Common Competency Management Pitfalls

How to Avoid Detours on the Road to Competency Management

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"There's no question that competency management initiatives require effort. With good planning, design and execution, they can be professionally rewarding and quickly become a vital component of an organization's workforce optimization efforts."

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Introduction

"You don't drown by falling in the water; you drown by staying there." – Edwin Louis-Cole

At Avilar we are seeing a steady increase in the number of people interested in using competency management at their organizations. This is great news! People are beginning to understand that competency management is central to workforce development and are taking steps to create the foundation that will lead to better staffing practices, targeted learning initiatives, focused individual development plans, disaster planning, improved project teams, succession planning, and every other workforce management activity from hire to retire. While we hear from people excited to begin their projects, we also hear from people who have "fallen into the water" and are in danger of drowning in a sea of confusion and complexity. The pitfalls in the competency management process are out there, but it is our hope that this white paper will help you avoid some of those we've run into or perhaps help some of you back to solid ground if you've already experienced setbacks.

As we all know, it's generally easier and less expensive to learn from the mistakes of others than to learn from our own. So, the Avilar consulting team has identified some of the competency management difficulties we've been able to help organizations resolve. The pitfalls shared in this white paper fall into three categories; insufficient planning, inadequate competency model, and poor execution.

PITFALLS WE'VE ENCOUNTERED

- **Insufficient Planning**
- **Inadequate Competency Model**
- **Poor Execution**

For each of these three pitfalls we've identified three potential solutions, and for those nine solutions we've identified three tips that can either keep you from getting into trouble or help you get out. We hope that several of the 27 tips will be useful to you.

Planning Pitfalls

"A goal without a plan is just a wish." --Antoine de Saint-Exupery

Getting off on the right foot with a solid project plan is a requirement for any project. A great number of the problems we encounter can be attributed to a lack of planning and organization.

STARTING TOO BIG

Not long ago one of my colleagues described his efforts to help a large organization that was set on identifying all of the competencies for every job in the organization, at a very detailed level. The goal was perfection. There was no room for error in the wording of the competencies and stakeholder input was required on every word. What was the result? After two years of intense work on their model, the project team was barely out of the rough draft stage.

Unfortunately, before my colleague could provide much help a new CEO came on board and not surprisingly scrapped the project as a low value initiative, unworthy of additional effort.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Don't attempt to roll out a high-stakes, organization-wide competency management project in one step**
- **Select an initial project that will get you meaningful results in a relatively short period of time**
- **Ensure that your project is clearly aligned with the organization's strategy**

A competency management project should be staged over time. Start with an initial project that's designed to yield some good, meaningful results that you can learn from and build on in a relatively short time period. Key leaders in most organizations have a very short attention span so be careful to select an initial project that is closely aligned with your organization's strategy and goals, is likely to achieve meaningful results, and will serve as a foundation for future applications. One of the best ways to ensure that your project stays small but focused is to write a clear statement of purpose that puts boundaries around the jobs, roles and skills to be included initially.

INSUFFICIENT STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

Good planning requires participation at some level by every group that has a stake in the outcome of the project. Often we see projects that suffer from insufficient stakeholder participation. One enthusiastic learning manager we encountered recently was fascinated with the idea of competency management and interested in building his own competence in this important workforce development skill. He read widely, attended several workshops and consulted with the organization's human capital vendor partners. He had a strong commitment to creating a learning needs assessment and development planning system that would be unique to the organization. He also wanted to avoid some natural conflicts that typically arose between the human resources department and other areas of the organization, especially the IT and engineering groups. Since leaders in these groups rarely took time to collaborate with HR, he worked on his own and developed a well-organized, well-written competency model populated with a skill dictionary purchased from a leading vendor. Participation in the initial needs assessment however was low and resistance high –

especially from the technical groups who were clearly annoyed that they had played no part in developing the model. If you can't get the right people to the table in the beginning of the project you're going to have conflicts down the road.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Be sure all stakeholders are adequately engaged and represented at the appropriate times – select "bridge builders" for the team**
- **Keep the process moving and be conscious of using stakeholder time wisely**
- **Keep lines of communication open – don't let natural conflicts impede your progress**

We all know that people are more likely to support what they help create. Include people who represent all stakeholder groups from the beginning and be sure to include as many "bridge builders" as you can. Bridge builders are those people who are natural translators; they have the ability to speak the language of two or more subgroups and bring them together to focus on common ground. You need these people to bridge the communication and culture gap that invariably exists among departments in an organization. Also, be sure to include individuals from all levels in the organization, especially those being assessed. Employees, managers and supervisors often have differing perspectives on how skills are effectively used in organizations; frequently the input from the employees themselves is more accurate and useful than input obtained from managers.

