SABPP
SA BOARD FOR PEOPLE PRACTICES
Setting HR standards

SABPP FACT SHEET

NUMBER 6: July 2013

HR COMPETENCIES

Introduction

To build an effective and competent HR team it is necessary to be able to understand exactly what is required from the various jobs, the current strengths of the members of the team and also what improvements in knowledge and skills might be required. This is even more important in situations where heads of HR are asked to re-build an HR team to suit a changing organisation – a project where the stakes are higher and success more urgent. So where do they start?

Depending on the business strategy, an HR business plan will be developed. From this, the most suitable HR organisation structure can be designed. Use of a competency model can then make it quite straightforward to set out the requirements for each HR position in terms of outputs, knowledge, skills and behaviours.

Competency models provide the foundation for a pro-active approach to analysing training needs[1]. If no competence standards have been set, then any attempt to assess the competence levels of staff can only be subjective and therefore possibly inconsistent and unfair.

> Terry Meyer wrote one of the original South African books on competencies, and titled it "Creating Competiveness through Competencies – Currency for the 21st Century", implying that value will be exchanged between buyers and sellers through competencies. His definition of competency is "the integration of knowledge, skill and value orientation, demonstrated to a defined standard in a specific context". (Meyer, T., 1996, p. 34)

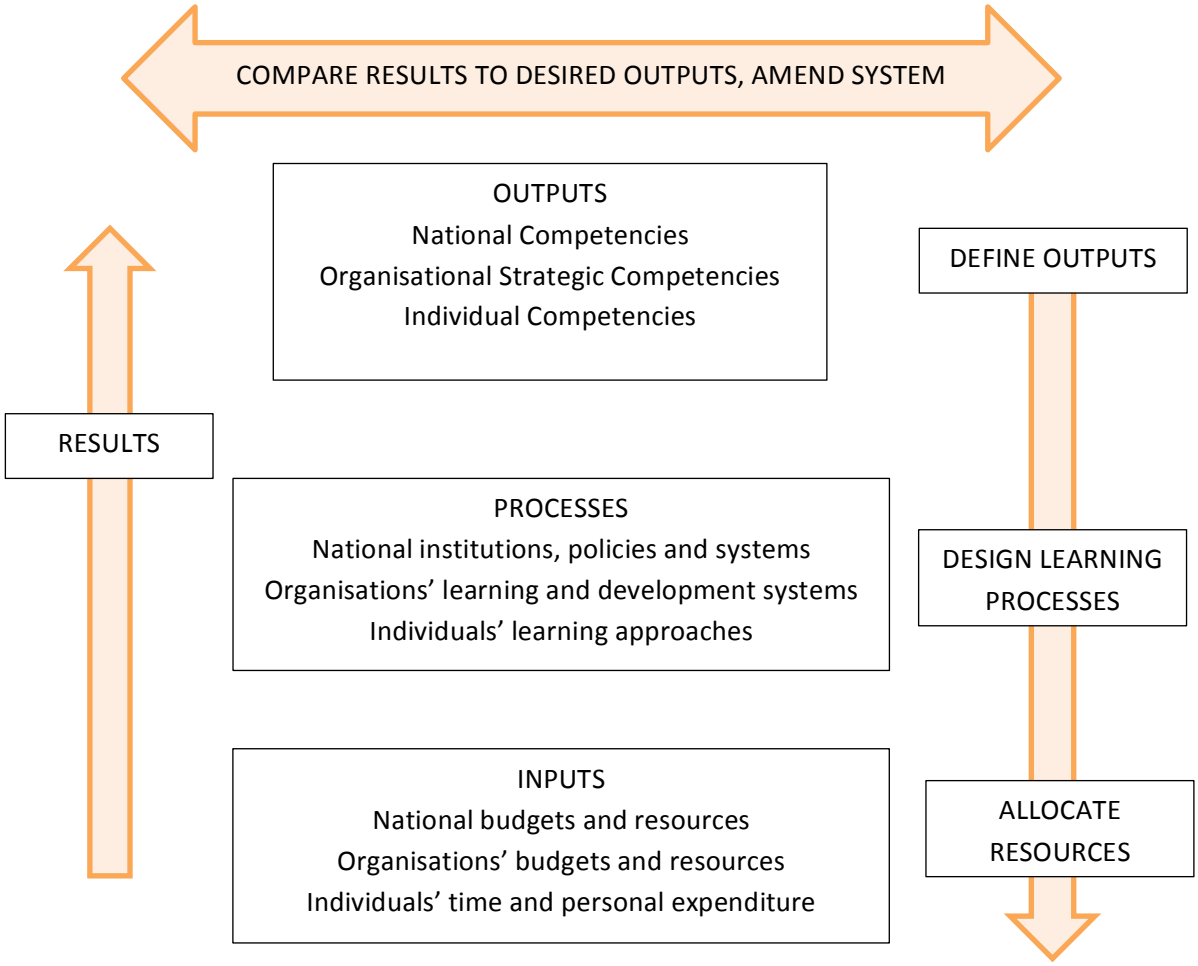
This Fact Sheet will cover theories and uses of competencies in general and then the specific example of an HR competency model and its application in the HR profession. The specific example can be generalised to cover all key skills in an organisation and would thus be useful in any talent management strategy.

