizational core competencies in concrete terms. Improvement of organizational core competencies can then be achieved through coordinated adjustment of HRM administrative policies and practices covering all, or selected, personnel functions. In some cases even in public sector settings, it may be important to ensure that an organization's competency model be explicitly future oriented, rather than implicitly historic, and that it identify levels of superior strategic performance rather than levels of threshold, or minimum, operational performance (Jacobs, 1989). For example, entry level recruitment to government based on the assessment of potential could include future oriented expectations in the priority assigned to different competencies, and in the design of competency assessment instruments.

Using a top-down approach, Dror's (1997) generic strategic analysis of the alternative roles of senior civil services links the core capacities of the organization with the attributes of its individual members. These are equivalent to organizational core competencies and employee core competencies, respectively. Dror's recommended future-oriented core capacities (organizational core competencies) include: intervening in history, energizing, adjusting social architecture, risk-taking, handling complexity, making harsh tragic choices, and mobilizing support for constructive destruction.

A similar typology of functions unique to the public sector provided by Carroll (1997) includes: reconciling differences, achieving agreement, and using legitimate authority to carry agreements into effect. Dror suggest that these core capacities can be actualized through utilization of six attributes — super-professionalism, innovation-creativity, merit-elitist but society reflecting, virtuous, autonomous but subordinated, and mission-oriented — (employee core competencies) of the senior executive cadre. Dror believes that these executive core competencies are required to carry out higher order tasks which have strategic importance in determining the relative success of government in an era of globalization and rapid change.

Another, complementary, description of competencies which distinguishes the public sector from the private sector is provided by Sherwood (1997) — acceptance of the legitimacy of the democratic process and elected officials, an ethic of responsibility to the public at large, and respect for the expertise of other professionals. Taken together and extended, these competencies provide an alternative to the simple emulation of private sector competency models and profiles.

To evaluate the potential for success of the competency movement in the public sector, it is necessary to relate inputs to outputs. At the current juncture in the history of governance, the

relationship between elected officials and their bureaucracies is severely strained, resulting in serious constraints on the strategic planning process (Carroll, 1997; Sherwood, 1997). The competency movement in the public sector will probably be less connected to an effective strategic planning process, and thus will be less effective than it may be in the private sector. Exceptions to this pessimistic forecast may occur in public sector organizations which enjoy both a strong mandate and an effective, ongoing consultation process among all its key stakeholders (Bryson, 1995; Austin et al, 1996).

Public Sector HRM Administrative Practices on Competencies

One of the main criticisms of the current HRM system in the federal public sector is the lack of effective internal integration among the sub-disciplines of the personnel function. Another main criticism is the uneven quality of strategic flexibility of the sub-disciplines (e.g., training is flexible, compensation is inflexible). Internal integration of HRM occurs when all of the personnel specialty functions work in a seamless fashion in the explicit pursuit of corporate strategy. Competency-based systems operate effectively at the level of individual employees without regard to their future career within the organization.

Career-based HRM, on the other hand, is more effective when individuals spend most of their career with the same organization, such as the military, police forces, religious organizations, and, to a lesser extent, the foreign service. To date, most successful applications of competency-based approaches have been in the area of human resources development—i.e., staff training—oriented to organizational performance improvement.

Some authors suggest caution in the application of competency-based approaches to other HRM practices—e.g., Dubois, 1996, p. 66. Others note the limited diffusion, even in the private sector, of economically viable changes to compensation-related employment practices which result in high performance (Pfeffer, 1996). Nonetheless, the competency-based approach currently is the main available alternative to centralized military-style career management systems for the pursuit of an eventual internal integration of HRM strategies and practices (Miles & Snow, 1984).

In addition to the limited evaluation of competency-based approaches to HRM, there are other barriers to implementation at the level of individual HRM sub-systems and practices. Senior managers are frequently under pressure to imitate practices in other organizations, without being sufficiently familiar with contextual differences and tacit aspects of implementation methods. At the same time, HRM managers are often poorly positioned within the organization to ensure the strategic linkages that are required for success (Pfeffer, 1996; Johns, 1993). This means that the transfer of high performance technologies from one organization to another is a non-trivial affair. Successful implementation demands considerable management attention, expertise, and local contextual confirmation, even when the competency-based approach has been well validated in the original organization. Strategic crisis, regulatory and social policy initiatives, and broad access to detailed contextual information all promote successful innovation (Bryson, 1995, p. 234; Johns, 1993) of competency-based HRM administrative practices.

The Competency Movement and Staffing in the Public Sector

Many public sector organizations are experiencing, or have experienced, major changes in their strategic orientations. Snow and Snell (1993) illustrate how staffing plays a key role in the realization and consolidation of major shifts in strategy and structure, ranging from a job-person match function, to a strategy implementation function, through to a strategy formation function. An effective competency-based staffing model in the public sector will require improved methods for designing and maintaining managerial assessment and selection tools appropriate to its function or transitional state. Consultative methods (e.g. joint consultation), effective documentation, and active strategic monitoring and maintenance is essential for the attainment and long-term viability of functionally appropriate competency-based staffing models in the public sector (Austin et al 1996).

Austin, Klimoski, and Hunt (1996) have recently designed a micro-level framework that uses stakeholder participation to develop and implement selection systems in the public sector. Their framework is based on the values of fairness, technical adequacy, and feasibility as viewed individually and collectively by political entities, management, labour unions, system designers, and human resource managers. A comparable analysis of key values of different groups of stakeholders could also be optimized for agency or ministry strategic orientation—e.g., (Braithewaite, 1994) to reflect the globalization effects noted by Dror (1997). Social diversity issues affecting merit could be resolved through this methodology, and could result in the identification of new competencies that support diversity while addressing the need to recognize and measure 'soft' competencies (Donnellon & Kolb, 1994).