As you engage your stakeholders, keep the process moving and be conscious of using stakeholder time wisely. I've had the misfortune of sitting through dozens of boring, unproductive, hour-long meetings that actually required only three minutes of my attention. Wasting people's time is no way to build stakeholder support. Before every meeting, ask: Do we really need to meet? Does every invited participant have value to add? Will they receive value from attending? Keep meetings short and use e-mails, blogs, or other ways to keep people informed and to continue to move the process along. When you show stakeholders that you value their time they'll be much more willing to participate.

Keep lines of communication open. You're going to get divergent opinions and that conflict is good! Just don't let it slow you down. Busy people may not initially appreciate the value of a well-designed competency management program. By providing concrete examples of how they stand to benefit, listening to their concerns and providing support, you can get – and keep – them on board.

FAILURE TO IDENTIFY RISKS

Implementing a competency management initiative implies organizational change and as with any change effort there are risks. One of my colleagues tells of a high tech company that was planning a re-organization. They chose to roll out competency assessments at a time when anxiety was high and rumors rampant even though the reorganization had not yet been announced. Fearful of the consequences of admitting low proficiency, some employees tended to inflate their proficiency levels. A few managers manipulated assessments to ensure their favorites were safe from being cut or moved to an undesirable assignment. As a result the assessments were largely discounted and the competency management project lost momentum.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Timing is everything – assessments can support changes (re-orgs, RIFs, mergers, etc.) if they are timed right**
- **Consider the impact of assessment results on the individuals, work groups and overall organization**
- **Match testing and validation rigor with the stakes of your competency program**

Timing is everything. Had this organization realized that rumors and distrust would reduce the validity of the data, they could have waited until after the formal announcement and positioned the assessment in a way to match people's skills and interests to appropriate positions as they had intended.

To prevent a similar misfortune, you need to consider the impact that competency assessments might have on individuals, work groups, and the overall organization.

Employees and managers will be wondering: What's in this for me? Could this have a negative impact on my current job? Will it help or hurt my career? How will it help me be more successful? How will it help the organization?

Some initiatives are riskier than others. Make sure you match your testing and validation rigor with the stakes of the program. If you are assessing competence simply to have an inventory of skills to use in matching staffing or project requests, the skills and definitions you use probably need only pass a "face" validity test. If your competency assessment has the potential to impact individuals' employment decisions, however, the stakes are higher. You need to be able to clearly demonstrate that every skill you're testing really does measure job-related skills. In high-stakes assessments it's important to consult with your internal or external experts in employment law to ensure that your assessments do not have a disparate impact on employees in protected classes or otherwise violate fair employment practices.

Competency Model Pitfalls

A well-designed competency model that contains the knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics that are required in your organization is the backbone of a competency management system. Developing a good model is both art and science; it takes a great deal of research, analysis and intuition to get it right.

COMPETENCIES NOT SUITED TO YOUR NEEDS

With so many commercial models available it's tempting to just use a purchased model. In our experience, however, use of "out-of-the-box" solutions without modifications lead to limited success. "Vanilla" skills and knowledge definitions tend to yield "vanilla" data that isn't much use to the organization. If you want rich information about the competencies of your workforce, you need to match competencies to the needs of your organization.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Do your research – inside and outside your organization**
- **Be sure every competency is relevant**
- **Be sure your model differentiates you from the competition**

The first step is to do some research, both inside and outside of your organization. We help our clients use questionnaires, focus groups, interviews, checklists and other means to find out exactly what skills are important for success within the organization's vital roles. I'm no longer surprised when people come back to us after this step and are shocked at what people *really* do inside an organization. Often, companies discover areas of redundancy where work is duplicated by more than one work group or they learn about "black holes" where critical functions are being overlooked or not carried out as intended.

