

Employee Core Competencies for Effective Talent Management

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Abstract The search for best ways to attract, develop and utilize organizational people is becoming an intensely interesting and challenging task for HR professionals. Among the wide range of organizational processes relating to developing, retaining and utilizing high-performing employees is employee core competencies. The principal thrust of this study therefore is to review prior literature with the aim of unraveling such employee competencies that significantly impact the management of talent in the workplace. Using a non-empirical approach, the review of extant studies reveals that the skills, knowledge and abilities of employees impact job descriptions and performance management. Others include recruitment and selection, training and development, workforce planning and career paths, compensation and succession planning among others. The paper concludes that tying core competencies with talent management is a win-win proposition as it provides organizations with a means of upgrading and retaining their valuable workforce. To achieve this, the paper recommends the building of competency models, the identification and possession of high-performing behaviors; the development of written job descriptions and the devotion of organizational funds time and space for competency related researches.

Keywords Core competencies, Competency model, Talent management, Organizational effectiveness, Productivity

1. Background of the Study

In chaotic times and crowded marketplaces such as the one organizations find themselves today, classical production factors such as capital and land are losing some of their significance. Change drivers - globalization, shorter product lifecycles, rising customer demands, intense competition, quicker technological developments and higher costs pressure – keep sounding the death knell of organizations in an ever-quicken pace. Seventy Percent of the largest industrial firms in the United States and Europe in 1955 no longer exist; 40 percent of the 1980 Fortune 500 have disappeared through acquisition, break up or bankruptcy [1]. McGowan [2] also notes that the cycle of business of rags-to-riches-to-rags again that used to take seventy years now occurs in fewer than five.

And yet, as companies die, many more are born. In the 1980s a huge surge in startup entrepreneurial activity began and is continuing today [3]. What is the sustaining secret of these new organizations? In order to create strategic competitive advantages and remain in business, organizations have to evolve ways and means of strengthening and utilizing employee core competences in

the management of talent. Some studies reveal that competencies can distinguish and differentiate an organization from its competitors and that while two organizations may be alike in financial results; the way in which the results were achieved could be different based on the competencies that fit their particular strategy and organizational culture.

Talent management is the process of ensuring that the organization attracts, retains, motivates and develops the people it needs. In the opinion of [4], talent management is a conscious and deliberate approach undertaken to attract, develop and retain people with the aptitude and abilities to meet current and future organizational needs.

2. The Problem

Both private and public organizations are increasingly realizing the importance of nurturing a talented workforce. This is because with a talented and well managed workforce, everything is possible – the sky is the limit! Without it, one can count on numerous unsuccessful strategic efforts – one after another. Among the wide range of organizational processes relating to retaining high – performing employees, employee core competencies have become a focal point. What is not yet clearly known is where exactly can organizations focus resources such as incentives, coaching and training programs to enable employees perform maximally. By clearly identifying the right competencies,

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can organizations recruit and manage talented people in the most strategic way, putting the right people in the right jobs with the abilities to perform at their maximum potentials every day? Are competencies what employees need to be successful in their jobs? Can core competencies differentiate an organization from its competitors and create a company's competitive advantage in the market place? The main thrust of this paper therefore is to assess the impact of employee competencies on the management of talent in the workplace. Specifically, the paper outlines the types of competencies, and how they affect the key talent management processes.

3. Extant Literature

Prior literature and strong research evidences have examined employee core competencies as it relates to talent management within the organisation. These research evidences are reviewed and presented hereunder:

3.1. Talent Management Processes and Programs

The term "Talent Management" was coined by McKinsey & Company following a 1997 study [21]. As a concept, talent management came to the fore when the phrase 'the war of talent' emerged and later became the title of a book [22]. While most leaders do not agree on one narrow definition of talent management, they do seem to share an idea about the basic parameters of the subject. After a careful identification of the variables comprising talent management, ASTD Staff [23] defines talent management in this way:

A holistic approach to optimizing human capital which enables an organization to drive short- and long-term results by building culture, engagement, capability and capacity through integrated talent acquisition, development and deployment processes that are aligned to business goals.

Also broadly explained, talent management is the implementation of integrated strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, improved processes for attracting, retaining and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs [24].

The goal of talent management is to create a high-performance and sustainable organization that meets its strategic and operational goals and objectives. A typical talent management model consists of key HR processes that are designed and developed to ensure an organization attracts, retains and engages/motivates its workforce.

