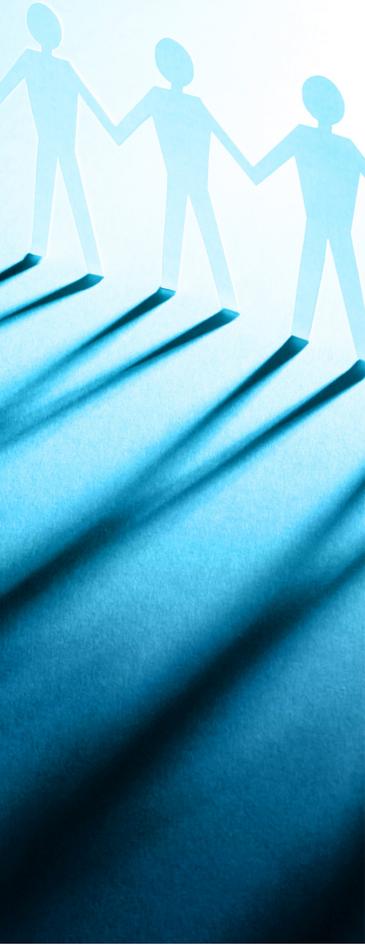


HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND  
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Talya N. Bauer, *Editor*



# Competencies at Work

*Providing a Common  
Language for Talent  
Management*

**Bruce Griffiths**  
**Enrique Washington**



BUSINESS EXPERT PRESS

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*Competencies at Work: Providing a Common Language for Talent Management*

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*To organizational leaders and talent management professionals  
who are committed to selecting and growing talented people.*



## Abstract

*Competencies at Work* will equip readers to understand, build, and implement competency models as a foundational and integrating element in talent management systems. Readers will understand how competency models have evolved to be the current best practice in defining criteria for all talent management applications such as selection interviews, promotion panels, assessment centers, job descriptions, and learning objectives. Specific guidance is provided in the steps needed to establish a sustainable model, with research results on universal competencies contained in most contemporary models. Also discussed are the challenges and issues in building and implementing models, such as the need for proof of efficiency and effectiveness, that is, reliable measures of competence and proof of validity. Competency models will be placed in the greater context of the complete talent management system needed to effectively recruit, select, orient, train, appraise, reward, motivate, and promote high-performing employees. The most popular competency applications of interviewing, assessment centers, survey-guided development, job modeling, and training criteria are specifically explored and explained. Finally recent case studies bring competencies to life in real organizational settings. Questions for reflection will help readers review and summarize important content in each chapter.

## Keywords

assessment, behaviors, business, communications, competency, development, feedback, individual, leaders, leadership, learning, management, model, motivation, organization, organizational, performance, personal, process, role, skills, success, talent



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Bruce Griffiths

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Enrique Washington

# Foreword

As I sit down to write this foreword, I can't help but reflect on the history of Paymaster to Personnel to Human Resources to Human Capital Management. Quite a journey for the HR profession, and the last two iterations in the evolution of our science and discipline have been catalyzed by the advent of sophisticated and elegant competency modeling techniques. However the operative words here are technique and science. There are too many attempts by organizations to rush to design and develop their own competency model without rigor and methodologically correct approach. Though well-intended as this may seem, it does diminish the utility and successful application of these, often, incomplete and inexact models. That said, and even in light of so many lay practitioners trying hard to create the wheel, competencies have become table stakes if a company is to be great or remain great. Griffiths and Washington have provided the magic ingredient to help realize the true potential of competency models and their creation. Their approach is both elegant and practical. Their explanations of the science behind modeling and true stories that highlight the why and how provide even the least experienced layman the opportunity to learn and grow while helping to create a competitive advantage for their respective companies. But most importantly, a well-crafted competency model finds that special line of best fit by serving both the needs of the organization and the personal goals of the individual. A well designed and integrated model will truly have something for everyone by creating that common language of performance and potential. Hats off to Bruce and Enrique for so successfully addressing a long overdue need in such an elegant way!

**Jeffrey M. Cava**

EVP, CHRO

Starwood Hotels and Resorts World Wide, Inc.

Board of Directors

Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)



# Introduction

## Are Competencies Important?

Let us begin with a common hiring scenario. After a recent resignation, your organization is interviewing for a new operations manager. The decision makers assemble to compare notes on the candidates they have interviewed. “I think Susan has the right stuff for this position,” one says. “She was poised and radiated confidence when I asked difficult questions.” Another speaks up: “I think John fits the bill. He’s energetic and really seems to be a people person.” A third interviewer prefers Bill because of his “street smarts and technical knowledge.”

