Keeping the Competency Study Alive

Applications for the Training and Development Profession

By MAC McCULLOUGH and PATRICIA McLAGAN

After 15 months of work on the ASTD Training and Development Competency Study, Pat McLagan, the study's volunteer director, and Mac McCullough, staff director, spent time reflecting on its completion and on what might lie ahead. In these conversations, they share their personal satisfaction at the accomplishment of a major piece of work and urge its application to the growth of training and development as a profession.

McCullough: During these past 15 months, I sometimes wondered whether the competency study would ever be finished. What started off as one study turned into a whole series. The people who were involved number almost a thousand. It was a mammoth effort, and I'm personally and professionally proud that ASTD has taken this kind of leadership role in professional development for the field. I think this study moves training and development one step closer to being a profession. We've helped define the field with more rigor and specificity than ever before and helped clarify its body of knowledge.

McLagan: I think you're right

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and that it's happened none too soon. I see the field changing dramatically as the technological revolution brings new problems to solve every day. I see our field helping make the shift to a society based on information and service—helping with the tremendous retraining effort that will be required. I think many in our field are ready to do this. More and more training practitioners at high levels in business, industry and government are being asked by their bosses to contribute to strategic and long-range planning. The human factor is playing more of a part in top management discussions.

At lower levels there are more and more people who see training and development as a viable career. One evidence of this is the tremendous increase around the country in degree programs in training and development and human resource development. These people, as well as those

who have more experience and positions of authority, have a right to look to ASTD for guidance and help. I think the competency study provides both.

McCullough: Of course, it's not as if there haven't been other studies dealing with the same issues. Back in 1967, an article by Len Nadler and Gordon Lippitt described the three roles of the training director as administrator, learning specialist and consultant. At that time those distinctions were very useful in talking with line managers about the function of the training department. In 1976, there were two studies that helped clarify that function even more. The Ontario Society for Training and Development not only described four roles performed by the trainer (administrator, instructor, designer and consultant) but also identified core competencies required to carry out each one. Then

there was the well-documented work by the U.S. Civil Service Commission, studying the roles and competencies needed by federal employee development specialists. That study identified five roles—administrator, manager, learning specialist, career counselor and consultant—and listed the tasks and activities each performed. ASTD wasn't idle either. In 1978, it published "A Study of Professional Training and Development Roles and Competencies" known better as the Pinto-Walker study, after its authors. It described in detail what trainers do and has been used by ASTD to help shape its national conferences and professional development workshops. In addition, people such as Malcolm Knowles, George Odiorne, Bob Blake and Jane Mouton have all described what they believe to be the proper roles for training and development professionals.

McLagan: The studies in the 1960s and 1970s mostly concerned what trainers did—their tasks and duties. But there was a need for a prescriptive study that would lay out what should be done by competent trainers now and in the near future to address the work of the 1980s and help people prepare for it. In doing the study we wanted to focus specifically on the training and development activity and not address the organization development function. Thus, we emphasized the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to perform the various roles in the training and development field today and in the future. We wanted to articulate clearly the required competencies in a way that would lead to tools and products of broad usefulness.

McCullough: The ASTD Professional Development Committee was explicit in its charge to the study team. The team was to define excellence in the training and development field in a useful form to be used as a standard of professional performance and development by ASTD organizations, educational institutions, training and development departments and individuals practicing or expecting to practice in the training and development field. That was a large order, but I believe the final report will prove useful to all four audiences.

McLagan: I do, too. For example, I see a number of uses for the individual practitioner.

I see the study as a self-assessment tool. Each of us can look at our current job and decide which roles we play and to what extent we play them. We then can look at the role outputs, the competency model and the role profiles and assess the level (basic, intermediate or advanced), at which we are performing the critical competencies for those roles.

The study also should be useful for determining an individual development plan to help us get from where our competencies are to where we want them to be.

Similarly, we can use the information in the study for career pathing. Comparison of roles that require similar competencies should help us make decisions about lateral transfers. Or, if we want to consider completely new roles, the study provides guidance on which competencies are considered most critical today and for the next five years in all of the training and development roles.

The study can help us talk with management. It provides a framework for picturing oneself in the training and development function and shows how that function fits into the total human resources area. Knowledge of specific roles, competencies and outputs should make discussions with management about performance more realistically based.

The study can help us explain our jobs. It defines terms and describes specific outputs and

behaviors, in ways that could help answer that common question: "What exactly does a trainer do?"

