

WHITE PAPER

The Role of Competencies in Career Development

Presented to the U.S. Department of State
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The Role of Competencies in Career Development: A White Paper Presented to the U.S. Department of State

INTRODUCTION

Competency modeling is an activity that is becoming more and more common in organizations. It is quickly becoming the “hub” around which the entire human capital cycle is being organized. Included in the cycle is employee career development where competencies, if constructed and used correctly, have significant potential for adding to the success of an organization. Competencies can provide valuable direction to individuals as well as to organizations. They are the focus of specific activities listed on an individual development plan (IDP) but also guide an organization’s broader career development philosophy.

The sections that follow describe the basics of developing competencies and their impact on all parts of the human capital cycle with a particular focus on the application of competencies in the area of career development. This information will provide insight into the countless ways in which well defined competencies could bring value to the U.S. Department of State.

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

The U.S. Department of State provides professional benefits to its Civil Service and Foreign Service employees, including a wealth of tools and programs for career development. Among these is the Career Development Resource Center (CDRC) which provides career development assistance and counseling to employees.

A key element of any career development program is a focus on the skills or competencies needed for one’s current job as well as those that must be developed for future roles within the organization. Competencies are typically defined as the knowledge, skills, abilities or other personal characteristics that differentiate highly effective performers from others. In other words, competencies are those things that enable an employee to be successful on the job.

Competencies are important to organizations (whether private sector or public sector) because they serve as the “hub” around which so many human capital initiatives are being organized (see Figure 1). Defining the competencies linked to individual jobs or job families allows organizations to recruit and select individuals with the capability of starting and achieving success on the job (e.g., Fluency in Multiple Languages, Ability to Build Relationships). It also allows organizations to design training programs that ensure employees have the job-specific knowledge and skills necessary for performing their jobs. Competencies also help organizations define clear expectations for employees and appraise employee performance for the purpose of determining whether expectations are being met. Competencies also serve as the foundation for creating development programs which help employees respond to appraisal feedback and further enhance their ability to be successful in current as well

as future work roles. Finally, clearly defined competencies allow organizations to track levels of competence throughout the organization and proactively fill (or avoid) any gaps through succession planning efforts.

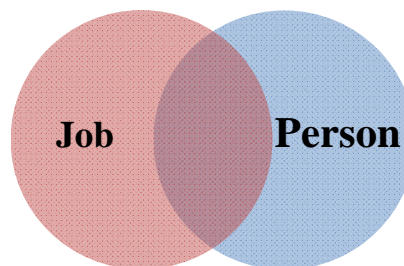
Figure 1: Human Capital Cycle



FOCUS ON CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Of particular focus in the human capital cycle for this paper is the step involving employee career development. Career development is the act of addressing the degree of overlap between skills required by the job and the skills of the person (see Figure 2). When this level of overlap is less than desired, career development activities are undertaken in an effort to increase the fit between person and job.

Figure 2: Model of Job-Person Fit



Most people are selected into organizations because they have a certain set of competencies that allow them to be successful in the job for which they are chosen. However, it is the responsibility of the employee as well as the employee's leader to focus not only on the competencies important for their current job but also to develop

the competencies that will be needed in subsequent roles in the organization. How to go about doing this is not always clear. Having an empirically-based, appropriately developed set of competencies (competency model), strongly endorsed by the leadership of an organization and relevant for jobs throughout the organization, can help tremendously. Such competencies could be developed for the Department of State and, as such, could greatly support and enhance the career development efforts of the CDRC.

