
Educating for Competence

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Traditional capability evaluations tend to focus on what has been, rather than what could be. All too frequently, as employers, coaches and friends, we assess how well a new potential employee might address challenges from the past. To compound the problem, we may equate a credential, such as a degree, with particular skills (when the degree may have had a pure knowledge focus) or experience with expertise (as in the joke about the teacher with 20 years experience who actually had one year of experience repeated twenty times.) A competency-based organization is one that seeks out, recruits, empowers and nurtures excellence. This isn't straightforward "checkbox" management. Enabling change in government can be challenging, even when we recognize the need for streamlining, creativity and informed risk-taking. And proving competency is as challenging as achieving it. In an era of modern comptrollership, financial management professionals may be well positioned to help define, plan, implement and deliver product and service improvements, using competency frameworks as part of their tool kits.

As I write this, I am working for a government that has recently adopted a competency framework, and for a university that has outcome or competency-based learning firmly imbedded in its approach to higher education. Use of competencies in public sector work environments is growing rapidly. Post-secondary institutions have been slower to imbed them in curriculum and assessment in ways that prepare students for workplaces of the future. This article briefly explores use of competencies in both environments, links between them, and potential roles of the financial manager in competency planning and implementation work.

I am one of those persons who contributes to that forty-something demographic bulge. My first job interviews emphasized how

much work experience I had, how much education I had, and – unofficially — how I would fit. Similarly, my first university applications focused exclusively on my formal education and grades. Although there is little evidence to show that the amount of work experience and education an applicant brings are good indicators of future work performance, many public sector organizations still use quantitative experience and education criteria to screen out job applicants. The Saskatchewan provincial government has moved to competency-based recruitment. Karen Jellico and Diane Crease are the Saskatchewan specialists for management and in-scope competencies, respectively. They have noticed how much applicants appreciate the clarity that comes with the new approach. "We used to use phrases such as "excellent communications skills," comments Crease. We are now much more specific. We use statements such as '...write and present, accurately and in a timely fashion, a variety of detailed and clear technical and public reports tailored to intended audiences.'

Once the candidates are through that first hurdle, chances are increasingly strong that their competencies will be assessed in the interview process, even if the organization to which they have applied has not formally adopted a competency framework. In university environments, it is not yet common to assess competencies during the application process, or in the classroom. But that is changing, and Royal Roads University is one of the institutions spearheading that change.

What are Competencies?

Competencies include the knowledge, skills, motives, perceptions, values etc. that can determine the difference between individuals who do a job adequately, and those who do exceptional work. Objectives tell you "what;" competencies outline "how." Competencies and learning outcomes are

very closely aligned and the terms are used almost interchangeably in some education settings. Dr. Tony Boydell (pers. comm.) of Royal Roads University describes the differences as follows. "Competency is the possession of an ability; a learning outcome is the determination of that ability at a predetermined level of attainment and in a predetermined context."

Knowledge and skills are familiar currencies, but what about more nebulous entities such as motives and values? Envision two auditors who have very similar knowledge and skills. One thinks of himself as a strong back-to-basics practitioner who is excellent with value-for-money auditing. The other thinks of herself as a synthesist, and considers it short-sighted to focus exclusively on a single attribute of effectiveness. Now, think of some audit projects you've encountered. For any given project, would you expect one of these individuals to outperform the other? Would the exceptional performer always be the same individual? Would they have made similar recommendations when reviewing accounting practices that have recently come to light through the media?

What is Education?

Definitions vary, but education is often thought of as the process of enabling learning for a changing environment. Training, by contrast, is a particular, structured approach to enable learning for a relatively stable environment. Learning can take place through mentoring, coaching, job rotation, formal courses and many other media. This article focuses on education in

one post-secondary institution that is closely tied to evolving workplace needs.

Are Competencies of Value?

Public Service Commission Strategic Advisor Robert McSheffrey (pers comm) is one of many professionals who has watched the use of competencies take off in recent years. His group does extensive competency work for clients. He states that through that experience, he hears about many benefits, including “increased transparency in HR transactions, stronger links between various HR activities or functions, and a better fit between the attributes of people selected and the strategic objectives of organizations.” I have already noted that Jellico and Crease hear from applicants that they appreciate the clarity in competency-based job postings. Jellico finds the hiring process goes more smoothly in many cases, and is more confident they will hire excellent candidates, as compared with the previous credential-oriented approach. As a secondary benefit, they have experienced situations in which managers learn more about the work that is being done through the workers’ discussions of required competencies. This sometimes requires restructuring of workload or other changes, but if done in an inclusive and respectful way, it can lead to increased efficiencies or effectiveness.