It rarely makes sense to start completely from scratch, however. The best models are based on both internal and external research. There is a wealth of competency models and skills dictionaries available from government agencies, industry groups, professional associations and vendors; they can provide you with both structure and content for your model. We've seen organizations spend months building a skills dictionary only to find a purchased model that contained 80% of their needs. They could have conserved their efforts to developing the additional 20% of the skills specific to their own needs.

COMPETENCIES POORLY WORDED

We once worked with an organization that contacted us to help refurbish the skills dictionary in their competency management program. Several subgroups had created their portion of the skills dictionary independently so there was no consistency in titles, descriptions, or structure. Each person who contributed to the model used different levels of detail, parts of speech and punctuation. The engineering department had used such extensive technical jargon that only they understood the content. This left key leaders in the organization unable to use the data without translation.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Use a consistent grammatical structure for content titles and descriptions – verbs help!**
- **Make them just granular enough to get a valid assessment**
- **Make assessments more accurate by defining non-technical skills in observable, behavioral terms and avoiding technical jargon**

Determining the level of detail or granularity in the skills and definitions in your skills dictionary is one of the most difficult - and important - aspects of this process. There is no one answer to the right level of detail; your project team must make your best hypothesis and depend on feedback from your pilot group to determine if more or less detail is required.

In Job Task Analysis, there are typically four levels of detail:

JOB	A collection of roles, tasks and responsibilities assigned to an individual.
ROLE	A set of responsibilities or functions and expected results associated with a job. A job typically contains several roles.
TASK	A unit of work performed as part of a job or role.
ACTIVITY	A specific, discrete, observable activity undertaken to complete a task.

Most typically, the skills evaluated in competency assessments are used at the task level, with behaviors associated with the associated activities contained in the skills definition. Depending on the purpose of the assessment, however, some activities may be "elevated" to the skill level. In other cases, skills needed for several related tasks may be combined to reduce duplication and minimize the size of skill sets to be assessed.

In drafting your model, here are the three most important considerations in determining level of detail of competency definitions:

1. Are all the behaviors in the skill definition likely to vary together? Written and oral communications are frequently combined into one skill, but good speakers are not always good writers.
2. Will the skills and definitions make sense to the survey taker? The more precise your definitions are the better. Be careful to avoid jargon that new employees may not understand and senior leaders won't be able to interpret.
3. Will the data collected in an assessment be of value to the organization? It's essential that your organization is prepared to understand and respond to the information collected in the survey. Don't be more or less detailed than you need to be.

Finally, using observable, behavioral terms will make your assessments more accurate and objective. See the difference:

Ambitious	Results focused
Is goal-oriented and driven to achieve objectives. Is highly motivated to advance his/her career.	**Able to articulate purpose and desired end result for work efforts. Makes personal sacrifices when needed to achieve important goals. Persistent in pursuing important goals despite setbacks and obstacles.**

POORLY DESIGNED STRUCTURE

Competency models tend to get very big, very fast as they expand from an initial pilot project to other parts of the organization. We've seen some models so unwieldy that even the competency managers who work with them every day didn't know where to look for specific skills. They ended up with a large number of overlapping skills and definitions. Having a logical, predictable structure will help keep things in order. Plan ahead; even if you are starting with a small subset of the skills used in your organization, try to anticipate what the ultimate model might need to include. Make early decisions on your hierarchy based not just on your initial project, but what will make sense when the skill dictionary grows. It's much easier to grow into a structure than it is to retrofit one.

Include – or make room for - competencies that can be used for all jobs such as core value competencies everyone in the organization is expected to possess, such as ethics, business conduct, knowledge of the industry, etc. Think about horizontal, or job level competencies, which vary based on the type of job. For instance, coaching skills may be critical for supervisory employees while strategic planning is more critical for executives. Make room for these varying levels in your model. Vertical slices based on various disciplines or job families – human resources, engineering, production, marketing – will contain their own competencies.