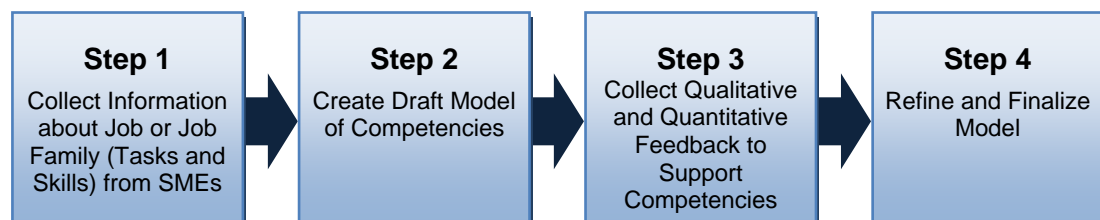
SOLUTION DESCRIPTION

The State Department is made up of many roles within various functional areas in both the Civil Service and Foreign Service. Employees need a variety of skills to be successful in any given role. The skills and competencies necessary for individual jobs might be clearly defined but an overall, organizing set of competencies (competency model) would add significant value. This would include specific, behaviorally-based competencies that capture the organization-wide, core/general competencies as well as the functionally-specific technical requirements of individual State Department jobs or job families. Such competency models could be used for selection, training and performance management but also for enhancing the developmental activities throughout the Office of Civil Service Personnel. They would provide a guide for what is important in various roles across the State Department. Employees could be assessed on the competencies and use the results to develop Individual Development Plans (IDPs) designed such that employees demonstrate competencies achieved through IDP implementation. The process of building competencies would involve several current employees and, as a residual effect, the activities involved would immediately help participating employees understand and apply the competencies to their own job.

SOLUTION IMPLEMENTATION

Competencies can be designed using a very rational process that takes advantage of the wealth of knowledge and expertise present in the current organization. In short, subject matter experts (SMEs) share knowledge of their jobs – the tasks required and the skills and characteristics needed to complete the tasks successfully – and then provide qualitative and quantitative metrics related to the competencies that are created using their expert information. The process involves activities such as interviews, focus groups and questionnaires. A given model will go through several refinements before reaching final form. Figure 3 provides a brief description of the four most basic steps involved in any competency modeling effort.

Figure 3: Steps for Creating a Competency Model



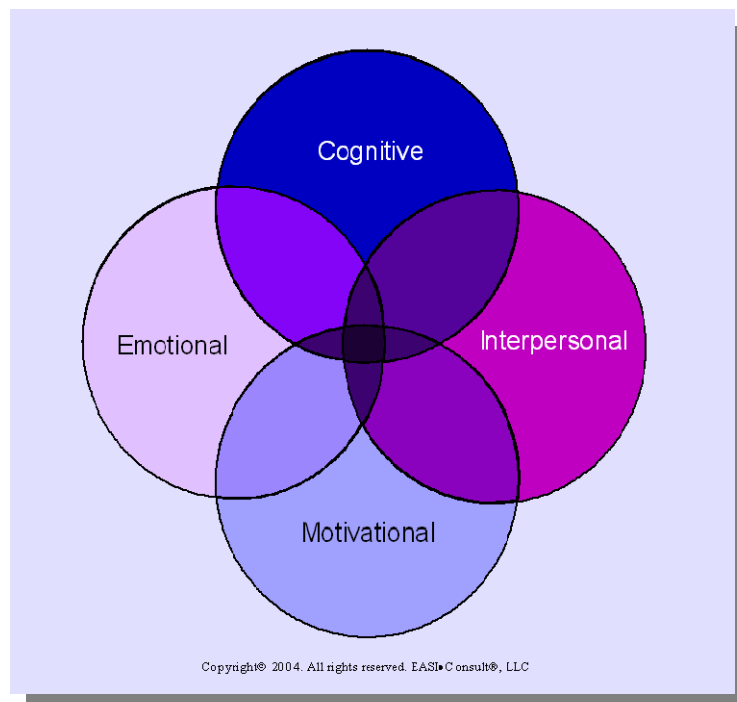
The structure of a competency model is such that it provides clear and specific behavioral indicators of success. That is, a given competency is defined by the specific behaviors an employee must rely upon regularly to be successful in the job and organization.

BEHAVIORAL VERSUS TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES

A common misconception is that all competencies are similar in nature. A clear distinction exists, however, between job-specific knowledge or skills (*Technical Competencies*) and robust personal characteristics (*Behavioral Competencies*). Both are important, yet the distinction is equally important. While the first is easily seen as linked to the content of the job, the latter tends to transfer across jobs and is enduring. This distinction has strong implications for all areas of HR initiatives.

Behavioral Competencies typically fall into one of four broad categories or factors. (See Figure 4.) Individuals, successful in their career, tend to rely on strong cognitive abilities. They are continuously learning and make sound decisions along the way. Their use of interpersonal skills is equally important – building relationships and working with others to achieve goals. High achievers bring a motivation level to the job that sets them apart – continuously driving for results and motivating others in the process. Just as important for career success is an emotional strength to succeed – demonstrating adaptability to the changing demands of work and sound temperament.