Anyone who has worked in the public sector knows that many factors typically affect success; there is rarely a test-tube like environment in which one can view simple causes and effects. However, the value of competencies has been researched. Studies such as the one done by Heffernan and Flood (2000) show that there is a direct relationship between performance and use of competencies, though the cause and effect relationships may not be clear.

How are Competencies Determined?

In a formal sense, a competency framework, such as a customized dictionary from HayGroup, might be purchased for an organization’s use. This kind of tool includes a selection of competencies and descriptors, relevant to the client organization. With or without such a tool, senior managers might select key competencies for use with recruitment, performance management, training, development, succession planning, or all of the above. Or individual

business units might work to select or develop competencies through internally facilitated processes involving the affected employees. The top-down approach has somewhat better potential for consistency and roll-up (e.g., to help with succession planning); the bottom-up approach has somewhat better potential for buy-in and commitment. Marcelle Qualizza, who is leading a competency integration project with the British Columbia Government, (pers comm) has worked with both approaches over the years. He says “In a perfect world, organizations need both top-down and bottom-up approaches when developing competencies. The top-down approach can support driving the strategic vision of an organization, especially in a time of organizational change. By identifying those competencies that are critically linked to the vision, leaders allow the organization to experience the vision in real and tangible terms by knowing what to expect in the workplace. The bottom-up approach capitalizes on the expertise of those in the trenches who actually do the work. The expertise they offer and the ‘know how’ they bring to their jobs is vitally important in identifying those competencies that make the difference in doing an exceptional job.”

Crease describes how their process for in-scope employees works in Saskatchewan. “When we first develop competencies for a position, or a group of positions such as highway traffic officers, we convene a group of subject matter experts (SMEs). These are persons in the job, who are at full performance. We try very hard to select a representative sample (men/women, urban/rural, north/south etc.) They participate in intensive working sessions that explore what they need to do, and how they do it.” I had commented on the extensive catalogue of competencies that Saskatchewan has posted on the web. “That is largely the work of these SMEs. Their work is validated by managers, and we try to leave the content, intent and even language as close to their conclusions as possible.”

Qualizza describes how the top-down/bottom-up ideas link to renewal in the British Columbia public sector: “We are currently identifying core competencies and generic management competencies that will assist in driving the vision of the BC public

service: to achieve excellence in public service through service excellence, work environment excellence, and people excellence. In addition, though, we recognize that individual ministries and managers need to have HR tools that make sense to them. Engaging them with their staff to develop their own competency models, as has been done in the ministries of Attorney General, Public Safety and Solicitor General, Education, and Forests, allows them this opportunity.”

For the students, or learners as we call them, who study at Royal Roads University in Victoria British Columbia, the determination of learning outcomes is relatively top-down, (although learners shape the case studies and examples used as a backdrop to learning.) This is a conscious choice. Royal Roads is a young university, which has carved out a solid niche for itself, despite the odds. Many believe that its success stems from the fact that its programs are so closely linked with organizational needs. Every program (such as environmental management, leadership and training, conflict analysis or knowledge management) has an advisory board made up of industry leaders who speak to emerging workplace needs. Although board members do not physically craft the learning outcomes or competencies, they provide content and context from which professional educators craft them. In partnership, the university and its boards produce relevant, assessable outcomes, which build a foundation for learning. Organizations that want to refine their internal processes for learning, training or development needs analyses might adapt this advisory board approach to fit their governance models and cultures.

One of the most interesting questions about competency selection is who needs to work on what, and how proficient they need to be. In our university environment, this is relatively straightforward. The industry-driven process for selecting the outcomes is described above; the required levels of competence are determined largely by whether the program is undergraduate or graduate, and are further defined through grades. As for matching learning outcomes with individuals, this is left to the judgement of learners and their sponsors through their program selection and application process. At Royal Roads University, prospective learners submit personal state-

ments and other demonstrations of interest, competence and achievement, which go beyond academic credentials and grades.

This self-selection is in stark contrast with many work environments, particularly union settings in which links with classification and pay encourage debates about who needs what competencies. I have heard senior performance measurement experts state, with confidence, that clerks have no need to know how their work fits into business unit objectives. Yet we have probably all seen examples of how motivation, engagement and the work environment have improved because a person frames their work in a larger space/time context, and understands how they are helping patients, protecting victims, or conserving the ecology, as opposed to doing word processing, minute-taking or phone duty. Even an inclusive process can build relevance and ownership. It isn't uncommon for subject matter experts in Saskatchewan to leave a competency working session and say, "Wow, I didn't realize that I did such important work!"