Within the structure you develop, group competencies in a logical sequence so that assessments are easier to take and reporting is meaningful. One way to group is to present assessments in a life-cycle format, starting with skills needed for the first step. Others may be clustered by logical functional area. For example, in the case of human resources it might be best to group assessments with staffing competencies as one area and learning competencies as another.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Group competencies in a logical way that will make sense to survey takers and those analyzing data from survey results.**
- **Order in a logical sequence (eg. Life-cycle, sequential, basic to advanced, etc.)**
- **Use a numbering system that helps find skills and allows for new skills to be added later.**

Finally, use a numbering system that enables new skills to be added. You may wish to skip numbers to allow for internal expansion. As expectations, skills and business processes change, it is likely that you will need to retire certain skills and bring in others, or create entirely new competency sections. Make sure you leave room in your numbering system for those unavoidable changes.

Execution Pitfalls

"The hurrier I go, the behinder I get." – Pennsylvania Dutch Proverb

In the pressure of contemporary business life, most of us are under pressure to do more with less. As we drive for results, we can sometimes get sloppy and miss the mark. Many of the pitfalls we've seen occur despite a well designed project plan and competency model.

INSUFFICIENT TESTING & VALIDATION

Some time ago we worked with an organization that was in a rush to get results. The project team was under a great deal of pressure from senior leadership to quickly assess the skills of the employees in a new business they had acquired. The results were less than satisfactory. When we were asked to help evaluate their project we identified some of the pitfalls they'd encountered. In the interest of time, the organization elected not to do a pilot in the new organization since they had recently completed their own pilot. It turned out that the acquiring and acquired organizations used terms differently, resulting in confusion and inaccurate data.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Conduct a pilot project to test the processes and invite feedback**
- **Select "advocates and assassins" across a variety of job families**
- **Provide extra support for the pilot group and review results and recommendations with key participants**

Steps shouldn't be skipped, particularly in high stakes projects. Test and validate well throughout the whole process. Conduct a pilot project to test everything, including the communication and training programs as well as the technology used to deliver and analyze your assessment. Actively seek feedback by asking, what did we miss? What did we overdo? What didn't you have the opportunity to say? What didn't you understand? Was anything unclear or redundant? Take a look at what worked and what didn't before you roll the assessment out to other people. And remember that additional pilots might be needed as the scope of your initial application expands.

Difficult as it may be, you need to invite and welcome criticism of what you've created. In your pilot, be sure you include representatives from all job families that will participate in your final initiative; different types of employees frequently have different reactions to competency assessments. Consider carefully the comments of those devil's advocates and potential project assassins. Their input could save you from making tactical errors when you roll out to the rest of the organization. Be open to feedback and be ready to respond to data that indicates you need to go back to the drawing board. Provide extra support to the pilot group; they can become additional support and create good publicity for the overall project.

INADEQUATE COMMUNICATION

Earlier in my career I helped to create a pay-for-skills performance management program. The client's boss had chartered the project both to increase lagging skill levels and to contain costs incurred by routine cost-of-living raises based solely on seniority. As the new program rolled out,

however, employees were resistant to the concept that their raises would now need to be earned as they demonstrated increased competence. Employees complained vigorously to their supervisors, creating anxiety in management ranks. Employees knew that while the message in the employee town meetings was "we're not here to save money, we're here to improve skills" the leadership team was scrambling to cut costs. The fact that there were two different stories created an employee relations nightmare that took a great deal of effort to overcome.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Have a clear, consistent, truthful message**
- **Provide a forum to address questions and concerns**
- **Make sure managers can (consistently) answer the question, "Why are we doing this?"**

Rumors and distrust can spread rapidly, so it is imperative to convey a clear, consistent, and truthful message to all stakeholders in a timely way. Communication planning is of tremendous importance and needs to be addressed early in the project. Start by asking a few questions about your stakeholders. What are the things that concern each stakeholder the most right now? How might your competency management initiative benefit each stakeholder relative to these concerns? What objections might each stakeholder have?

A forum to address questions and concerns can help alleviate problems before they begin. Many organizations anticipate questions and publish a FAQ document either in print or on their intranet. As additional questions arise, they are published for all (along with the answers).

In most cases, supervisors and managers are the key to successful communication. They are the individuals who have the closest contact with employees. They need to be able to explain the program's purpose and effects to their departments or groups so that they understand what's in it for them and how the initiative will help their career paths, prepare them for better positions, etc. They must also be able to provide feedback on the program to the project team about how things are really working.

