Designing a competency framework

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Key learning points
- The questions you need to ask before and during design.
- The skills and process of design.
- Tips and tips on designing a sound framework.

Introduction
From the first module (Competency frameworks: an introduction, issue 10) you have probably gained a picture of a competency framework. You may also have recognised that this is just one design and that, like vacuum cleaners, while there is much commonality there are also differences.

This module will look at designing a competency framework.

Why does an organisation decide it needs a framework? Our experience is that it stems from two prime sources:
- The first is to solve a real problem that the organisation is facing, such as the need to select better recruits or to identify better managers, or ... Well, there are many problems that organisations face.
- The second is a decision to improve the way things are done; for example introduce coaching and self-development or have a common basis for the people processes in the organisation, such as performance management or succession planning.

Having set out on the road to meet the need or to change the way things are done, a six-stage design process is started. I am not going to suggest that all the content of all the six steps is a must. What I am suggesting is that, in an ideal world, this is the minimum that would need to be done to produce an ideal framework.

The levels must be progressive. Level 1 is the most basic for effective operation and level 4 is an outstanding one. For example:

- Level 1: Passes water
- Level 2: Paddles in water
- Level 3: Swims in water
- Level 4: Walks on water

The levels are cumulative. It is expected that the person at level 3 can do all the things in levels 1 and 2 but not all the things in level 4.

The progression follows a theme or even two or three themes that are directly related to the competency and the environment where the competency will be used. Without a listing of common descriptors, the process can be a real brain-ache. Some common progressions are:
- simple to complex;
- single factor to multiple factor;
- low risk to high risk;
- short term to long term, etc.

Given the scale progression, you can define each level. This enables you to place the behaviours appropriately.

There is no way of knowing how this will fall out without working through this stage. In one organisation a very complex and demanding set of inter-personal behaviours was required by very junior people in the organisation, and senior people did not need this level of behavioural complexity. Focus groups tell you this. So is this structured low complexity to high complexity or is a different progression used? Decisions are required at each stage. Given the additional information from the focus groups, you can produce the draft design.

Roll-out
This is the subject of the next module, which will also include what the framework can be used for.

Six-step approach
So what are these six steps?
1. The reason, motivation and scope.
2. The foundation information.
3. The basic design.
4. Testing the basic design to produce the draft design.
5. Test, final design and ‘go’ decision.
6. Roll out.

The draft design
Producing the draft design
You now have a basic framework with titles, and definitions with appropriate behaviours allocated.

It is useful to test what has been achieved by using focus groups. The people involved will be aware of how the basic design has been produced. Their role is to do a sanity check on the work so far – is it logical, does it hang together, will it be acceptable, what is missing? They have the more creative role of deciding the basis of the scale progression so that levels are coherent and distinct.

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Test and final design
- Check that behaviours appear only in one competency and at one level. With computers this is made easy by using ‘find’.
- Check for non-observables - it’s amazing how words such as ‘understand’ slip in. The designer has to produce observable behaviours that result from the ‘understanding’.
- Eliminate redundant adjectives and adverbs; for example, an adjective such as ‘competitive’ qualifying ‘marketplace’. Market places are competitive; if not, they are not market places.

Summary

Now the framework has the fewest number of competencies consistent with the requirement. Each competency has a defined title and defined levels that follow a consistent progression, and within each level are behaviours consistent with the level descriptors. For example, if the level descriptor indicates ‘responsive’, then none of the behaviours will be ‘proactive’.

The framework is clean and ready for a final sanity check and the decision to roll it out.

References

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Designing a competency framework

Let’s have a look at the first five steps in detail. From this you can decide what skill you have, what resource you need or how you can locate the resource you will need.

**Reason, motivation and scope**

We have already touched on the reason and motivation, but let’s take it a little further. If we are to be successful we shall need to answer some basic questions:

- What is the purpose of the competency framework?
- What is the target population? (e.g. graduate, sales, managers, etc.)
- What are the budget and time parameters?
- Do we have expertise available?
- Who will use the framework? (e.g. managers, HR, target population, etc.)
- What formats have been predetermined?
- How will it be made available? (e.g. intranet, booklets, cards, etc.)
- Who are supporters already and whose support will be needed?
- What/who are the major blockers?
- How will it be piloted, validated and launched?