- Armstrong [14] goes further to observe that the key talent management processes are: developing the organization as an 'employer of choice' – a great place to work; using selection and recruitment procedures that ensure that good quality people are recruited; designing jobs and developing roles which give people opportunities to apply and grow their skills; providing opportunities for

career development and growth; creating a working environment in which work processes and facilities enable rewarding jobs and roles to be designed and developed and developing a positive psychological contract. Other processes include recognizing those with talent by rewarding excellence, enterprise and achievement and conducting talent audits which identify those with potential and those who might leave the organization.

Mathis & Jackson [15], Aswathappa [16] and Schuler [17] agree that the above mentioned processes are achievable through human capital programs like:

- Recruitment, selection and placement- recruitment is the process of finding and attracting capable applicants for employment. This is done through verifying that a vacancy exists, identify the sort of person you are looking for and in what capacity, and finally, seeking candidates and making a short –list of those who qualify [27][28]. From the aforementioned processes, selection and acclimatization of the appropriate candidate(s) is done [29].

- Training and Development-training and development is any attempt to improve current or future employee performance by increasing an employee's ability to perform through learning, usually by changing the employee's attitude or increasing his or her skills and knowledge [30].

- Compensation – A way to reward individuals for important work accomplishments, contributions to the goals of the organization and increased skills and competencies in their jobs.

- Performance management – An ongoing, continuous process of communicating and clarifying job responsibilities, priorities, performance expectations, and development planning that optimize an individual's performance and aligns with organizational strategic goals

- Others are turnover management, employee - employer – labor relationships; health, safety and welfare; downsizing, succession planning, and promotion.

3.2. Employee Competencies

The term "competence" first appeared in an article authored by R.W. White in 1959 as a concept for performance motivation [5]. Later, in 1970, Craig C. Lundberg defined the concept in "Planning the Executive Development Program". The term gained traction when in 1973, David McClelland wrote a seminal paper entitled, "Testing for Competence Rather than for Intelligence [6].

Competencies are the measurable or observable knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors (KSABs) critical to successful job performance [7]. It is the ability of an individual to do a job properly. Competency can also be viewed as a set of defined behaviors that provide a structured guide enabling the identification, evaluation and development of the behaviors in individual employees.

The combination of observable and measurable knowledge, skills, abilities and personal attributes contribute

to enhanced employee performance and ultimately result in organizational success. To understand competencies, it is important to define the various components of competencies which include [8]:

- **Knowledge:** This is the cognizance of facts, truths and principles gained from formal training and experience. Application and sharing of one's knowledge base is critical to individual and organizational success.
- **Skills:** A skill is a developed proficiency or dexterity in mental operations or physical processes that is often acquired through specialized training; the execution of these skills results in successful performance.
- **Ability:** This is the power or aptitude to perform physical or mental activities that are often affiliated with a particular profession or trade such as computer programming, plumbing, and calculus, among others.
- **Individual attributes:** These are properties, qualities or characteristics of individuals that reflect one's unique personal make-up. Individual attributes are viewed as genetically developed or acquired from one's accumulated life experiences. Although personal characteristics are the most subjective of the components, a growing significant body of research links specific personality traits to successful individual and organizational performance.
- **Individual Recognition and Rewards.** Individually recognizing and rewarding any of these sources of expertise provides a strong basis for individual performance engagement. However, it is their combination that results in the unleashing of resources that are all too frequently untapped.

Competencies provide organizations with a way to define in behavioural terms what it is that people need to do to produce the results that the organization desires in a way that is in keep with its culture. By having competencies defined in the organization, it allows employees know what they need to be productive. When properly defined, competencies allow organizations to evaluate the extent to which certain employee behaviours are present and where they may be lacking. For competencies lacked by employees, they can learn. This will allow organizations to know potentially what resources they may need to help the employee develop and learn those competencies.

