

16/02/2003

Competency quotient

John Lau

THERE IS no one common definition for the term 'competency' but competencies typically refer to observable and measurable skills and knowledge that enable good performance in a particular task, activity or role. Some competencies may be learned in formal education while others are picked up on the job.

What organisations want

Ideally and superficially, many organisations aim to have:

1. A definition library for all their hard and soft skills,
2. A set of competencies that reflect their corporate values,
3. Objective and well-defined levels of competence,
4. An easy competency assessment tool, and
5. Clear-cut development and training plans.

Why these wants are too ideal

1. There are available competency dictionaries, and organisations are spending too much time reinventing the wheel. The description, for example, of 'integrity' by one author will not be too different from another author's or from that of your company. Perhaps the reason for such over-emphasis is because competencies are the easiest components of human capital to define.

2. Corporate values such as integrity, teamwork, customer focus and proactivity are rather universal. Every company strives to be the number one player which provides excellent service to customers. Should all share similar values and, therefore, competencies?

3. Organisations are trying too hard to be objective. In reality, competency assessments can only be structured systematically. Let's take a few leaders of the world for example. Among Abraham Lincoln, Margaret Thatcher and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is better in decision making? What basis can one have to determine which leader is a scale above the other in problem solving or perhaps two scales below, objectively?

4. There is no easy competency assessment tool. Hence, behavioural attributes are closely correlated with successful demonstration of certain skills and knowledge. Measuring (or commonly termed as 'profiling') these attributes (or tendencies) becomes a good predictor for good skills performed. Thus, the many validated assessment tools in the market are merely assessing behavioural tendencies and not the actual skills. Skills and knowledge are historical evidence. It requires investigative efforts to collect them. It may involve one-to-one appraisal, multi-rater feedback, an assessment centre or competencies-sort cards but it has no short-cuts.

5. When a gap is identified in a competency assessment, organisations expect a button-away solution that is often translated as Training Needs Analysis (TNA). While training does provide basic ingredients for improvement and there are available self-development guides, nothing works better than coaching. Organisations need to hire the right people for the right job and create the right environment to produce superior performance.

What organisations really need

1. It is good enough to get a competency directory that is already available in bookstores or on the Internet. Forget about the laborious top performer interviews and focus groups.

2. Identify competencies that are of central importance to effectively undertake a given job. Do not focus on wrong issues or mistaken critical job competencies for your corporate values.

3. Work backwards from work results and consequences in identifying strong or weak competencies rather than ranking competencies on a five- or three-point scale. List the expected positive results of a task and its possible negative consequences. Match the observable outcomes with this list to regressively identify factors (competencies or stallers) contributing to these outcomes.

4. Competency (skills and knowledge) is only one of the three core human capital factors among 'Behavioural Compatibility' (attitudes and attributes) and 'Learning Ability' (intelligence and aptitude). Organisations need to measure these three factors with different tools. Existing competency, compatibility and ability influence the extent to which new competency can be acquired or developed.

5. Determine how a job should be done and observe how a job has always been done. The key word here is 'observe'. Observe to identify possible causes for unskilled or overused competencies so that corrective actions can be coached. Develop your coaches first.