[1] *Managing Human Resource Development.* Marius Meyer et. al, 2013, Lexis Nexus

1. Theory

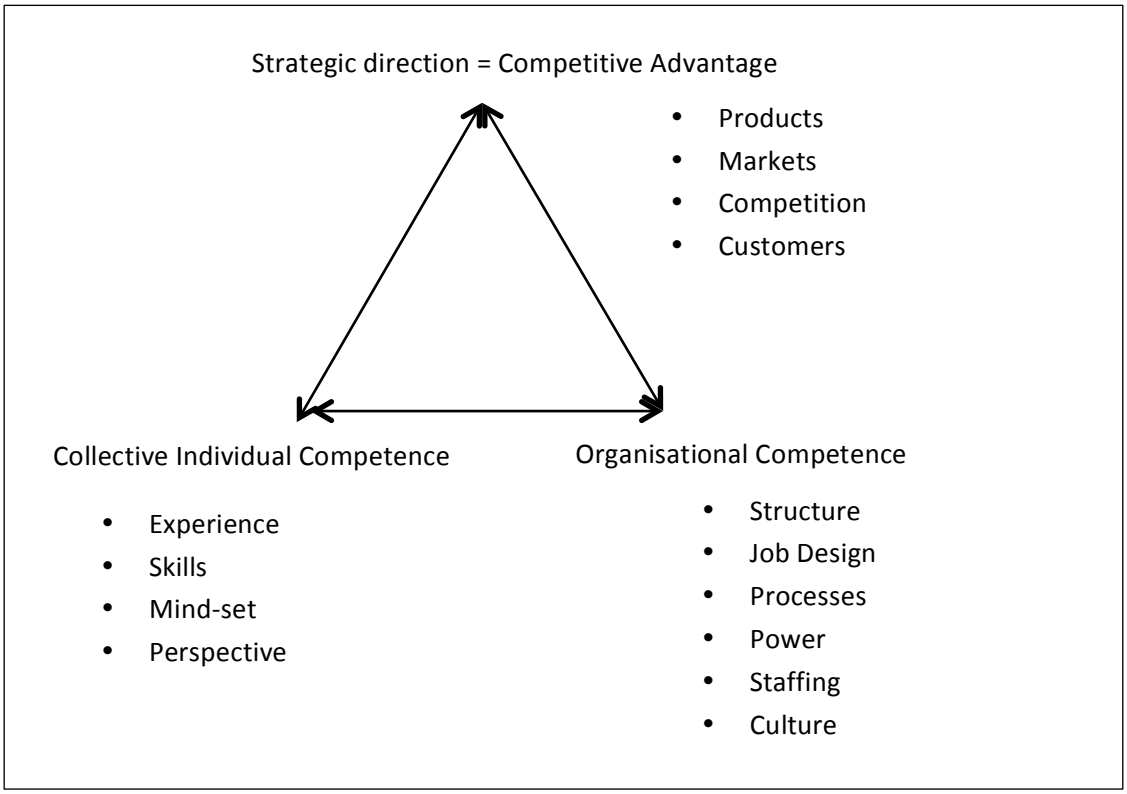
Meyer (1996) points out that the definition of competencies can be approached from the angle of attributes (what a person has in terms of knowledge, skills, motives or traits); performance (what behaviour is demonstrated); and values/ethics (how the person behaves (for example, safety, customer-orientation, team-work, leveraging diversity). In his view, these approaches have to be combined and hence his definition as stated in the box above.

The identification of individual competencies has little value on its own. The creation of a systems view of the creation and development of competencies has tremendous value at national, organisational and individual level, as shown in the diagram adapted from Meyer (1996, p. 41).



It is noted that the relevance of specific competencies at any of these three levels can change over time, as the external environment changes and demands new responses from nations, organisations and individuals. An example of this would be the competence to deal with huge volumes of data/information delivered through social media. This was not even envisaged thirty years ago and is a critical issue in productivity amongst knowledge workers today.

Stephen Drotter, in his book The Performance Pipeline[2], emphasises the need for strategic alignment of the competitive advantage of the organisation, the organisational competencies and collective individual competencies. This is illustrated in the diagram below (Drotter, 2011, p.98)



Competencies at the level of the individual can be defined in respect of:

- Occupational competencies
    - technical – defined by the output needs of that occupation
    - managerial – valid across occupations
- Meta or generic competencies – defined by the "modern world of work" rather than by a specific competency. They may be attributes (such as flexibility) or performance (such as ability to use computers).