How are They Measured?

Competencies can be measured at a point in time, such as during an interview, or over time, to assess progress. Job interviews are a common public sector point-in-time forum for assessment of competencies, although they might be referred to as "knowledge, skills and abilities." Candidates' knowledge is often assessed through questions such as "What are the key principles..." Skills are commonly assessed through writing assignments, "in-box" exercises and presentations. Motives, values and perceptions might be explored through questions such as why the position attracted the candidate, or what strengths they think they bring.

Progress towards higher levels of competence is tracked in some organizations. There are evaluation tools for training that go beyond perceptions in the classroom, to changes in knowledge, self-assessment of competence, perceived transfer to the job, and changes in behaviour. Some performance management systems are tied to enterprise-wide succession planning initiatives, which draw information from retirement plans, career plans, employee performance and potential. Supervisors, peers, and employees might all provide feedback

through "360° assessments." Self-assessment can be powerful as well. In Saskatchewan, Jellico is quite excited about their gradually expanding use of competencies for succession planning. "We are seeing progress, which is critical given the rising rate of retirements. Our new performance management system will be built around competencies. This will make it simpler for managers to pave the way for good performance and succession management connections."

Despite the availability of tools for assessment over time, and pockets of good practices, several studies show that practice lags behind potential. For example, a *Journal of Management Development* article by Abraham, Karns, Shaw and Mena (2001) shows that even in the high profile area of management development, established competencies are rarely used in performance appraisals. Another study by Chong, Holden, Wilhelmij and Schmidt (2000) found that "only a very limited number of organizations have a mechanism to track the return on investment in knowledge-based competencies or related intangible assets."

At Royal Roads University, there are two tiers of learner competencies. We expect every learner to achieve some level of mastery in the institutional abilities, which form the highest and most general level. We also have learning outcomes for each program, and a subset of those outcomes associated with each course. The way each outcome is assessed is clearly described through criteria, which are accessible to faculty, staff and learners.

One of the things that differentiates Royal Roads from the vast majority of universities is its comprehensive focus on competency-based assessment. As an example, envision a knowledge management course that is linked to three outcomes: a knowledge outcome relating to communities of practice (CoP); a skills outcome relating to the implementation of discussion-enabling technologies and a skills outcome relating to team work. It is possible that a learner could excel with the technology and CoP outcomes, but do very poorly working in teams. In a traditional marking structure, if all work averaged out to a "B" a student would pass. In this environment, if a learner did not demonstrate competence with teamwork, they could not graduate. They would have different opportunities to demonstrate those skills, and would need to

master them in order to clear the "in progress" from their transcript. This is analogous to competencies being used in a meaningful way through workplace performance, career and succession plans.

Regardless of the process for assessing competencies or learning outcomes, the desired result is better performance.

Improving Performance of Knowledge Workers

Sustained improvements require learning. The knowledge economy creates a demand for learning that goes well beyond the classroom. A report published by the Society for College and University Planning in 1995 estimated that every person needs the equivalent of one year of university every seven years just to remain productive in the workplace. Canadians are looking for relevant, practical avenues for lifelong learning.

Royal Roads University provides one model of how to help organizations achieve sustainable improvements. When the university was created in 1995, its challenge was to meet the learning needs of individuals already established in their careers. Most programs are at the master's level, and combine intense, three to five week on-campus studies with internet-based distance education. Programs are always grounded in the information obtained from board members about workplace needs. Program competencies are developed, based on those needs. In most programs, assessment is intimately tied to the competencies. This means that learners can state with confidence what they can do, not just that they have completed Course X or Degree Y. The University can state that graduates have mastered competencies. When graduates sit in an interview room or boardroom, I believe that their abilities to discuss competencies and effectiveness are greatly enhanced by the self-knowledge and confidence that comes from moving up through a competency-based assessment process. If graduates need to master new, emergent competencies, this can feed back into the curriculum design process, to keep learning relevant and current. Just like the 360° concept from the workplace, this model ensures that program designers and instructors receive feedback on their effectiveness from industry through boards, directly from learners

and from peers through corporate effectiveness efforts. Royal Roads is committed to working towards excellence, and is drawing on sources such as the National Quality Institute, Baldrige criteria for educational excellence and ISO 9000 standards in order to do so.

