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IS YOUR JOB ANALYSIS DOING THE JOB FOR YOU?

CHALLENGING THREE MYTHS THAT STEER ORGANIZATIONS WRONG

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It's a century-old debate: If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it really make a sound? One side argues no, no ear drums vibrated, no sound was perceived. Others say yes—there were still sound waves, regardless of how many people were or were not there to hear them.

As I/O psychologists rather than philosophers (though some may argue, there are similarities) we have a different debate: If an organization develops competency models and they don't drive results, did they *really* do a job analysis? There are a number of approaches to performing a job analysis (also known as a competency model or Success Profile, used to identify what leads to success in a role). At the end of most processes, you'll possess some information about a job. But far too often it's not the kind of information that drives true business results by guiding or changing the behaviors of your employees. The models, essentially, do not make a sound. Or they make a sound, but no one hears it. Either way, job analyses are too time-intensive, costly, and

critical to guiding employees' behavior to have the same kind of impact as a downed tree in a deserted forest.

In this article, we'll provide our point of view on three ways organizations falter when performing job analyses, and our advice on alternative ways to achieve resounding success. We're organizing these points of view around three competency modeling myths:

1. Competencies or competency models can be designed as one-size-fits-all.
2. Once a model is created for a job, it should endure for many years.
3. Each HR system in your organization needs a different competency model (or at least different definitions of success).

Let's take a closer look.

1. COMPETENCIES OR COMPETENCY MODELS CAN BE DESIGNED AS ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL.

Like the fountain of youth or a money tree, a competency model that's one-size-fits-all is pure fantasy. It'd be nice, but it doesn't exist in reality. It's tempting to say all leaders need to coach others, or all employees need to be innovative. But the big problem with putting the same competency in each model is making it work well for everyone.

We find this one-size-fits-all approach breaks down in a few different ways:

- > **Slick sounding, sexy competencies.**
Sexy competencies? Ok, maybe that pushes the limits, but here's an example:

“Advanced Intellectual Aptitude.” What job in today’s economy doesn’t need Advanced Intellectual Aptitude, right? But using this in practice—defining it in a way that people understand what they need to do—is often where this kind of competency falls apart. Frequently to meet diverse needs across wide audiences, these slick competencies bundle a number of behaviors together, resulting in something so broad that it’s too all-consuming to be operational. Advanced Intellectual Aptitude, for example, may cover so wide a range of behaviors that it’s a competency model in and of itself. Bundle a few of these very broad competencies together and you encapsulate so many behaviors, the people using the model won’t know where to start or focus.

> **Bland, vanilla competencies.**

Sometimes a competency is simplified to such an extreme extent—again, usually in the pursuit of utility across large audiences—that it lacks any actionable behaviors at all. The behaviors are generic and vague. Like a horoscope or a fortune cookie, they’re open to an individual’s interpretation in order to be relevant. And much like a horoscope or a fortune cookie, accuracy is highly questionable.

> **One competency, all levels.** This is a case of good competencies gone bad. It happens when organizations start with a solid, focused competency, but expect too much from it. Take a concept like effective communication or customer orientation—both solid competencies. But successful performance in these will certainly look different at the executive level than among individual contributors. Trying to make a single competency that serves all masters boils behaviors or skills down to

their most basic forms, and leave people unclear on what they are supposed to do or why a certain competency might be relevant for them in their position. Some will create behavior anchored rating scales (BARs) to make this problem go away. The idea is that the same competency is applied across job levels, but the criteria for effective performance of the competency is different depending on level. Isn’t this further complicating the approach by turning one competency into three, five, or even seven (depending on the number of BARs)?

In all of these cases, the competencies and resulting models can be frustrating for the user. When this happens, sometimes associates go rogue. They scrap the model in favor of something that feels better—something they write themselves, or obtain from some other source. This undermines the consistency and reliability of the system. And without that, the opportunity for validity and utility is gone, too.

The Better Way

The better way to infuse the consistent behavior across wide audiences is to create a set of complementary competencies that define behaviors for populations with a lot in common. Take the need to persuade, for example. At executive levels, we might call that competency “influence” and stress the importance of behaviors such as creating strategies that advance goals held in common by key stakeholders. We can modify the same concept for sales managers with a competency called “Broadening Business Value,” which stresses gaining commitment from customers to advance sales. Sales professionals use “Sales Ability” and “Expanding or Advancing Opportunities.”

For professionals and frontline leaders outside the sales function, we might identify a competency such as “Gaining Commitment,” which focuses on facilitating agreement for single ideas, rather than large strategies such as an executive would.