Once competencies have been defined for each level of work (because the definition of, for example, assessing client requirements, differs from the level of a sales representative to that of the product development manager), the model needs to be implemented through a structured process which should include:

- Validation of the collection of competencies assigned to each specific job/position in a job profile
- Assessment of current levels of competence of each person against the requirements of his/her job profile
- Establishment of a learning and development plan to fill gaps OR
- Redeployment into a more suitable position.

[2] *The Performance Pipeline, 2011.* Jossey-Bass

2. Uses of competencies

In the NQF

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is based around the definition of what people should be able to do at the end of a specific education or training process. This definition is based on the concept of competencies expressed as outcomes (what the learner is expected to do); standards (how well the learner is expected to perform); and assessment criteria (how to tell when the learner is at the expected level of performance).

This original definition needed to be updated to cope with the increasing requirement for flexibility and adaptability in performing work and hence the increasing importance of underlying learning. This is being catered for in the new definitions under the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations system of the NQF, which will focus on knowledge, skills (practice) and workplace application.

In organisations

Rather than developing the workplace skills plan (annual training plan) based on what training employees and managers feel they would like, the use of a competency model provides a standard against which gaps can be established through assessment and then the appropriate development method can be established. Training might not always be the answer to filling a gap – for example, if there is a gap in the desired level of teamwork as described in the job profile (derived from the competency model), possibly some individual coaching based on feedback from team members might be the appropriate development solution. But where training is the right approach, the use of the competency model ensures that training is focused on important organisational needs.

Stephen Drotter points out that competency models should spell out how specific job families must achieve specific results under specific circumstances. The emphasis is therefore on results, not on activities, and therefore competency models must be job family specific, not generic for an organisation.

3. HR Competencies

Repeated studies during the 2000's[3] demonstrated that:

- HR functions which concentrate on strategic issues make a direct contribution to the success of an organisation;
- Few HR functions play this strategy-setting role, which encompasses activities such as building executive leadership, creating a human capital strategy, and shaping business strategy;
- This strategy-setting role has a much greater business impact than the tactical, strategy support role generally played by HR functions;
- However, the demand on HR professionals continues to be to play multiple roles in the organisation (such as Ulrich's conception of the HR leader with 4 key roles: employee advocate; human capital developer, strategic partner and functional expert). This work has not gone away;

[3] The various studies led by Dave Ulrich and Wayne Brockbank at Michigan State University between 1997 and 2012; the Corporate Leadership Council's 2006 study *Defining critical skills of Human Resource Staff*; the PhD study of Penny Abbott in 2010/11 *HR Management in the South African Socio-Economic Context.*

4. HR Skills Building

Skills building in the HR field needs to take place both at the level of the individual HR practitioner and at the level of the national HR profession.

Skills building at the individual practitioner level will take place from the gap analysis of requirements of the position versus the actual assessed level of competence, leading to an individual development plan. Major employers undertaking this type of gap analysis can identify patterns of lack of skills and put together programmes to address them across the HR function. For example, one organisation's HR Academy decided that the gap in terms of HR practitioners' business acumen necessitated as the first priority a customised programme to build business knowledge and the skills to apply this knowledge to HR work in the organisation.

Skills building at the level of the profession is being driven through the SABPP with interventions including:

- The SABPP's Learning and Quality Assurance Committee and Higher Education Committee will be working with learning providers and universities to consider the Competency Model as part of their HR curriculum development processes;
- A proposal will be put to the Board of the SABPP on the alignment of the Model to SABPP's professional registration levels;
- The SABPP's Candidate development process will be structured to ensure development of the key competencies from the Model;
- The SABPP's Continuing Professional Development Committee will be working to align a new CPD process to the Model;
- Case studies will be written up of implementations at organisational level, to assist with disseminating lessons learned;
- Data will be collected through the SABPP's assessment partners to permit research and benchmarking of HR competencies and to evaluate the impact of competency development.

Thus, the HR Competency Model forms the foundation for a number of related and aligned HR capability building opportunities, thereby contributing to holistic H competence development.

5. Conclusion

Competency models are a well-recognised tool to improve the outcomes of learning and development within organisations because the use of the models can align the standards set for competencies to the requirements of the organisation's strategy. An HR competency model provides a key component for HR professional development and talent management.

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The HR function cannot afford to fall behind in terms of the development of HR practitioner skills. The rapidly changing and expanding demands on the HR function require a systematic approach to development of skills within the function.

The SABPP's National HR Competency Model provides a template within which the HR job roles can be described and profiled. It provides a standard against which skills can be assessed and it provides the foundation for development of world-class yet South African appropriate HR skills. Moreover, the HR Competency Model outlines the key competencies needed to implement the first national HR standards framework (see the August 2013 Fact Sheet on HR Standards). HR professionals and HR teams are encouraged to apply the HR competencies of the national HR Competency Model. Likewise, learning providers and universities should use the Competency Model to design HR curricula and develop HR competence in learners.

Consulting and assessment support for organisations wishing to implement the Competency Model is available through consultancies partnering with the SABPP. For further information, refer to the website and/or contact penny@sabpp.co.za.

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