

## Riding the Wave – Competencies in HR Systems Applications: Do we know what we want?

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Over the last five years, there has been a wave of interest in the development and application of competencies in the HR field. HR practitioners have been promoting the adoption of competency models in practically all areas of HR – from Recruitment & Selection, Training & Development, Career Development, Job Design, Performance Management, Compensation & Benefits, Culture Development, Leadership Development and even Exit Management.

Apparently, part of the eagerness to use Competency Models is a desire to justify a more “scientific” way to give objectivity and importance to some of the more “subjective” areas of HR Management & Development. With competency models, it allows HR practitioners the opportunity to cloak HR practices with a systematic and logical structure of assessment and definition.

Before we go further into the application of competency models, let us realize some fundamentals. Firstly, competencies must be anchored in an organization’s strategic positioning and value proposition. It must reflect the core values of what an organisation stand for. Unfortunately the reality, at times, is that organizations start off with a “cut and paste” set of competencies – either by copying from other organizations or drawing them from a competency dictionary (which is a compilation of competencies and its definitions). Usually, there hasn’t been enough deliberate thought and careful consideration given to articulate the desired sets of competencies which the organisation should strive for.

Secondly, competencies should answer the following key question: What specific knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours do we need in what job sets or clusters to achieve strategy X? Herein, competencies are meant to be the bridge between deliberate actions and sustained results. When all is said and done, competencies give answers to another key question: What does an excellent performer look like in a particular setting?

Usually, competencies can be classified into three tiers: **Core** (reflecting the unique positioning and culture of the organisation; **Functional** (identifying the critical elements of the job or position) and **Leadership** (presenting the key attributes for leading within the organisation). Embedded in each competency is the identification of the following characteristics: **Intent** (reflecting personal characteristics of motives, traits and self-concepts), **Action** (reflecting behaviours of specific skills and content knowledge) and **Outcomes** (reflecting job performance).

If we are clear about the above fundamentals, then we are on a firmer foundation to discuss the application of competencies in HR systems. Invariably, competencies when well constructed and made relevant to the organisation become the foundational stone for all aspects of human performance. Thus, from the moment a potential individual is identified to join the organisation, through his growth and career within that organisation till his eventual departure, his performance and capabilities must be supported by competencies.

Conversely, it is surprising to note that there are organizations that use competencies but only for selected areas of human performance. For example,

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such organizations may use competencies for training and development but not for performance assessment. The spotted application of competencies is probably indicative of a lack appreciation for the meaning and value of competencies as well as an inability to gather consensus amongst the management of the organisation for its extended application.

Hence the adoption and application of competencies within an organisation is not the sole prerogative of the human resource department. Without the full participation (and understanding) of the management team, use of competencies tend to be under-rated and under-valued. As with all good human performance applications, the human resource department should facilitate the discussion and application of competencies within the organisation. Until management sees the value and use of competencies, such application will be seen as pure "HR plays".

An additional caveat in the application of competencies within the organisation is the danger to regard competency assessment as a number crunching exercise where seemingly "esoteric and unmeasurable" values such as "leadership" are assessed using a numerical scale. While measurement is an important factor in competency application, one should not "put the cart before the horse" where more time is spent discussing the score derived from a competency assessment rather than the impact of that competency on the individual or job performance.

There is a simple wisdom in all developments in the human performance arena – unless the development is assessed and has an impact on the compensation of the individual, it will be at best work promoted by human resource but given lip service by the rest of the organisation. Thus, competency applications should not just be pervasive within the organisation, but also be embedded in the performance management and compensation systems of the organisation. Without this embedment, competency applications tend to flounder.

Finally, it is worth stressing again that without the expressed support and engagement of the management team, competency applications never get fully realized and appreciated. Winning the management team's "share of the mind" in supporting competency development is critical for its longevity and relevance to business performance.