Building a Competency Model
How to Get Started

Recently, federal agencies started to increase the use of skills assessments and subject matter expert interviews to evaluate job applicants. Additionally, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has been working with agencies to draft a skills-based list of job qualifications that will be used in a refreshed job competency model.

While there are unique challenges associated with updating a competency model for OPM, the country's largest employer, it's an excellent case study for all employers who are moving toward a more competency-based approach to managing workforce performance.

If your organization is introducing or evolving your competency management program, you might be wondering how to get started. Here are four important questions to answer before building a competency model.

1 What is a Competency Model?

Let's start with the basics. A competency model is a framework that defines the competencies – the skills, knowledge, abilities, and behaviors – required to perform a job at a desired level of proficiency.

Organizations may have one or multiple competency models. The number and type of competency models will depend on the company's industry and goals, and may include:

- **Organizational Core Competency Model** – a baseline set of skills and competencies required of all employees. Clear written communications, for example, could be a core competency.
- **Functional or Technical Competency Model** – a set of competencies that are specific to job functions, often within one department of your company. Functional or technical competencies could include the ability to write computer software using a specific programming language.
- **Job Competency Model** – competency sets that are specifically needed within a job or role. This competency model zeros in on clearly defined needs of a specific job, such as product strategy development or financial forecasting.
- **Leadership Competency Model** – competencies needed by those in management and leadership positions within your organization.

2   Why Does Our Organization Need a Competency Model?

Competency models create a common language to describe job requirements across the organization. By adopting an organizational core competency model, employers not only eliminate the need for departments to create their own terms, definitions, data, and analysis, but instantly put all departments, leaders, managers, and employees on the same page when talking about jobs, performance, and careers.

Importantly, competency models help organizations move away from employees' backgrounds – their education, experience, and professional affiliations and relationships – when assessing their fit for a new job or promotion. By design, competencies are "blind to a person's skin color, gender, religion, gender identity, political affiliation, and other labels that can get in the way" of making sound, unbiased assessment of an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities.

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A well-constructed competency model will help your organization to:

- **Recruit based on talent, not background**
- **Clarify job and work expectations**
- **Close skills gaps, by aligning employee performance and behaviors with your strategy**
- **Maximize productivity**
- **Make fair promotion decisions**
- **Fine-tune learning and competency development plans**
- **Increase employee engagement**

3   Where Can We Find Competency Model Examples?

Organizations have been using competency models for years, so there are many examples out there to get you started. While you may not find a model that exactly fits your organization, you can likely find one that you can adapt – saving you an enormous amount of time compared to building one from scratch. You may select multiple models to help you build a competency model that reflects your organizations' core competencies, technical or functional requirements, and leadership framework.

Here are a few examples to consider as you look for a model that may fit your needs:

- **O*NET** – the O*NET Program is "the nation's primary source of occupational information." The National Center for O*NET Development has an ongoing data collection program aimed at identifying and maintaining current information on the characteristics of workers and occupations. The information that populates the O*NET Database is collected from three primary sources: job incumbents, occupational experts, and occupational analysts.

- **NICE** – the Workforce Framework for Cybersecurity (NICE Framework) is a fundamental reference for describing and sharing information about cybersecurity work. It expresses that work as task statements and describes knowledge and skill statements that provide a foundation for learners including students, job seekers, and employees.
- **OPM** – though the OPM is in the process of updating its job function competency model, it maintains a Competency Model for IT Program Management and Competency Model for Cybersecurity that were updated in 2020. Both are good examples of broad competency models that clarify the proficiency level expected for each competency at each applicable job grade level.

Avilar, too, maintains an employee competency model, with more than 350 skills clustered into more than 50 skill groups, that can be used "as is" or customized for your organization.

4 How Do We Create a Competency Model Framework of Our Own?

Once again, OPM is a good example of how to develop a competency model to reflect your organization's reality today. Like OPM, we recommend that you:

- Connect with your leaders and managers to capture their input. Last fall, OPM conducted listening sessions with experts and chief human capital officers.
- Draft your master list of requirements; the skills, knowledge and abilities that your workforce needs to do its job well.
- Interview or survey employees who work in the targeted occupations, to collect their background with the job, tasks they perform, and the competencies the employee believes are needed for the position.
- Finalize your list of requirements, or competency model framework, that reflects the skills and competencies your workforce needs to perform across the jobs in your organization.

As you can see, a competency model is a dynamic framework with layers of competencies, proficiency levels, job roles, functions, and more. To develop, manage, and maintain your competency model, you'll want a robust and flexible competency management system, such as Avilar's WebMentor Skills™ that supports your efforts. By tracking the required job competencies and individual skills and competencies, competency management systems can provide tremendous visibility to support smart recruitment, workforce development, and workforce allocation efforts across commercial, non-profit, and government organizations. Contact us to learn more about WebMentor Skills™.