The operationalization of a new staffing model can be illustrated by Dror's (1997, p. 12) employee core competency of super-professionalism. The particular assessment and developmental opportunities available in each government's historical context are taken as a point of departure for a new competency-based model. The essence of Dror's super-professionalism is based on practical intelligence and tacit knowledge, thus taking the middle ground mapped out by Sternberg (1995) in a recent theoretical debate on competencies. In the Canadian context at least one researcher has attempted to validate a measure of managerial practical intelligence in relation to candidate performance on a managerial assessment centre (Kerr, 1995). This kind of research and policy-based development of new competency frameworks for staffing is not yet widespread in public sector organizations, due in part to some of the constraints on strategic planning previously noted.

Another reason for the lag in development of competency-based staffing is the difficulty of assessing non-managerial and work group contributions to organizational core competencies in public sector organizations. This problem arises in part from the relative difficulty in measuring results and performance and in attributing improvements to changes in competencies, as opposed to other factors. Even if the causal role of competencies in performance can be logically argued, there may be a major time lag and other factors that mediate the relationship between competencies and organizational performance, especially given the increasing and differential

impacts of globalization on performance expectations (Bryson, 1995, p.294; Maor & Stevens, 1997; Suedfeld, 1992).

Joint consultative approaches could be used for developing competency models and assessment methods, as an immediate proxy for quantitative, objective measures of results, pending improvements in criterion measurement for performance at individual, team and organizational levels of analysis (Austin & Villanova, 1992). For example, staff union input, among others, to the development of competency-based assessment processes has been shown to be effective in optimizing conflicting goals for the design of a public sector selection system in the United States (Austin et al, 1996).

Theoretical Issues in Competencies

Recent resource-based economic analysis of the theoretical underpinning of CBHRM programs has raised a number of troubling questions (Lado and Wilson, 1994). For example, most competency programs in the private sector have been developed around the notion of a firm developing a sustainable or durable competitive advantage—as manifested by larger profit margins or market share—over its competitors. One characteristic of the competencies associated with this competitive advantage is that they must not lend themselves to easy duplication. Therefore, simple imitation of another organization's successful program is no guarantee of sustained competitive advantage unless the new HR system attributes are unique, causally ambiguous, and synergistic. Competency programs lacking these characteristics are easy for other organizations to imitate exactly and thus obtain the same competitive position (Pfeffer, 1996). Most approaches to competency program design do not deal explicitly and thoroughly with these issues, making their long term success largely a matter of chance, even in the private sector.

Further analytical work is required to adapt these competitive concepts to the values production and governance functions of public sector institutions (e.g., Austin, James & Hunt, 1996; Denhart, 1993; and Dror, 1997) and to the articulation of methods of transferring competency approaches across governmental functions and levels. Standard capitalistic economy theory is premised on the assumption that firms are in business to maximize, or at least make, a profit. Unlike the typical objectives of a public sector organization public sector, this objective is unambiguous. In a rational, economic environment, the competencies that position a firm to reach this objective will be embraced and those that do not will be rejected. Moreover, certain precision tools, such as human resources accounting, can be applied to measure the extent to which this objective is being accomplished. Thus, consideration has to be given to the cost-benefit of extensive competency assessment for a given job versus reliance on generic competency definition. Equivalent accounting and accountability models have not been established for public sector HR activities.

As noted previously, the professional literature is quite persuasive in suggesting that any CBHRM approach should be tied to strategic objectives. The difficulty arises from the reality

that while the CBHRM approach is well-founded, its applicability to government is somewhat questionable as governments exist to make private and social valuations coincide. In other words, governments in a democracy do not exist to maximize profits. Instead, they maximize the social welfare function that includes not only measurable monetary benefits but some benefits that are intangible and cannot be easily measured. These benefits are accounted for by an imputed value. The government may, therefore, engage in activities for other than financial gains. Hence, there is a requirement to link CBHRM to the social welfare function mentioned above as well as to the corporate strategic objectives. As previously suggested, the difficulties of reliably embedding organizational and individual competencies within strategy apply equally to public sector organizations.

A final theoretical and professional consideration in the area of industrial and organizational psychology is the resurfacing of the debate between the competency movement and the standardized testing movement. This renewed debate was published in the journal, American Psychologist, over twenty years after the publication of McClelland's original article on testing for competence instead of intelligence (Cowan, 1994; McClelland, 1994; Barrett, 1994; Boyatzis, 1994). The essence of this debate revolves around the professional standards required to ensure that a rigorous valid methodology in defining competencies, in designing the methods for their measurement, and for their use in decision-making. This debate has parallels in other areas of applied psychology related to HRM (Lowe, 1993) and its implications should be carefully considered in designing and implementing any competency-based program.

Conclusion

This paper provides a broad overview of the concept of competencies, its origins, and application in human resource management. A prime issue with CBHRM is that the approach, being relatively recent in the public sector, has not yet been assessed. Empirical data are, as yet, not available to measure program success and to validate underlying models, implicit or explicit. Some desirable characteristics of such programs, however, would be the establishment of clear linkages to strategic corporate objectives, the specification of the models in use, and the anticipation of the on-going need for self-correcting processes.

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