

Competency Studies and Competency Models

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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:

In the year 1973 David C. McClelland, a well known Psychologist and authority on Achievement Motivation published a paper in the Harvard Business Review entitled **“Testing for Competence rather than Intelligence”** which has been credited for launching the competency movement. This paper was the culmination of a research undertaken by McClelland and his associates at the McBer and Company for the US Department that selects and places Foreign Service Information Officers across locations in countries abroad in United State Information Service Bureau. The State Department had a very specific problem – the performance in the Foreign Service Information Officer examination and the scores on the FSIO General Aptitude Test Battery did not predict success as a FSIO, as observed later from the actual on-the-job performance.

If traditional academic aptitude and knowledge content tests, as well as grades and credentials at the school/college examination did not predict job performance or success in life, then what did?

This was the intriguing question that McClelland had to look answer for. The research undertaken and the techniques formulated by McClelland and his associates aroused interest in the world of psychology all over and hundreds of competency studies were initiated across the world.

Richard Boyatzis – the McBer Research:

America Management Association (AMA) commissioned McBer to find out what makes managers competent and to design a programme where managers could learn these competencies. They studied a sample of 2000 managers in 41 different types of jobs, in a dozen different industries. Richard Boyatzis was the President and CEO of McBer Company when AMA approached them. Boyatzis’s book “The Competent Manager” became a major milestone in the competency movement.

WHY COMPETENCIES?

The quest was to find out what is that makes a “star performer” deliver star performance. The quest was also to find out the observable behaviours are exhibited by those who are star performers or who deliver “superior performance” as opposed to “average performance”. If we know the behaviours exhibited by star performers we could train others on that all managers could emulate these behaviours so that we would be able to multiply the star performers in any organization.

Hence a competency is both “observable” and “measurable”.

“DIFFERENTIATING” AND “THRESHOLD” COMPETENCIES:

In any organization, people need to demonstrate certain competence to provide minimally effective job performance. These competencies are called “Threshold” or “essential” competencies. However, there are certain competencies that are demonstrated by superior performers that make them stand apart from the others. These competencies are called “Differentiating Competencies”.

PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF HAVING A COMPETENCY MODEL:

- > The most important benefit is that all in the organization start seeing performance being delivered with the help of a specific set of competencies that are observable and measurable.
- > A common language of competencies emerges in the organization.
- > There is unity of efforts in understanding and utilizing the competency framework.
- > All Human Resources related processes like Selection, Performance Management, Training etc. can be competency based.

COMPETENCY DEFINED:

- A Competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job. (Richard Boyatzis)
- A competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation. (Spencers)
- An observable skill or ability to complete a managerial task successfully. (Jacob)
- An underlying characteristic of a manager causally related to superior performance on the job. (Evarts)
- Any skill, knowledge or attribute that is observable and identifies excellent performance. It is a term that describes a pattern or cluster of actions taken to achieve a result.”

DESIGNING COMPETENCY STUDIES

Competency Studies are generally initiated for certain types of job – jobs that have high value in relation to organization’s strategic plans, in short, value added jobs which are

strategic in nature, which could make or break the organization's plans, jobs which are meant to achieve strategic outcome for the organization.

One of the critical requirements in competency studies is to know about superior performers who in turn can contribute substantially in competency identification process. The whole competency movement is based on couple of important principles – first is that peoples' espoused theories of action (what they say they do) bear no relation to their theories in use (what they actually do) that is why what people actually do in critical situation is important and the second is that one learns a lot about critical aspects of a job and the competencies required by speaking to superior or star performers. Defining performance effectiveness criteria, therefore, is an important step that leads to identification of superior performers.

Effectiveness Criteria for the jobs under study are developed e.g. Business Managers – Sales or Profit, Research Scientists – number of patents or publications, for Human Service Workmen, say alcoholism counsellor – number of client who are still 'dry' or who have been able to hold a job etc.

A sample of "Superior" performers and "Average" performers is identified for each job under study. At times considerable patience and tact has to be exhibited in order to get people to differentiate amongst people as superstars, average performers and poor performers because a standard reply that one gets is "there is no such a thing as poor officer" or "our selection process guarantees that we do not hire poor performers" or "all our people are good".

Using a technique viz. "**Behavioural Event Interview**" data collection is done. Developing actual competency scales follows this.

COMPETENCY MODEL

Every competency scale can be understood with a clear definition that is contextual to the organization. This is supported by key actions that are observable as demonstrated by the person. A rating scale then calibrates these key actions.

The rating scale is prepared based on the progressively increasing proficiency of demonstrating the competency. The definition, key actions and the rating scale read together provide the "competency description" that can be used by the organization. A set of competencies emerging from the competency study are thus put together in a logical sequence thereby giving a "Competency Model" specific to that organization.

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