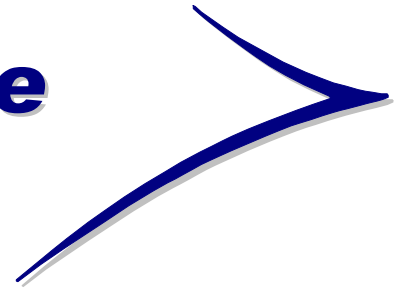


beyond competence



Competence frameworks fail to add value if they are built on confused concepts

Know what I mean?

Ask any 10 people what they mean by competence and you are likely to get at least 3 or 4 different definitions.

This can cause endless confusion in frameworks for managing competence and performance, unless there is clarity about the underlying concepts.

Four influential definitions are summarised here.

Predictive competency

This definition concentrates on finding characteristics that are likely to differentiate superior performers.

The concepts derive largely from the work of David McClelland, a 1970s Harvard psychologist famous for his work on motivation and psychometric testing. Richard Boyatzis, his former student, popularised the term *competency* in a 1982 book.

Many companies apply the concepts - especially for high-potential staff. Most corporate systems do not use the sophisticated tests envisaged by McClelland, but rely on assessment against 'competency statements.'

These are often rather bland descriptions of the things that people need to be good at if they are to be effective and get on in the firm - and may become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Organisational competency

Core competencies are characteristics of an *organisation*, not individuals. They are aggregates of capabilities, where synergy is created and applied across an organisation.

The definition by Prahalad & Hamel, two business academics, became highly fashionable in the 1990s.

A core competency is an area of specialised expertise from complex technology or work-activity streams - such as Honda's expertise in engines.

Core competencies provide a set of unifying principles that are difficult to imitate, and that pervade marketing and product development strategies.

Proven competence

Both the above definitions are widely used in hazardous sectors, but they concern probability rather than proof of competence.

Duty holders subject to Safety-Case regulation need something more robust. In many cases, they define competence as a real and demonstrated ability to carry out some activity to a set standard.

Proven competence is judged by the outputs from work activities, not by inputs like knowledge or training. What workers produce is compared with a standard - usually a minimum acceptable level of performance.

This 'VQ model' of competence is often criticised as a lowest common denominator, inappropriate for high performers or knowledge workers.



Adaptive competence

In the last 10 years, a fourth variation has been applied widely to professional roles where practitioners create and define their own tasks.

In a 1991 article, Fleming described a concept of meta-competence - "that which allows someone to locate a particular competence within a larger framework of understanding" - or the ability to read a new situation and to adapt or apply appropriate competences.

It is not about answering questions posed by predictable tasks in known worlds. It is about dealing with uncertainty and incomplete evidence, asking the right questions, and developing ways to resolve problems.

It may be seen as learning to learn, flexible transfer and application of knowledge and skills across contexts, or "thinking outside the box."

Which is right?

All four definitions have problems for real-world application.

The first leads to subjective, judgmental assessment if it is not tied to a rigorous testing strategy.

The second is difficult to translate into frameworks of individual behaviours that can be assessed.

The third can become a bureaucratic evidence nightmare, and usually fails to differentiate high performers.

The fourth is difficult to apply and assess robustly in a way that provides assurance in high-risk situations.

Beyond competence

At Rowanhill, we use the proven-competence definition, but apply it within core strategic frameworks, and translate superior-performer qualities and 'metacompetence' into easily assessable terms.

We can then go *beyond competence*, integrating diverse concepts so that competency standards & performance measures are aligned rigorously to critical business processes - adding value, not bureaucracy.

Our approach reflects sound theory, and is firmly grounded in practical experience of what works and what does not in different organisational or occupational contexts.

Find out more



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