Figure 4: Four Factors of Behavioral Competencies



Behavioral Competencies are very important and most often determine the success of an employee. Because training employees in Behavioral Competency areas is quite difficult, selecting for these competencies during the hiring process is very important. Behavioral Competencies serve as the foundation on which competencies that are more job-specific and technical in nature sit. Without the foundation, an employee's Technical Competencies are not enough to ensure success.

In contrast, Technical Competencies are also important but are more easily identified in a selection process. They are the basic qualifications that a person should have coming into the job and usually can be trained on quite effectively. They include knowledge and skills directly related to a specific job but do not guarantee an employee's success. Figure 5 helps to illustrate the difference between the two types of competencies and the importance of focusing on core/general competencies when selecting new employees.

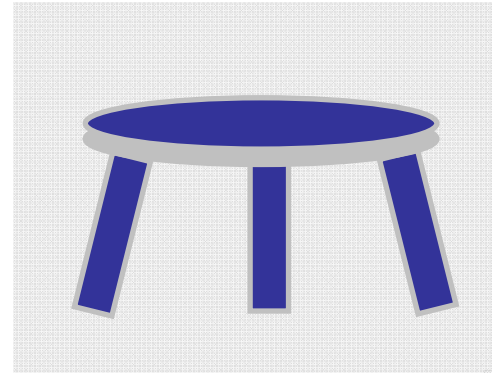
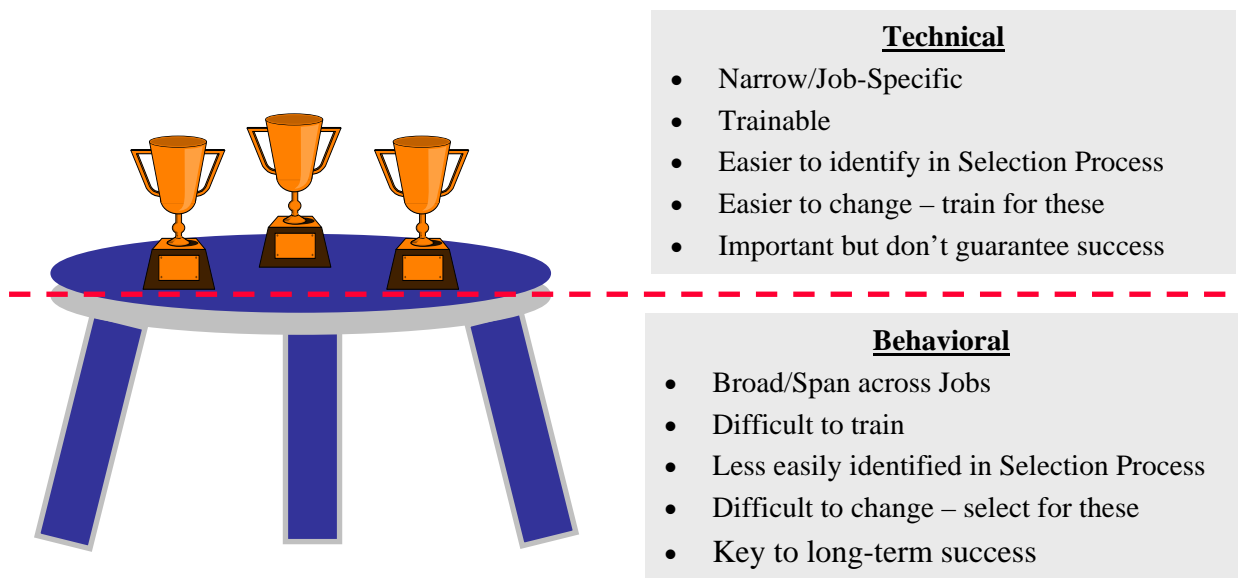
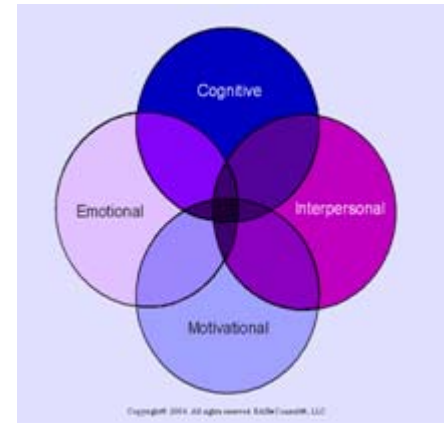
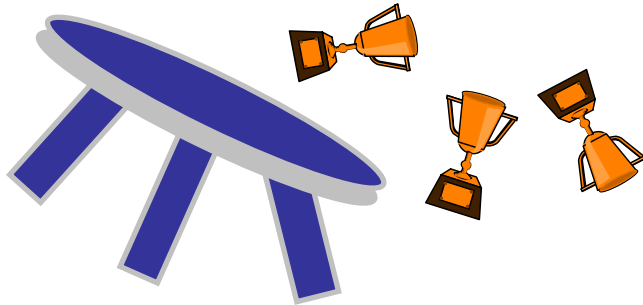


