Choosing a Competency Management System:

Public vs. Private Sector

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Corporations and government organizations have similar competency management needs. Both have an interest in understanding the skills, knowledge, abilities and behaviors that their employees need to succeed. Both want a "dashboard" that displays current skill sets and how well those abilities map to targeted jobs, so leaders can make informed decisions about whether, and how, to develop employees.

Government agencies, though, face unique workforce development challenges that drive special requirements for federal competency management systems. What are those challenges? How (and when) can a competency management system help? What matters most when choosing competency management technology for government? Let's take a look.

Government Workforce Development Challenges

The U.S. federal government is, by far, the largest U.S. employer. It has just over 2 million civilian employees (excluding U.S. Postal Services workers). Government human capital professionals are tasked with finding personnel with the right skills at the right grades to fill budgeted positions.

Unfortunately, some government systems, processes and demographics present unique challenges to achieving that goal, including:

1. **Restrictive Job Classifications.** The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) defines all federal occupations, establishing official position titles and describing the grades and levels of work. Job titles are used for personnel and budget purposes, aiding standardization around wages, job assessments and communications across and between agencies. However, the system forces agencies to fit workers into a fixed set of categories rather than (as corporations do) hiring flexibly, paying and promoting personnel based on a tailored job scope or based on the job market and skills of an individual.

2. **Unpredictable Federal Budgeting Process.** Government hiring managers need an approved budget before bringing on new personnel or promoting employees. Yet the annual budgeting process is frequently delayed, often for months beyond the original deadlines. Hiring efforts are then stymied, as government planning, recruiting and hiring activities are placed on "hold" until the budget is approved. This leaves the government in a poor position to recruit and retain personnel who have competing, faster-moving career opportunities in the private sector.

3. **Older Workforce.** Baby Boomers are continuing to surprise federal leaders. For more than 15 years, the federal government has been anticipating a wave of retirees as that generation became eligible to retire, taking with it a massive accumulation of knowledge and skills that could only come from many years in government service. The wave hasn't happened. Instead, the government workforce has shifted older and older. However, retirement of this generation is an inevitable event, even if it comes as a trickle rather than a wave. When it does happen, agencies need to be able to replace the lost knowledge and skills with competent personnel.

How (and When) Can a Competency Management System Help?

Government and corporate leaders who make big workforce decisions (such as layoffs or reductions in force) without enough visibility into what skills they are keeping and what they are letting go are doing themselves a disservice. Why? Because even when the outcome is great, they don't know why.

Competency management systems can help avoid such blind decisions. 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 like these:

1. **Recruitment.** Agencies that do a good job of documenting the competencies required for their jobs – beyond the definitions provided by OPM – are better able to identify employees who are a good fit.
2. **Career Planning.** Some agencies have started to document the career path and knowledge of their older workers, giving them a starting template for younger personnel who may benefit from following a similar path.
3. **Emergency Response.** With workers spread throughout the world, government agencies routinely face emergencies such as natural disasters, pandemics and civil unrest. Each disruption can create an urgent need to identify workers who can step in for those who are unavailable. Having a competency management system that can quickly identify qualified personnel is invaluable in these situations.

As for when…the simple answer is that agencies need competency management systems and programs in place well before a retirement wave, a reduction in force, or the next emergency forces leaders to make fast decisions. Competency information is built up over time for any workforce. The more information that's available, the more informed decision makers can be.

What Matters Most When Choosing a System

There are many competency management systems to choose from, though few are well-suited for the special needs of the government. Here are five things to look for in your system:

1. **System with its "Roots" in Competency.** Most enterprise human resource management systems or talent management systems have some competency management capability. Unless the system has its "roots" in competency management, it's unlikely that it will have all of the core features you'll want – including retaining and retrieving employees' competency history over the time they are working for the government.

2. **Team with Government Experience.** Look for a system (and a vendor) that has experience with federal government agencies. Ideally, your technology and team will have proven experience with competency models such as National Initiative for Cybersecurity Education (NICE) and O*NET, so you can filter and pull in the specific competencies you need to support OPM job classifications and specialty areas.

3. **Deep Understanding of OPM Job Series and Grades.** Look for a vendor that fully understands how to handle job series, has pre-existing competency models for various OPM series (especially in areas like leadership and professional development), and has tools to help maintain and understand parentheticals within job series.

4. **Choice of Cloud or Licensed Software.** Most competency management systems are available as cloud solutions today, which is generally an easy-access, affordable option. If your agency requires licensed software, due to concerns about the privacy of your data, look for someone who offers a hosted or on-premise licensed solution. Be sure your vendor keeps the licensed version as up to date and accessible to you as its cloud solution.

5. **Flexible Database and User Interface.** Every government agency has some unique requirements for database fields or user permissions in the solution. Look for a technology that is easily tailored to your needs, without unnecessary time and expense of custom solutions that are difficult to upgrade. You'll want a system that easily adapts to your needs – and automatically retains those features when the next release is available.

Government has a lot to consider when thinking about competency management. The good news is, there are technologies available to do what technologies do best: streamline and automate processes and data access to support informed decisions. **Avilar's WebMentor Skills™** is proven to have the capabilities to support specialized government needs. **Contact us** today to find out how we are helping our government clients – and how we might be able to assist you, too.

About Avilar

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