These opinions are weak because the interviewers are all looking for different qualities. They lack an understanding of what it really takes to manage and lead effectively. Nor do they have a common vocabulary to support a valid debate. The ensuing discussion is likely to become an unproductive test of wills as the interviewers lobby for their favorite candidate. To prove this point, imagine asking the interviewers to independently record and then share their definition of effective leadership. Chances are you will get as many answers as there are interviewers. Never fear, though, there is a solution to this confusion.

Over time, our definitions of what constitutes the *right stuff* for defining talent have evolved; the accepted standard is now the language of *competencies*. A single competency is defined as a cluster of behaviors representing one facet of what is needed to perform a job. For example, *Composure* is frequently cited as a personal competency that is important to many positions. A cluster of behaviors that demonstrate composure include showing patience, responding calmly to stressful circumstances, and demonstrating control of emotions. Having, and using, this kind of common vocabulary is especially vital in judging candidates for complex, cognitive jobs such as managing and leading.

This core concept of a *behavioral* characterization of a facet of competence has been fundamental to the language of competency since someone first articulated the notion that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior (especially more recent behavior in a similar context).

Here is the basic idea: How much do you really care about what candidates tell you about their underlying motivation, values, attributes, and even training, compared to how they express these through their accomplishments and performance? How much can we really know about what is going on beneath the surface, compared to what we see in their current and recent actions?

And, of course, competent people are *the* essential factor in successful and enduring organizations. Without them, organizations are only empty buildings and idle machines. People have the ideas, and produce, market, and sell the organization's goods and services. Only people can organize and energize the enterprise. But what defines their competence? Is it raw talent? Knowledge? Skill? Ability? Personality? Motivation?

This book will explore this relatively new, but now widely accepted, concept of competency and competency models. It will argue that these models are absolutely essential in providing a common language for talent management across human resource systems. Indeed, without an accepted model of the ideal employee, individual talent systems (e.g., recruiting, hiring, promoting, training, appraising) are suboptimized and may even contradict each other.

The pages that follow will provide a clear, best-practice definition of competence that emphasizes effective *behavior* and *performance* as a primary definitional element. Building and implementing models will be presented, as will sample competencies and complete models. Case studies of successful applications in organizations will demonstrate the efficacy of competency models. Finally, nuances in presentation and interpretation of models in the key talent areas of selection, training, and performance management will be discussed.

It is important to note a legal reason for learning about competency models. Legally defensible selection and promotion systems must be based on valid criteria. Spending time on ensuring a valid model helps provide assurance that any organizational evaluation is reliable and valid.

It is also important to point out what this book does not include. Our focus is on the elements and systems that ensure that an organization is staffed by exceptional individuals capable of producing needed results in their defined roles. Once onboard and fully functioning, their retention and motivation are part of other human resource systems that ensure lasting tenure and continuing interest. These systems include compensation, benefits, performance management (appraisal), engagement, employee (labor) relations, safety, employee assistance programs, and others. These are certainly important in overall management of an enterprise, but detailed description is beyond the scope of this book.

Finally, here are some specifics on our target reader. Whether you are a small service business with fewer than a dozen associates or a global giant doing business around the world, we hope that this book will help you understand and be able to create and implement a competency model to provide the criteria needed for essential decisions and actions to optimize your most valuable resource: the human resource.



## CHAPTER 1

# The Underlying Principles of Competency Modeling

This chapter will provide a fundamental understanding of the *why*, *what*, and *how* of competency modeling. Let us start with the observation that all organizations have a very practical need to identify the criteria that define their ideal employee. Any leader who makes decisions about whom to hire, whom to promote, what skills to train, or how to appraise, implicitly assumes this ideal criteria. Defining this *model employee*—and creating a blueprint to replicate him or her—is an ongoing challenge dating back thousands of years. Indeed, two millennia ago the Chinese bureaucracy identified its *ideal* member as someone who could pass rigorous tests on the *six arts* of arithmetic, writing, music, archery, culture, and horsemanship.

Competencies are now the most prevalent method used to define ideal employees and have become a fundamental part of talent management systems across organizations. Talent management has been defined by the Society for Human Resources Management as “the implementation of *integrated* strategies or systems designed to increase workplace productivity by developing improved processes for attracting, developing, retaining and utilizing people with the required skills and aptitude to meet current and future business needs” (emphasis added). Therefore, having a competency-based system to link these processes is the key to cohesive and effective talent management.

### Historical Influences on Current Competency Constructs

Modern concepts of an ideal employee have roots in the assessment center movement, dating back to World War II. For hiring and promotion,