Figure 5: Behavioral and Technical Competencies



Look beyond the trophies to the foundation. The trophies are important but, by themselves, do not guarantee success. What happens if there is no solid foundation of general competence to support the technical skills?

Falling short on Behavioral Competencies accounts for most failures on the job.



BENEFITS OF SOLUTION

Competency models provide benefits to individual human resource initiatives; however, perhaps the most important outcome of implementing a new competency model is that it allows an organization to integrate any number of human resources initiatives, thus creating a continuous cycle of human capital activities as displayed in Figure 1. In fact, a natural by-product of a well developed and leveraged competency model is a common language to understand and measure the effectiveness of recruitment, selection, training, performance management, development, and succession planning activities. After establishing a competency model and thus a common language, employees see the connections between what makes them successful in their current job and where they need to develop in order to advance into future roles.

APPLYING A COMPETENCY MODEL IN A CAREER DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

From a career development perspective, competencies serve as the starting point and foundation for a number of possible career development activities. Some of the most common activities and how competencies play a role in each, are listed here.

Creating IDPs. A competency model provides clear direction for establishing an IDP. Assessing an employee on a set of key competencies (for a current or future role) allows that employee and his/her manager to identify important strengths and gaps (i.e., job-person fit). Using this information, specific action steps can be established for addressing the gaps, thus increasing the fit between person and job. Activities listed in an IDP might include training, coaching and/or developmental assignments (on the job or off the job). When competencies are well defined and behavioral in nature, creating activities for development becomes much easier.

Designing Workshop Content. A competency model can be used as the basis for the design of a training and development workshop. A workshop might focus on an entire

set of competencies or might focus on only one or a few competencies. For example, an important competency might be “Influencing Others.” This competency could be defined as developing and maintaining customer relationships, motivating others to work toward common goals, and facilitating compromise between individuals and departments in an organization. An entire day could be devoted to assessing and developing this competency in a group of workshop participants. Several group and individual exercises could be developed for the purpose of helping participants understand and apply the competency on the job.

Identifying Key Topics for Coaching Sessions. Competencies can also provide specific direction for focus during one-on-one coaching sessions. Working together, an employee and coach might identify a key competency area where the employee is struggling on the job and discuss ways to address the gap. Alternatively, they might choose to address each competency in successive fashion over a period of time, discussing and designing ways to address each competency.

No matter what the activity, competencies play a vital role in career development. The clearer and more behaviorally defined the competences are, and the more accepted they are by the organization as a whole, the more effective an organization’s developmental efforts will be. The next section provides some examples of where EASI•Consult® has helped organizations clearly define a set of competencies and then applied those competencies to one or more of the human resources activities discussed throughout this paper, including career development.

EASI•CONSULT® EXAMPLES OF COMPETENCY APPLICATION PROJECTS

EASI•Consult® has built hundreds of competency models for both private and public sector organizations. Each project is unique and each competency model we build for a client is used for a slightly different purpose. We have created models that serve as a guide for developing selection and appraisal criteria, models that provide a foundation for developmental efforts, models that help organizations plan for leadership succession, and many models that serve more than one purpose. For example, a set of competencies can be used to select a number of employees into an organization, after which those same competencies are used as a guide when creating performance appraisal criteria as well as an IDP for each individual in their new role.

SUMMARY

In summary, competencies are not entirely new to the work world but are growing increasingly popular and have an impact on all phases of the human capital cycle. For this reason, it is vitally important that organizations who undertake the task of building and implementing a set of competencies fully understand the process used to create useful competencies and the important distinction between Behavioral and Technical Competencies. Competencies can have a particularly valuable impact on an organization’s efforts to provide career development opportunities to its employees.

The U.S. Department of State offers significant career support to its employees. This support could be greatly enhanced by creating specific behavior-based competencies to serve as the foundation of all career development activities. With appropriate support and understanding, such an effort is well within reach.

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