Stop Competency Blunders

Using some common sense can help curtail many mistakes.

By Tim Brown

MANY ORGANIZATIONS invest large amounts of time and money to develop competency models for their workforces. Unfortunately, few of them actually see marked return-on-investment in terms of improved job performance. While there are many possible reasons for low ROI, poorly developed competencies are often the culprit.

The following are some customary mistakes that organizations make when attempting to use competencies to drive their workforce development. The good news is that these mistakes can be largely avoided by injecting a healthy dose of common sense into how they are developed and used.

(To clarify, I define *competency* as something an individual must demonstrate to be effective in a job, role, function, task, or duty.)

Developmental mistakes

Excessive time and resource investment. Like the jobs that they are supposed to describe, competency models should be agile, flexible, and easily updated. But, that isn't always the case. Because building competency models and the attendant online tools have become big business for consultants, it often consumes the time of the internal training and human resource staffs. Even worse, the process sometimes becomes so expensive and time consuming that it is difficult to keep those models up-to-date.

One way to reduce the cost and time required is to take advantage of existing competencies. For example, in my work with federal agencies, I use starter lists developed by the Office of Personnel Management, the government's central policy shop. Official position descriptions may also be a good source of competencies and job tasks, as well as talking with senior employees. In a one-day workshop with senior job incumbents, it is possible to conduct a high-level job analysis, identify relevant core competencies from an existing pool, and define required technical competencies.

Wrong competencies. The purpose of building a competency model is to identify the standards of good job performance in the organization. This requires the right competency development methodology, such as studying star performers or conducting a job analysis. The foundation of success with competencies is built by the people who know the jobs thoroughly— not by HR staff or managers who may not understand what is required.

Another common error is to confuse competencies with jobs tasks or duties. For example, project management is a job duty, not a competency. To be a successful project manager, an employee would have to develop proficiency in several competencies that underlie project management, including planning and organizing, influencing others, and problem solving.

Insufficient hiring standards. Competencies that deal with traits or abilities that are difficult to acquire on the job should be focused on during the hiring process, not employee development. Abilities tend to be more stable characteristics that are difficult to change. It doesn't make sense to load a competency model with requirements such as integrity, resilience, or flexibility. Those are examples of qualities that new hires should bring to the job.

Too many competencies. Less is usually more. Competency models often consist of as many as 20 to 30 items. That can be overwhelming to employees and supervisors alike. The requirements for organizational or individual effectiveness become less clear as the number of competencies increases. Instead of pushing for big numbers, management should identify about eight common, core competencies that all employees should possess. Each specific job should have no more than six technical competencies, for a total of about 14 competencies.

Limiting the number of competencies is easier if you remember that they are supposed to be the foundation for everything else. For example, a well-defined competency for communication makes a separate competency for formal presentation or technical writing unnecessary.

If you can't control the number of competencies, it is useful to prioritize them by designating a subset as *critical*. Those should be the competencies that support the job essentials.

Implementation mistakes

Attention to measurement. The ability to quantify competency proficiency levels and gaps makes it possible to set priorities and document progress. But, it also requires competencies be developed and defined in terms of behaviors that can be measured or observed.

When used for individual development planning, absolute accuracy in measuring proficiency isn't necessary. After all, the objective is to identify the top two or three competencies that the employee should concentrate on to improve performance. Approximate measures are also adequate for strategic analysis of competency gaps at the organization level. If competencies are used for hiring or promotion, however, accurate measurement becomes critical.

Unrealistic expectations. As with any tool, there's a limit on how much can be achieved with competencies. They may be most beneficial when used for other HR processes in addition to learning and development. When using competencies only for development, organizations can expect to see performance improvements over time if competency selection and

implementation are done correctly. Implementing competencies can't fix an organization, but it can be a starting point.

Perhaps the biggest advantage of using competencies is that they help create job awareness—a healthy balance to the customary emphasis on getting results. Competencies provide a language that helps employees and supervisors communicate more effectively about job performance. Junior-level employees, in particular, gain clarity about what it takes to succeed in the organization, and managers can better help employees reach their full potentials.

Lack of organizational support. Organizations should invest time and resources in developing competencies only as part of a larger commitment to workforce development. Employees need these factors to properly develop their skills:

● an assessment to pinpoint where they need to improve

● the ability to set developmental goals, and help from their supervisor in doing so

● learning resources, for example, online courses, books, audiotapes, and classroom training

● opportunities to try out new skills or knowledge in an environment where they can make mistakes without penalties

● constructive feedback on how they're doing.

The resources devoted to developing and implementing competency models for training and development have the potential to significantly impact employee performance. With a basic grasp of competency-based development, realistic expectations for what can be achieved, and—above all—some common sense, you can greatly increase your ROI in this valuable tool.

Tim Brown is a human capital analyst with LMI, a not-for-profit government consulting firm located in McLean, Virginia; pbrown07@comcast.net.