McCullough: While you've been talking about the individual training and development practitioner, I've been thinking about another group of individuals I talk with all the time—people thinking about entering the training and development field: recent graduates, disenchanted school teachers and people looking for a career change. They often contact me for advice, and they usually start the conversation with, "I'm not looking for a job with ASTD, I'm just gathering general information about the field, and you were recommended as someone who had background and could give me some leads." (Sometimes I wish Richard Bolles had never written that book.) I'll use the study to help training

and development career aspirants. The definitions of training and development and the role descriptions give an excellent idea of the scope of the field. By reviewing competencies and roles, it should be possible to determine what skills someone could transfer among roles. Finally, I see the study giving the newcomer an appreciation of the training and development field because it describes the particular skills, knowledges and attitudes of a competent performer.

McLagan: A second major audience we addressed was managers of training and development departments. I see a major change in perceptions of many companies' training and development managers. Their jobs are much more challenging. They are being held accountable not only for what happens in

their own area, but for what they contribute to the overall good of the organization. And they are being asked to lead and manage a more career-minded, competent staff.

I see a number of ways the study will help the training and development manager: in selecting new staff by using the role profiles as a screening device; in establishing and developing internal training programs; in conducting performance appraisals based on roles, outputs, competencies and profiles; in structuring organization and job design around roles and role clusters; and in determining strategic direction from the forces predicted to impact on training and development in the future.

An astute manager could also use the 18 critical competencies listed in the Training and

Development Manager Role Profile as a self-development exercise.

McCullough: The study's third audience is the academic community. In recent years, ASTD has been trying hard to build bridges between the training and development academic world, the society and the world of work. Our last Conference on Academic Preparation of Practitioners in HRD/T&D centered around the efforts of colleges and universities to make academic offerings more in tune with the needs of employers. The study, because it is practical in its approach and grounded heavily in real experience, should be helpful in curriculum development, evaluation and planning, in determining research projects and in student counseling.

McLagan: That takes care of three of the audiences we were charged to address, but what about the fourth—ASTD itself?

McCullough: Speaking strictly for myself, I see the publication of the competency study as an opportunity for ASTD to assert its world leadership in the training and development field.

First of all, I recommend that ASTD use the results of the study to audit its activities—conferences, workshops, publications. Are they adequate? Are there areas that need attention? Are there gaps?

Second, the study could suggest new products and services, such as a training and development resource manual listing and rating learning resources—articles, books, courses, programs, people—that members could tap to increase a competency or expand a role.

Third, ASTD should take the lead in getting others to do similar studies to help complete a competency map of the entire human resources area. ASTD's Organization Development Division could study their particular roles and competencies. And groups such as the American Compensation Society could be approached to determine their interest in a similar study.

Fourth, ASTD should revisit the questions of certification and accreditation with the aim of arriving at a decision on each of these very complicated and difficult issues given the results of the study.

Fifth, the national organization needs to work diligently to determine how the chapter network can make the results of the study available and useful to the largest number of members. Packaged programs, a speaker's bureau, leader training are possibilities.

And finally, I feel very strongly that ASTD must develop a process for keeping the competency study alive. Changed assumptions, future forces and output expectations will change the results. If the study is to be useable and useful, ASTD must not let it be cast in stone. It must be allowed to grow and change with the times.

McLagan: It's also important to remember that the study and the model it presents are not "the truth" but a decision tool for seeking the truth. It should never be used to replace the judgment of the user. Sometimes I think we look to models to make decisions for us, but the best a model can do is to clarify our thinking. Actual performance is up to the individual.

One important thing the study does is provide a common language about our field (roles, competencies, outputs, profiles, clusters). To use the results effectively, we will need to adopt that language. For example, when we speak of "roles" we need to be clear that we are not referring to "job titles."

We should acknowledge that the study could not possibly address all facets of the jobs of training and development practitioners. But I believe it captures the most critical and important aspects.

One big problem we have is spreading the word about the study. I hope that the people who helped complete the study will not the results. Our goal was a useable product, and I think we

have one. It can be used to move the training and development field forward, but that will require the work of a lot of us who see our field emerging as a profession which can help solve many of the problems facing our country today and in the future.

McCullough: Pat, as study leader you were the guiding light and prime contributor to the training and development competency study. Congratulations on a job well done.

McLagan: Thank you, Mac. I, in turn, want to thank all the people who helped with the study. I want to ask them not to stop now. The job is just beginning.

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