3.3. General Employee Competency Model

A competency model is a set of skills and behavior identified to be critical for effective job performance. When used to guide individual work behaviour and professional development, competency models can be instrumental in achieving organizational success (Oakland country, 2014:2). The competency model is made up of several skill domains or groupings of associated competencies. At the Oakland Country – Michigan for example, the three skill domains in the General Employee Competency Model are Interpersonal skills, Collaboration skills and self-management skills. Each domain is further broken down into related competencies as

shown below:

3.4. Interpersonal Skills

This is a skill domain which involves:

- i. **Building Positive Working Relationships:** This skill is attained by developing and using collaborative relationships with internal and external partners and customers to facilitate the accomplishment of work goals. The key behaviors that lead to building positive working relationships according to Oakland Country (2014:4) include keeping people within and outside the organization updated and informed in a timely manner; valuing others' knowledge and expertise by inviting input and feed back of others; promptly acknowledging requests from others and showing up on time for meetings and appointments; maintaining a positive attitude; initiating open and candid relationships with people at all levels; interacting effectively with own and higher managers; and cooperating with others to pursue mutual goals [9][10].
- ii. **Building Trust:** This skill is built by interacting with everyone in a way that gives them confidence in one's intentions and those of the organization and fostering an environment that is fair and open to new ideas. Key behavior that lead to building trust include being reliable and dependable; giving credit where credit is due; treating people fairly and with respect; expressing consistent point of view to different audiences; being honest and straight forward with others and maintaining confidentiality and high personal ethical standards [11][9][10].
- iii. **Communication Skills:** This skill is attained by making efforts to clearly convey information and ideas through a variety of media to others in formal and informal settings in manner that engages them and helps them understand and retain the message. Key behaviors for such an attainment include: Organizing thoughts before speaking and communicating clearly and articulately; using examples to clarify a point, ensuring that others involved in a project or effort are kept informed about developments and plans; ensuring that regular and consistent communication takes place; tailoring the content of speech to the level and experience of the audience; organizing ideas clearly in oral speech; tailoring written communications to effectively reach an audience; and using graphics and other aids to clarify complex or technical information [9][10].

3.5. Collaboration Skills

This is a skill domain which includes:

- i. **Working together as a team:** This skill is attained by actively participating as a member of the team toward the completion of team goals. Persons who have capacity for team work use their experience and knowledge to play a part in a team in order to reach common targets. Among their skills, there is willingness to compromise and openness to suggestions and arguments from team members. In order to work successfully in a team, the

persons must have equal rights and be tolerant [12]. Cripe & Mansfield [9] observe that as a team member, the ability and desire to work cooperatively rest on how a team member listens and responds to other team members' ideas; offers support for others' ideas and proposals; is open with other team members about his/her concerns; expresses disagreement constructively; reinforces team members for their contributions; gives honest and constructive feedback to other team members and provides assistance to others when they need it. Other skills include working for solutions that all team members can support; sharing his/her expertise with others and seeking opportunities to work on teams as a means to develop experience and knowledge.

As a team leader, the ability to demonstrate interest, skill and success in getting groups to learn to work together entails providing opportunities for people to learn to work together as a team; enlisting the active participation of everyone; promoting cooperation with other units; ensuring that all team members are treated fairly and recognizing and encouraging behaviors that contribute to team work [9].

ii. Customer Service Skills: This skill is built by firstly recognizing that the unit exists to support its customer's needs and therefore making customers and their needs a primary focus of one's actions. Key behaviors include listening and responding effectively to customer questions, resolving customer problems to the customer's satisfaction; respecting all internal and external customers; using a team approach when dealing with customers; following up to evaluate customer satisfaction; measuring customer satisfaction effectively and commitment to exceeding customer expectation [11]. The demonstration of knowledge of products and services; getting the customer's input; assessing their needs and responding to requests for information, products, or services promptly, courteously and effectively are also some of the customer service skills [10].

3.6. Self-Management Skills

This skill domain involves:

i. Quality focus by establishing and exceeding high standards of excellence in all elements of one's work. Fermilab [11] observes that quality of work involves maintaining high standards despite pressing deadlines; doing work right the first time; correcting own errors and regularly producing accurate, thorough and professional work.

ii. Adaptability by maintaining effectiveness when experiencing major changes in work tasks or the work environment and embracing change by consistently remaining flexible to new work demands.

iii. Planning and organizing by effectively managing one's own time and resources to ensure that work is completed efficiently. In the case of unregulated work flows, it is essential that the employees have a high level

of organizational skill. Thus, they must be able to recognize coherences and to structure their work [13].

4. Research Questions

To make the review of literature undertaken above useful, and to help in making an attempt to contribute to existing knowledge, the following research questions have been advanced:

1) What are the prospects of employee core competencies in the achievement of effective talent management?

2) Can core competencies differentiate an organization from its competitors and create a competitive advantage?