These related—yet still distinct, unique, and specific—competencies all get at the same concept, but with different key actions. They’re relevant, and they prompt the people using them to focus on the right behaviors. At the same time, they aren’t required to be defined separately for every job within the organization. And when paired with lists of critical knowledge, experience, and personal attributes specific to a job or role, they’re a powerful way to define, guide and evaluate behavior.

2. ONCE A MODEL IS CREATED FOR A JOB, IT SHOULD ENDURE FOR MANY YEARS.

As business changes, so does a view of success in key roles. One could say that nurses will always need a keen ability to remain focused on patient needs, that sales people will always need to persuade. We’d answer: yes, but we’re seeing our health care clients needing their nurses to play a more active role in managing a patient’s care across providers while controlling costs. In many firms, those in sales have shifted from selling products transactionally to partnering as business consultants. Competency models need to capture these business or market shifts through the re-prioritization of the model, the deletion of some competencies that are no longer relevant or the addition of new ones.

The Better Way

Revisit your models periodically, or whenever there is a major change in your business. Some organizations need to review them as frequently as every other year, few can wait more than five years between reviews. Recent recessionary activity certainly changed the behaviors necessary to be successful in many organizations. For example, competency models that used to drive a focus on expansion may have been scrapped in favor of new ones that drive cost management behaviors. Existing models don’t always need full overhauls, adding a competency around sales opportunity analysis would improve alignment with business goals in the case of a sales organization moving from a transactional to a partnering sales approach. Periodic, strategic reviews confirm the most relevant competencies are being used accurately and efficiently.

Not sure if it’s time? It’s probably worth a look if you agree with one or more of these three statements. *People in my organization are:*

- > doing a new kind of work, or working differently.
- > working with new kinds of technology or different people than they have previously.
- > tackling new and different types of problems.

The need to eventually update models is sometimes overlooked when designing them. Some organizations create a unique model for every position. If the organization is big and there are thousands of employees, the review cycle could be endless. The

opposite of the ‘one-size-fits-all approach’ we warn against in the previous myth, overly-specific models can be too cumbersome to keep current—leaving the models out of touch with the business and unlikely to drive results.

3. EACH HR SYSTEM IN YOUR ORGANIZATION NEEDS A DIFFERENT COMPETENCY MODEL.

While it’s true that one model will not work for every position in your organization, it’s false that each position needs multiple models to support each talent management system. We sometimes see that the model an organization uses for succession planning is different from the one used for selection, which is unique and not the same as what’s used for leadership development or performance management.

There are two major drawbacks to creating multiple models for multiple systems:

- > It’s a whole lot of work, necessitating that essentially the same process with the same stakeholders is duplicated several times over.
- > Models lack consistency. An associate is selected using one model, but held accountable to a different one as part of performance management. Multiple models mean multiple messages, minimizing the utility and validity of all models.

The Better Way

If you’re analyzing with multiple systems in mind, create one overarching master model. It may have 10 competencies in it, but not all 10 will be used in every system. Some competencies will be shared, while others will serve a specific purpose for a unique

system. The trick to getting this right is using a competency that is adaptable. Take a look at an excerpt of one such competency, which we already mentioned:

Gaining Commitment

Definition: *Using appropriate interpersonal styles and techniques to gain acceptance of ideas or plans; modifying one’s own behavior to accommodate tasks, situations, and individuals involved.*

Key Actions

- > **Opens discussions effectively—**
Describes expectations, goals, requests, or future states in a way that provides clarity and excites interest.
- > **Clarifies the current situation—**
Seeks, gives, and summarizes information; ensures that the situation/issue at hand is understood.
- > **Develops others’ and own ideas—**
Presents own ideas; seeks and develops suggestions of others; makes procedural suggestions.
- > **Facilitates agreement—**Uses appropriate influence strategies (such as demonstrating benefits or giving rewards) to gain genuine agreement; persists by using different approaches as needed to gain commitment.
- > **Closes discussions with clear summaries—**Summarizes outcomes of discussions and establishes next steps if needed.

This competency has different applications in different HR functions. In a selection situation, behavioral interviewing questions probe for past examples of the key actions. Development activities may focus on one

key action with a plan to improve a person's ability to develop others' ideas. When used in performance management, this associate is measured on and held accountable for gaining commitment as defined in the competency. At multiple points in the cycle of managing talent, associates' key behaviors are reinforced, rather than confused or even contradicted.

MORE ON COMPETENCIES . . .

There's much more to a discussion about performing job analyses and using competencies and models. If you're looking for information beyond what's discussed here, we invite you to discover more at www.ddiworld.com/our_expertise/dd_successs-profile-competency-management.asp. From the legal pitfalls of modeling to more tips on creating models that work, you'll find a wealth of information in white papers and monographs.

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