Is a competency-based higher education model of value to employers? Jellico and Crease think so. "We often have a good sense of what knowledge an applicant possesses, but it is more challenging to fairly assess other factors such as skills and perceptions. In our experience, many university programs focus on knowledge; it would be very interesting to know details about interpersonal, teamwork and other relevant skills, which an applicant has developed."

Is Performance in the Eye of the Beholder?

"What does good performance look like?" This may seem like a simple question, and I can think of a simple answer: "You know it when you see it." But this answer isn't very helpful, nor does it address those messy human and systems issues such as different perspectives, worldviews and scales of performance. This is particularly true in government, where, as Henry Mintzberg described it in his 1996 Harvard Business Review article, public services involve "complex trade-offs between competing interests." Recognizing good performance can be a bit like "The Blind Men and the Elephant," the poem, by John Godfrey Saxe, in which each sightless man describes a part of an elephant, deducing from his isolated experience that the beast is very like a wall, or a snake, etc. One of the poem's conclusions is "...though each was partly in the right...all were in the wrong."

How do perspectives influence judgement of performance? At the risk of generalizing, there is evidence that women put a stronger focus on relationship-building than do men. Consider how this might relate to the new Senior Civil Service competency framework from the UK cabinet office. This framework has a "Learning and Improving" competency, which includes the *effective* behaviour "Builds productive relationships with people across and outside the organization." The framework also includes "Focusing on Delivery," which includes the *ineffective* behaviour "focuses on the process rather than getting results."

In a situation in which process could be viewed as relationship building, some men and women might disagree about priorities and competencies for optimal performance.

Similar challenges emerge when one considers worldviews. Consider the different opinions two individuals might have about performance if one ascribes to constructivism and the other to realism. In essence, the first would believe that we create knowledge, based on what we observe, how we communicate, etc. We operate on a working consensus of reality. The second would believe that there is a right and wrong about what exists, even if the thing in question cannot be seen. If there were a facilitated public process that determined land use by consensus, a constructivist might consider the facilitator was high-performing, whereas a conservation biologist might say they delivered a disastrous compromise, in which people were allowed to ignore the facts.

Assessing performance at different scales is interesting as well. "Downloading" of services from one level of government to another, or charging other public sector organizations for your information, can be seen as effective behaviours to stay within budget. But what if the quality of service in the other office, or the quality of life for the citizenry, drops as a result?

All of these apparent contradictions illustrate the importance of context, a central theme of knowledge management, and of Steve McKenna's (1999) article stating that "most sets of 'management competencies' are developed without recognition of their inherent contradictions and without due regard to their contextuality."

Clearly stated competencies and associated behaviours or assessment criteria can bring important focus to an organization's efforts to achieve excellence. But, as the above examples of fragmentation and potential divergence show, they need to be used thoughtfully and in context. Hay-Group representative Mark Jackson says that they incorporate some recognition of the importance of context and systems in their competency frameworks, and are always open to change to keep current with important trends and findings. Other organizations have addressed the importance of integration in various ways. For example, the Canadian federal government

management competencies include statements such as "to synthesize information and identify links, issues." An American special interest group working on Chief Knowledge Officer competencies has included statements such as "systems/holistic thinking." Many Royal Roads University learning outcomes recognize the importance of context. They include study of self, and of one's biases; of systems thinking; of communications techniques to find root causes of problems and find areas of common interest; and of sharing and using knowledge in ways that will work for particular workplace cultures. Three specific examples follow. From the Knowledge Management program: "Demonstrates knowledge of self in meaning-making through values, beliefs and assumptions;" "demonstrates leadership in generating and weighing solutions, and developing knowledge management initiatives." And from the Leadership and Training program: "Explores and describes contextual systems and structures that affect organizations, including cultural, social, political, and economic systems and structures in the natural environment."

The importance of context provides a key leverage point for financial officers working in the climate of modern comptrollership. I believe that if you are a financial manager or auditor with an interest in leadership and effectiveness, you can add significant value to competency initiatives. You could become an objective advisor, with a valuable birds-eye view of the organization's business. Chris Brittain's discussion of modern comptrollership in the fall 2000 issue of the FMI Journal spoke about such individuals doing more "facilitating, mentoring, coaching, advising and plain old-fashioned teaching." As a facilitator, you could enable a team to explore: the alignment of competencies with corporate strategies, the pros and cons of top-down frameworks and the implications of what is recorded, and with what standards, for links with other systems and processes (such as "corporate yellow pages," HR databases, payroll systems and succession planning.) In other words, when others in the room are seeing a wall or snake, you could help the team envision the elephant, and save considerable time and money in the process. ■