LOSING STEAM

Developing and implementing a competency management system requires a great deal of concentrated effort and painstaking recordkeeping to document decisions about the developing competency model. As efforts get redirected, team members get reassigned and pitfalls are encountered, we've seen more than one project start to flounder. The potential for this is most serious when there is a single person as the "keeper of the spreadsheet" without others having detailed knowledge of how skills are organized and worded. One organization we worked with had a project manager who was very committed to his competency management program. He took all the necessary steps in the beginning of the program, particularly in including stakeholders from various parts of the organization. Unfortunately, he preferred to work alone and discouraged help from the rest of the project team, eventually isolating himself from other stakeholders. When the model he developed in isolation met with resistance, he became disgruntled and left the organization. Sadly, there was no one who could step in quickly to replace him and when a new resource was assigned, she was unable to interpret her predecessor's work and needed to start the project over.

PITFALL PREVENTION TIPS:

- **Ensure that you have sufficient redundant competence in competency management**
- **Acknowledge setbacks and enlist stakeholders in recovery plans**
- **Be visible in focusing interest on workforce skills and knowledge**

Make sure you have sufficient and redundant competence in competency management. While many large initiatives assign a dedicated resource to competency management, it's important that others in the organization know enough about the project to take over if necessary.

And don't underestimate the effort it will take to maintain your initiative over time. Changing business conditions, organizational strategies and new applications for your competency model will require both decision-making and administrative efforts on an ongoing basis.

We have never seen a project that didn't encounter a few setbacks. The most successful ones have project teams that are able to acknowledge them and enlist their stakeholders in recovering from them. They are able to bring people together, pinpoint what went wrong, explore options for recovery and revise plans accordingly. They focus on lessons learned, and how to apply them to future steps.

Finally, an important role for the competency management team is keeping employee competence a topic of interest to the organization at large. Having employee competence a topic of discussion at all levels can keep the competency management momentum going. I once worked with a Talent Management Director who was particularly adept at consistently keeping the focus on workforce skills and knowledge. In every meeting with senior leaders she invariably asked questions: How is this change going to impact the need for worker knowledge and skill? Will we need to retrain, teach new skills, redeploy? Will we need to go out and acquire new skills we may lack? She was so successful in doing this that even when she wasn't present at meetings someone else would ask those questions. Partially as a result of her ability to keep employee competence at the forefront of people's thinking, the organization became more and more focused on worker skills and competence. So take a cue from my colleague. Be visible, continually ask competency related questions, and collect and share success stories whenever you can.

Conclusion

At Avilar we believe that competency management is at the heart of workforce optimization. With a solid competency model, sufficient resources, and contemporary technology, competency management can be leveraged throughout the entire employment cycle. Competency management can help to get the right people in the door, uncover learning needs, create individual development plans, and manage performance. Employees can be more engaged in their work when their role is a good "fit", they understand expectations clearly, and they can see opportunities for career advancement. Organizations can benefit greatly from a current inventory of knowledge and skills, facilitating creation of competency-based project teams, planning for pandemics and other potential disasters as well as succession planning. With all of the possibilities made available by creating a competency management program, it is well worth the effort.

Thomas Edison said, "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work." There's no question that competency management initiatives require effort. With good planning, design and execution, they can be professionally rewarding and quickly become a vital component of the organization's workforce optimization efforts.

Biography of Christine Hipple

Christine Hipple, Avilar's Director of Workforce Solutions, has more than 20 years of strategic human resources and training experience across several fields. She consults with Avilar clients on competency management, facilitates implementation of WebMentor LMS and WebMentor Skills, and contributes to Avilar's strategic direction. Prior to joining Avilar, Ms. Hipple was the Director of Leadership and Professional Development at Magellan Health Services, has also worked as a Senior Training Consultant for the US Senate, Director of Training and Performance Management at University Physicians, Inc. and has worked as an independent Organizational Development and Training Consultant. Her portfolio of workforce development initiatives include establishment of both human resource and learning departments, implementation of a competency-based pay-for-performance program, development of a formal internal mentoring program and competency-based talent selection processes. Ms. Hipple has also served on the board of directors of the Maryland Chapter of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), and recently completed a term as President of the chapter.

Ms. Hipple holds a Bachelors Degree in Education from Indiana University of PA and has taken advanced courses in Instructional Systems Design from the University Of Maryland Baltimore County.