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Developing the workforce: the introduction of behavioural competencies at the University of Huddersfield

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Context

Competencies are nothing new. They have been used by organisations for over twenty years, in some form or another. Some have focused on particular groups within the workforce;[1] others have been designed for specific purposes (such as recruitment or training). Competencies are very much in vogue at present and in the LIS (Library and Information Services) sector, Lifelong Learning UK is currently consulting on new national occupational standards for the libraries, archives and information services workforce.[2] Universities in the UK are starting to adopt them, particularly for developing management and leadership skills.

Definitions of 'competency' vary, but they tend to fall into two themes:[3]

- descriptions of work tasks or job outputs (known as 'competences', typically outlined in a job description), and
- descriptions of behaviour (known as 'competencies').

The case study outlined in this article describes the development and implementation of the term in the latter sense, a competency framework that focuses on the behaviours required in a contemporary library and computing service. The overarching reason for introducing a competencies approach at this time at Huddersfield was recognition that constant change has become the norm for people working in our sector. The skills that were relevant ten or fifteen years ago are not necessarily relevant now. The workforce is now required to be more customer-focused, more flexible, more able to multi-task. Many of these skills are behavioural and less likely to be documented than the easier-to-define technical skills, which generally are already outlined in job descriptions and person specifications.

More specifically, the reasons for developing a competency framework were:

- To introduce transparency in terms of the behavioural skills expected in each role
- To provide a tool for performance management
- To assist with succession planning and career development
- To give recognition to people who meet or indeed exceed the required levels of competency
- To emphasise that the softer, 'people', skills are equally as important as technical skills.

Methodology

The project was conceived in partnership with the University of Huddersfield's human resources department, which co-funded the project on the basis that it would be used as a model for the university. HR consultants StraightForward[4] were appointed to work with us on the project, which was anticipated to take approximately six months. In outline, the methodology comprised:

- setting up a steering group chaired by the head of library services and including the head of staff development, the two consultants from StraightForward, a UNISON union representative and members of library and front-line computing staff

- briefing sessions for all staff to explain the concept of competencies and why they were being introduced

- meetings with senior managers for views on core values, skills, behaviours for the future

- focus groups with staff, convened by the consultants, probing issues around perceived roles, skills, decision-making, communication and performance

- draft of framework, consultation with staff, final version of framework and accompanying documentation agreed

- training – half-day workshops for all staff, one-day workshops for managers

- implementation, initially on an informal basis then integrated with the appraisal process

- evaluation.

WHAT THE COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK LOOKS LIKE

Figure 1 shows the pictorial representation of the framework. The eleven separate competencies represent the combined views of all colleagues within the service on the important skills and behaviours. They are portrayed in a circle so as not to give undue weighting to any particular competency; the two segments 'Managing finances' and 'Managing performance and development' are intended for managers, whilst the remaining nine are for all staff, including managers.

FIGURE 1. The Competency Headings

Figure 2 illustrates the format of each competency. Each one is divided into three levels, 'Learner', 'Competent' and 'Expert', with examples in each category of typical skills and behaviour expected at that level. The section across the bottom of the page gives examples of negative behaviour.

FIGURE 2. Demonstrating flexibility and adaptability

Each role within the service at Huddersfield has been mapped against the competencies, assigning levels as appropriate. A subject librarian, for example, is expected to be competent in 'Working as a team' but expert in 'Supporting and educating others'. The levels represent the minimum each individual should aspire to, and a good line manager will encourage their staff to exceed their required competency level.

Each individual is required to self-assess their competencies prior to meeting their line manager. They are encouraged to be reflective and self-critical, and to note examples of good practice and areas for development. This preparation acts as the basis for discussion in the appraisal process.

EVALUATION OF THE FRAMEWORK SO FAR

At the time of writing, annual appraisals that incorporate the competencies framework for the first time are being conducted. Despite some initial anxieties and scepticism from staff, initial feedback suggests this is going to be a valuable tool, particularly for performance management. Some managers have reported that they felt able to have difficult but productive conversations for the first time. Many people have commented on how helpful it is to see the competencies written down, to clarify exactly what is expected in their role – and also in the roles they might aspire to. Line managers now have an important role to play in ensuring that identified development takes place.

It will inevitably take some time for the framework to become truly embedded. The requirement for reflection and critical self-appraisal does not come easily to everyone and represents a cultural change in the way we manage performance.

Over the coming year the scheme will be refined in the light of further evaluation, particularly with regard to:

- consistency by line managers in their assessment of the competency levels
- discouraging a 'tick box' mentality towards assessment
- ensuring sufficient 'stretch' in the framework to maintain motivation
- annual refresher training for managers on 'difficult conversations'.

I am happy to send copies of the complete framework to colleagues and would also be very interested to receive

feedback from services which have already
adopted a similar approach.

Acknowledgements

References

1   See for example R.E.Boyatzis, *The compe-
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    Chichester: John Wiley, 1982
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3   Described in S.Whiddett and S.Hollyforde,
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    Personnel and Development, 1999
4   http://www.straight-forward.co.uk/
    (accessed 02.08.07)