

Designing competency frameworks

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I'm skeptical of the core competency frameworks in general. They often seem to me to be over-engineered lists of a mix of skills, behaviors, and other attributes. Frequently there is a little obvious link to the delivery of the organization's strategy or values. Note I am less skeptical about specific technical competencies to indicate skill in a field (e.g. architecture, nursing, or UX design)

Take the [OECD's \(2014\) set](#) which divides competencies into technical competencies: specific to a discipline or field of practice and core competencies. Technical competencies are the 'requirements to successfully perform a given job' and in their case 'are defined in job vacancy announcements.'

Their core competencies, on the other hand - that everyone should have - are described in a booklet. OECD lists and describes fifteen core competencies grouped into three clusters: delivery-related, interpersonal and strategic, and 5 levels (related to the type of role). Level 1 is roles including 'assistant' and 'operator', level 5 includes Heads of Function and Directors, giving a total of 75 statements. This form of a competency framework is common. I'll take the OECD one as an example of why I am skeptical:

The OECD competency 'Analytical Thinking' at level 1 lists:

- Distinguishes between critical and irrelevant pieces of information.
- Gathers information from a variety of sources to reach a conclusion.

And at Level 5 lists:

- Is sought out by others for advice and solutions on how to best interpret and use information.
- Discerns the level of pressure or influence to apply in each aspect of the analysis in relation to the broader context.

My skepticism on this sort of thing is based on my view that the items on such lists are:

- Subjective e.g. a Director - Level 5 - may not be able to distinguish between critical and

irrelevant information (a Level 1 competency) and who is judging what is critical or irrelevant?

- Not relatable to role or level e.g. an assistant, Level 1, maybe sought out by others for 'advice and solutions on how best to interpret and use information. (A-Level 5 competence)
- Not indicators of job performance as the context will influence the ability to deploy (or not) the competence.
- Not conducive to being 'leveled' by role. Any role may require different levels of competence so an assistant may require some of the competence listed at the Director level. For example, what assistant does not have to handle 'difficult on-the-spot questions (e.g. from senior executives) listed in this framework as a level 5 competence?

But these frameworks have lots of defenders. Take a look, for example, at the [SHL Universal Competency Framework](#) or the UK's [CIPD Competency Framework](#) Factsheet.

I notice that the SHL (2011) info says firmly that we need to distinguish between the words 'competence' and 'competencies', because 'it is unfortunate that two very similar words have been used to describe two very different constructs. It is essential that there is a clear distinction between these two terms.' The CIPD (2020) explains that 'In the past, HR professionals have tended to draw a clear distinction between 'competences' and 'competencies'. ... More recently, however, there's been growing awareness that job performance requires a mix of behavior, attitude, and skill, and the terms are now more often used interchangeably.') In this sort of distinction, you start to see the difference between core and technical competencies. In some cases frameworks mesh these. See, for example, the [Actuarial Competency Framework](#).

One person who does not defend core competency frameworks is [Marcus Buckingham](#), who says:

- **'Competencies can't be measured.** So, your scores (or the scores you give your team) and all the data around how much of a certain competency a person possesses are completely made up.
- **No single person possesses all competencies.** When you study people who excel at a certain job, although *as a group* they may have all of the competencies that are supposedly required, **no one person has all of them.**
- **There is no data that shows that people who acquire the competencies they supposedly lack outperform the people who don't.** So even if we could accurately determine that you are lacking a specific competency, having you take a learning and development course to plug that gap will have no effect on your performance. Well-roundedness does not predict higher performance, and it's better to be sharp in one or two key areas instead of well-rounded.'

The topic of competency frameworks came up this week as an organization asked me for advice on them. They had questions related to links between the framework and delivery of strategy and values, whether they needed core as well as technical competencies, how to communicate the competencies to the workforce in a simple and easy-to-use way.

What I've found is that organizational values are a very good basis against which to judge employee behavior, attitude and contribution – assuming that you have chosen values that support the delivery of your business strategy. And last week I listened to [Yancy Strickler](#) saying much the same thing. He is the founder of Kickstarter, and he was talking about 'the values the company created, which help guide the way Kickstarter attracts and hires talent and constructs and operates its business.'

Marcus Buckingham is also of the view that core 'competencies are simply values. They should be written on a wall, not attempted to be measured and learned. If you want your team to be goal-oriented and customer service-focused; express them as values, create stories around them, celebrate the heroes who demonstrate them – bring these values to life.'

The organization with which I was discussing competency frameworks has five values on which to judge an employee's contribution. Many organizations are now 'values based' – [Ben and Jerry's](#) is a classic example as is [Patagonia](#)

I suggested that those in the organization I was talking with re-think their core competencies, instead of focusing on the values – not as a measurement tool in the traditional sense but to gauge whether people are going to be, in Patagonia's terms, not a culture fit, but a 'culture add'. Patagonia's [values-based approach](#) 'to evaluating potential hires [is one] that arises from the company's unwavering and ironclad commitment to its mission. And it's a reminder to every organization that they are hiring human beings, not skill sets or even experience.'

For other aspects of workforce management – career development, technical progression, management/leadership development – I suggested they introduce technical competencies by job family. For an excellent example of a technical competency framework for designers look at [Jason Mesut's](#) approach. (Note that it also includes some core competencies).

To recap – I don't think most core competency frameworks i.e. items listed in progressive order by level achieve their intended outcome of supporting individual or organizational performance management or enabling, in Mesut's words. 'a clear way of objectively promoting or compensating people fairly ... or providing clarity of what a long-term career in the organization might look like or giving scarce and fickle talent a reason to stay.' A better approach is to develop technical competency frameworks based on job families and for core competencies that do not have a framework by lists and levels. Use only the organization's values and give clear and engaging messages that employees are expected to live the values in their daily work.

What's your view on a traditional core competency framework? Let me know.

The post "Designing competency frameworks" was first published by Dr. Naomi Stanford here
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/designing-competency-frameworks-naomi-stanford/>

About Dr. Naomi Stanford

Dr. Naomi Stanford is an organization design practitioner and author. During her earlier UK career, Dr. Stanford was an employee of large multinational companies, including Price Waterhouse, British Airways, Marks & Spencer, and Xerox. She moved to the US mid-career working as an organization design consultant to a range of organizations in the government, non-profit and private sectors. She then returned to the UK to work in the government sector. Naomi is now free-lancing as an organization design consultant/adviser. Additionally, she writes books, articles, and a weekly blog (over 800 so far). Naomi speaks at conferences and tweets regularly on organization design. Currently, she is writing the third edition of her Economist book 'A Guide to Organisation Design', to be published in March 2022.

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