The aforementioned research questions have necessitated the need to make clearer how they (research questions) lead from the review of existing literature to the contribution that the study makes to knowledge. This leads to implications and conclusions

5. Implications and Conclusions

In an increasingly competitive business landscape, excellent performers – “the talent” - are one of the key factors that will differentiate successful organizations. Clearly, organizations are extremely interested in excellent performance and hence the competencies that contribute to such performance. Competency management is about helping organizations to understand the competency profile of each employee, each team and the organization as a whole. It begins with defining employees' competencies and roles, capturing their assessment and analyzing the results. The results are then used to develop and deploy people based on their competencies [26].

Competency management places competencies at the heart of Talent Management. Defining competencies in a consistent manner helps to bind and integrate the organization's Talent Management processes, because competencies act as a common denominator. Though competencies were originally developed to focus training and development efforts, organizations should begin to use competencies in virtually every human resource domain. This is because competencies can provide the linkage for developing a truly integrated human resource system [26].

Competencies can link to larger organizational issues and a range of talent management applications. Through hiring and selection, organizations can use behavioral-event interviewing techniques and scoring checklists to identify individuals who have the competencies needed to be successful in the organization. In general, the greatest effort is devoted to identifying individuals with competencies in areas considered to be difficult to develop or in areas where immediate success is required [6][7][25].

When integrated into the learning, development, and career planning processes, competencies can be used in a

variety of ways. Competency-based curriculum design has been a mainstream practice for many years. In addition, many organizations have used career planning across bands or roles. More recently, competencies have been used to develop initiatives ranging from multisource feedback and assessment to coaching tools and comprehensive learning frameworks. Through the performance management process, organizations can clearly communicate the behaviors important to individual success. They can also help individuals see how well they demonstrate the competencies and develop plans for individual improvement [7] [25].

Job Descriptions: They explain the duties, working conditions and other aspects of a job including the competencies needed to perform the job's essential functions. Position-specific competencies are determined through the process of job analysis and are documented in the Position Description (PD) form. These competencies form a basis for recruiting, hiring, training, developing and managing the performance of employees [7].

Employee performance Management: Signals received from HR Washington [7] reveal that competencies allow supervisors to more fully describe to employees their performance expectations. Competency descriptions show employees what level of knowledge and skill mastery is required to successfully perform job duties, and what behavioral standards must be consistently demonstrated. Washington States performance and development plan includes competencies in both the expectations and evaluation sections. Corroborating the aforementioned, [6] explains that competencies provide regular measurement of targeted behaviors and performance outcomes linked to job competency profile critical factors. Also, performance management provides a shared understanding of what will be monitored, measured and rewarded and focuses cum facilitates the performance appraisal discussion appropriately on performance and development. Finally performance management provides focus for gaining information about a person's behaviors on the job.

Workforce planning and Career Paths: Competencies play key roles in workforce planning. Knowing which competencies the future workforce must possess to achieve business goals helps organizations plan and design their organizational structures, recruitment strategies, training budgets and development plans. It also helps in job assignments cum individual performance plans. Employees can also use competencies to plan a career path. As observed by [7], knowing which competencies are critical for certain promotions allow employees to request training and development opportunities and seek out specific feedback and coaching. In the same vein, [6] agrees with HR Washington [7] by asserting that development of stepping stones necessary for promotion and long term career growth clarifies the skills, knowledge and characteristics required for the job or role in question and for the follow-on jobs; identifies necessary levels of proficiency for follow-on jobs, allows for the identification of clear, valid, legally defensible and achievable benchmarks for employees to progress

upward; and takes the guesswork out of career progression discussions. Success Factors [18] also maintain that competency assessment is essential in the process of building an employee's career development plan.

Compensation: At the Nebraska University (NU), competencies are the foundation for the compensation programs. NU's philosophy in recognizing and rewarding specific competencies is the key to its continued and growing success. To NU, the development and proficiencies lead to proper distribution of monetary awards through salary adjustments [8].

The Washington State's compensation plan is directly tied to the state classification system which describes jobs in terms of the type and level of work performed. While competencies do not directly impact compensation, the nature and complexity of the work duties usually requires a certain level of knowledge and skill mastery. These competencies are often represented in the class specifications as 'knowledge and abilities' [7].

Decision Making: With increasing competence with increasing, the number of features and aspects (of experience) to be taken into account becomes overwhelming. To cope with this information explosion, the employee learns to adopt a hierarchical view of decision-making. By first choosing a plan, goal or perspective which organizes the situation and then examining only the small set of features and aspects that he has learned the employee can simplify and improve his performance [19].

