



eBook

Building and Executing a Competency Model for Federal HR



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Building and Executing a Competency Model for Federal HR

Competency modeling allows federal agencies to better identify and evaluate areas for improvement in their workforce. As defined by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), competencies are a measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that someone needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully.

A competency model is a framework of worker attributes used to align HR activities to HR strategy. By building a competency model, agencies can better identify the key components of the roles within the agency, combining data with workforce analytics to project future needs, and provide valuable training for the most important competencies on a role-by-role basis.

Tools that support employee training and development, alongside workforce planning and analysis, can be assets for federal HR departments decision-making. They help to accurately administer front-line assessments that identify immediate areas for improvement as well as provide a better picture of the workforce and how it can be augmented and developed.

How to Identify a Competency Gap

Competency models should be built in conjunction with subject matter experts who are familiar with key elements of each position within an agency. Competency models should be validated before decisions are based from it.

Once the competency model is developed, the next step is employee assessment. Employees are rated against the designated proficiency levels of their assigned position. While this can be a somewhat subjective process, controls can be used to minimize bias. For example, some raters are more lenient, others are more severe in their ratings, but well-written proficiency levels with behavioral anchors standardize ratings across raters. Also, training can be used to reduce their rater bias.

SkillsNavigator is a tool designed to facilitate employee-development assessment by several different types of raters. It can support self-assessment, supervisor assessment, and 360 assessments. Additional insights are important because they allow for a more complete view of an employee's performance. For example, a high definition photograph might reveal a few blemishes, but that is the point. In order to fix a problem, the first step is to raise awareness.





Employee Development and Succession Planning

This data can help take some of the guesswork out of skill replacement and training. It can be used to answer a variety of questions, such as: Of the people in the organization, what are our strengths, our weaknesses, how can we make employees more competent, or how does our current skillset stack up against future needs? Training opportunities come in two forms:

1. Addressing deficiencies needed to be successful in the current role
2. Aspirational training to advance employees in their career path

Both serve a purpose. The former helps bring employees to the level needed to effectively perform the duties defined for their position, while the latter helps support succession planning efforts or transitions in the workforce needs of an agency.

Once you have identified a competency that needs improvement, the agency should understand what training can be used to improve competencies. Training opportunities can be assigned to proficiency levels. For example, an entry-level leadership class might be assigned to the lowest leadership competency proficiency level and a more advanced-level class for the top leadership proficiency level.

This helps create a standardized system for training opportunities within an agency, which means agencies can make more judicious, targeted decisions about allocating limited training resources. Equally important, agencies can strategically report on training opportunities and future competency progression. Analytics can be used to identify which training is effective, which training that is ineffective, and optimize the successes and address the shortcomings.

Identifying Future Talent Needs

One of the many reasons competency assessment is valuable to federal HR departments is that it provides critical insights into future talent needs.

When integrated with workforce gap analysis, it helps to support workforce planning efforts, determining future headcount. Specifically, it is a major part in answering four questions:

1. Which positions do I need?
2. Where do I need these positions filled?
3. When do I need these positions filled?
4. How many of this position are needed?

Agencies frequently look at not only who they need to hire today, but who they will need in three-to-five-years' time, where those positions are needed both geographically and departmentally, and exactly when those positions will be needed. Comprehensive workforce gap analysis is used to determine many of these factors, but a significant data point in building such a model is a clear picture of skills gaps in the agency. That is where competency modeling is so important – providing a quantitative measurement of strategic positions within an agency and how people are performing in those roles.





Challenges in Accurate Competency Modeling

While the value of a good competency model is apparent, building that model can prove difficult with several potential challenges. The first and most pressing issue is accuracy of the components being evaluated. The job descriptions, competencies and proficiencies all need to be matched to the people who are currently working in the agency. Outdated job descriptions, poorly written benchmarks, or incomplete competency summaries can result in inaccurate assessments.

There is no single person in an agency who can illustrate the entirety of a competency model for its employees. To build an optimal model, engagement from other stakeholders is needed, such as job incumbents, supervisors, HR, and leadership. It is important to interact with all levels of an agency to get a truly clear picture of what people do in their roles and what competencies are most important in driving success in those roles.

This starts with a model that is can be refined through focus groups and interviews with key stakeholders and decision makers. Surveys can also be used for larger audiences. These individuals are asked to rate the relevance of each competency at a level, which helps provide an aggregate view of what is most important and how proficiencies should be assigned to match the model. Using a validated library of competencies can speed up this process, while not forfeiting accuracy.

A centralized repository of competencies reduces the time needed to start using these models. It is recommended to build a competency model as carefully configured to the agency and its departments as possible, but such a library can offer a good starting point. Further configuration allows the agency to ensure everything fits the specific needs of the people using it.



Best Practices for Competency Modeling

A good competency model provides HR and supervisors with a tool to evaluate and communicate with employees outside of the standard performance cycle. The following are best practices that should be considered when using a competency model.

1. **Linking the Competency Model to Agency Goals** – A competency model should be directly linked to the goals and objectives of the agencies. If the competency model is linked to strategic goals, and employee development is based off the competency model, then employee development will inherently be strategic.
2. **Building a Cross-section of Core and Technical Competencies** – Your competency model could have a combination of both fundamental competencies that will be present across multiple jobs, and technical competencies that are specific to certain roles. Communication, organization, and teamwork, for example, are fundamental competencies, while more occupational-specific competencies related to position descriptions are also needed.
3. **Using a Competency Library** – A well-defined competency library ensures greater efficiency when building a model, allowing you to draw from a preselected pool of relevant competencies. A competency library is a starting point, however, and not a final resource. To ensure accurate decision making down the line, agencies should make sure that competencies from a library are not too generic.

4. Finding a Balance for Granularity – When building a competency model, there is a desire for simplicity, both in development of that model and in presentation of that model to employees. But sufficient detail is needed to ensure it is clear what is expected of employees in these roles. A good competency model should be focused only on competencies that most directly impact performance and realization of agency goals.
5. Visual Presentations to Communicate with Employees – A job analysis is often a list-based presentation that may not convey salient points to non-HR staff. The benefit of a competency model and assessment is that it can be more visual. By presenting data in visual ways, end-users can be engaged, and the results are more memorable.

In addition to these five core best practices, there are other areas where you should focus to ensure success in implementing such a model, including:

- Focusing on future job requirements as part of the competency model.
- Using competencies to inform HR operations, including hiring and performance management.
- Using technology to more effectively use competency models
- Use a top-down development approach; Ensure the competency model is aligned to the strategy of the organization by engaging with leadership early.

A well-structured competency model that addresses the major issues faced by federal agency HR departments can be a powerful tool for both workforce planning and performance management. By addressing areas of weakness in the current workforce, overall performance can be improved to meet the requirements of the agency's inspector general or GAO reporting, while long term needs can be addressed with a better illustration of an agency's current competencies and potential skills gaps.

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