Having answered these basic questions, a picture will be emerging that prompts other questions.

It is necessary at this early stage to explore some of the questions. For example, you may decide to focus on a particular population and that population may spread across a number of functions. So the question arises, what sorts of jobs are involved? Are the jobs clustered in families? Does that indicate that other people should be included?

By now you should have defined the scope of the framework.

**The foundation information**

You now have to gather the behaviours that will form the framework. There are three key groups of people to ‘interview’:

- The first group are actual jobholders. Jobholders know what they do and how they do it.
- The second group are the visionaries and strategists. They can envision how the roles will change as the organisation develops, and therefore what behaviours will become paramount and what different ones will become important.
- Third are the sub-groups. These are often missed. A group may be under-represented – such as women in management or men in administration. There may be class or education or ethnic sub-cultures.

This is all about acceptability - that is how well somebody fits into the present situation. If managers are men there may be a prevalent behavioural culture with regard to what is ‘acceptable’. This may be different from what is ‘suitable’ for the roles and therefore require different behaviours. So it must be possible for the framework to be used to assess ‘suitability’ rather than current ‘acceptability’.

The word ‘interview’ was used in the information-gathering context. This is an absolutely vital phase of the process. There are three prime approaches. They are Critical Incident Technique and Behavioural Event Interviewing (Boyatzis, 1982) and Repertory Grid (Stewart et al., 1981). All three require a high level of interactive behaviour and analytical skills. The aim is to move past ‘why’ the person does something, past ‘what’ they do, to ‘how’ they do it – the behaviours used.

**The basic definition**

By integrating the information gathered you can identify the competencies required. The competencies can be titled and defined. As the designer, you now have some idea about what you are dealing with.

With the definition clear, the behaviours can be allocated.

At this point I should like to consider some of the design principles that apply to the definition and also apply to later stages of the design.

**Definition**

The definition is a summary, a ‘what’; it will therefore consist of only the essentials and avoid the ‘how’. ‘How’ is the content of the more detailed behavioural levels. This makes the definition unambiguous and unembellished - that is clear and simple.

**Overlap and contamination**

No definition must have concepts that appear in another definition.

The word or concept of planning as in ‘Planning and reviewing’ cannot appear in ‘Business and commercial focus’. It must be noted, however, that few competencies are entirely free from overlap or contamination by other competencies. You must as far as possible minimise overlap. This is a major challenge. Many frameworks have this contamination and it is very difficult to eliminate. For example, the common thinking on communication, considering others and working with others could easily form a giant competency and some behaviours could easily migrate across them. Nerves of steel and hanging on to clear thinking helps but it is difficult.

**Circularity**

No definition should use the word it is defining as part of the definition.

This avoids ‘circularity’ or a definition that adds nothing. An example would be defining ‘decision making’ as ‘the ability to decide’. This is not helpful. ‘The ability to make commitment to action’ or ‘the ability to reach a conclusion after consideration of possible choices’ is much more descriptive. What this also highlights is that, depending on the orientation and the behaviours involved, definitions of the same title will be different in different frameworks.

**Words**

The words we use should reflect standard English usage and mean what we are trying to convey.

An example is ‘respecting others’. The standard definition employs words such as ‘show admiration’ and ‘deference’. This is perhaps not what is intended. ‘Considering others’ may be defined as ‘thoughtful of somebody’s feelings or position’, ‘to take something into account, often sympathetically’. These definitions have much more of the tone required. In most cases, though, most people understand and accept the ‘correct’ words – although there is, of course, a basic problem in understanding what a word means. For example, two words that are very often confused are ‘innovative’ and ‘initiative’. Looking at some dictionaries, it is easy to understand why. For this reason it is useful for designers to compile a glossary so that words can be used consistently.

**Orientation**

Two of the competencies may have a commonality but the orientation would be different.

To take one example, ‘Change focus or adaptability’ may have a co-competency of ‘Creativity and/or innovation’. The orientation of the first is responsive; the orientation of the second is proactive. This orientation sometimes causes a problem, and two words become muddled because the competencies are assumed to be the same.

**Limitation**

A behavioural statement should avoid limitations.

An example of a behavioural statement is ‘Be influential in a challenging environment’. If you are influential, you are influential. There are degrees, but that is in content or context. If context is important it should be built into the level definition.