Leadership: Superiors or managers have to be informed about the knowledge and skills of their employees so that they can use them in a targeted way. Professional training is to be offered and feedback referring to the work performed is to be given. Independent and self-responsible actions are to be promoted. Decisions must be objective and comprehensible to the employees [20].

Succession planning: Careful, methodical preparation focused on retaining and growing the competency portfolios critical for the organization to survive and prosper provides a method to assess candidates' readiness for the role; focuses training and development plans to address missing competencies or gaps in competency proficiency levels; allows an organization to measure its "bench strength" – the number of high-potential performers and what they need to acquire to step up to the next level; provides a competency framework for the transfer of critical knowledge, skills and experience prior to succession – and for preparing candidates for this transfer via training, coaching and mentoring; and informs curriculum development for leadership development for leadership development programs (a necessary component for management succession planning).

Although the structure and content of competencies has received significant attention in recent years, organizations have focused less on translation into talent management applications and implementation strategies. Recent studies by various groups focusing on this topic highlight that competency applications vary widely. Most organizations start with developmental and hiring interventions and

progress toward more formal applications such as performance management, succession planning, and compensation.

Competency initiatives indicate that successful programs use more integrated approaches to competency implementation; provide tools and job aids to managers and team members; and apply structured change management principles during rollout. Clearly an individual practitioner can take the initiative to adapt existing competencies as his or her own standards for assessment and development. However, implementing competencies in multiple applications across an enterprise constitutes a large-scale change and requires significant resources and time. In other words, clarifying the critical success factors or competencies required for the success of individuals is a necessary, but not sufficient aspect of organizational transformation.

Finally, predicting the future is a risky business, but in this case our crystal ball seems very clear. We believe that more and more organizations will be implementing competency-based applications, and that organizations with existing models will be looking for more effective ways to deploy them for greater overall impact. The reasons are self-evident and include:

- As organizations get the last ounce of productivity improvement out of business process reengineering, they will need to turn to the asset they have ignored over the past decade, the human asset, if they are to gain greater productivity enhancements.
- Competency-based human resources systems have the capacity actually to drive organizational change rather than simply to enable it to take place.
- Competency development provides a useful alternative to the job progression that many organizations are seeking as they delay, broadband, and otherwise de-emphasize the job.
- Competency-based tools offer a more effective method for targeting and leveraging a broad range of self-directed activities that actually produce personal change.

It is necessary, however, to navigate some potential obstacles to widespread use. Some of these potential setbacks include:

- First is the need to streamline the model-building process. In the past, organizations spent thousands of dollars and countless hours of staff time creating competency models without any tools or processes for applying them. This was a waste of time and money. For competency-based systems to become more widely used, organizations must be able to develop models faster, and at a fraction of the cost. This is why Schoonover Associates often prefers to use its process of rapid model prototyping. It enables organizations to spend the majority of time and effort where it belongs: on tools, processes, and implementation.
- Second, organizations need effective practices for implementing competency-based systems. Too often,

models are not translated into practical applications that can be sustained. Simple, user-friendly tools must provide help for managers and individuals with their day-to-day human resource problems and opportunities.

- Third, organizations need to focus most attention not on model content, nor how to document or handle the employee record or data, but on what will optimize human behavior change—fully motivated, self-directed employees and managers who can conduct thoroughly expressed, collaborative, continuous coaching conversations.

These obstacles are being overcome as more and more organizations develop and implement competency-based human resources systems. We see competency use expanding significantly over the next decade, especially as organizations become more aware of best practices and see the power of using competencies as an integrating vehicle for all talent management

6. Recommendations

1. Human Resource practitioners should build a competitive competency model based on job descriptions that both potential and current employees and their managers can use to measure and manage performance.
2. Since organizations cannot produce and develop superior performers without first identifying what superior performance is, HR departments of organizations should develop behavioral interview questions for interviewing the best and worst performers.
3. HR departments should identify high-performer behavior and ensure organizational employees possess them. This will help define and sustain an organization's position and reputation in the industry.
4. Organizations should devote organizational time, funds and space to comprehensively conduct researches/studies of the job, group and organization of industry. The process should include researching performance and success, interviewing high performing incumbents and conducting focus groups and surveys.
5. HR departments should develop written job descriptions.
6. Organizations should enlist the help of specialists/consultants to assess them and create a unique competency model where this skill is lacking within the organization itself. Through outsourcing of the entire process, an organization can pinpoint the root causes of its workforce challenges.

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