



**Head
Light**

Bringing Competencies to Life: Getting More from Your Competency Framework

part of our We think... series

The Talent Cloud Platform

Developing Skills. Encouraging Performance. Boosting Recognition.





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The revival of Competency Frameworks

Just when we thought that competency frameworks were all but dead, we see a bit of a resurgence in the market.

Having invested in a framework during the 90s heyday – and retaining a firm belief in the unrealised potential of a common language for performance and behaviour – we are now seeing a number of organisations ‘refreshing’ their frameworks; committing renewed energy to bringing them to life and putting competencies to work.

We’ve also seen organisations which have never had a detailed competency model in place before, now expressing an interest in developing one now and seeing the need for a behavioural framework which underpins all of their talent management activities.

Most people know that a good framework can:

- Give employees a clear understanding of what ‘great’ looks like, and how to get there
- Form the basis of all assessment criteria, from external hires, to assessment for development, to performance management and appraisal
- Help managers to manage teams and individuals more effectively

but it can also:

- Help employees to understand and see what the organisational values look like in practice
- Guide and inform decision-making at all levels
- Improve customer experience and satisfaction
- Enable people to plan and manage their own careers, job moves and promotions
- Bring your organisation’s ‘external’ brand closer to your ‘internal’ brand and the employee experience.

In this article, we explore how you might now do something more with your competency frameworks, and why they might not be ready for the scrapheap just yet.

We will also look at both obvious, and less obvious, ways in which competencies can be more deeply embedded in the fabric of the organisation – by encouraging people to demonstrate them, discuss them, teach or explain them to others and to recognise when people do it well.

Time for a competency spring clean

If you already have a competency framework that has been in place for more than a couple of years, then a strategic makeover is probably a good first step.

When supporting our clients in refreshing their frameworks, there are a number of reference points and factors that we encourage them to take into consideration:

1. **The organisational values.** Competencies are an excellent opportunity to set out what is expected, in behavioural terms, of someone who works in line with the values of the company. Competencies can describe what values look like in practice and help people to understand how they can align their performance and behaviour with them.

It’s surprising how often we find that the competency framework and the values bear no resemblance to each other whatsoever, and sometimes contain impossible contradictions.

2. **The current strategy.** Your mission and vision may not have shifted much – or indeed shifted at all – in two years but your strategic priorities have undoubtedly been revised in the light of current market conditions, competitor activity and environmental pressures and developments.

Your competency framework should set out the enabling behaviours that will support the achievement of those priorities and help you to recruit and develop the key capabilities which will be needed within the workforce in the coming 2 to 5 years.

3. **Your brand.** We highly recommend working closely with the marketing department to identify opportunities to strengthen the representation of your brand by aligning internal behaviour with the image you present externally, with clients and partners.

Again, we frequently see an entirely different set of internal expectations to what the brand promises to its customers.

4. **Your talent management strategy.** What are you currently doing to ensure that your organisation has the right people in the right place at the right time?

Your competency framework needs to support all of the various talent management practices in the organisation and so it is worthwhile to carry out an audit of your requirements. Are you using several different (and potentially confusing) scales across assessment methodologies? Does the framework contain sufficient 'granularity' to allow discrimination between different levels of performance? Is it flexible enough to be used across working patterns, job families, grades, specialisms and locations?

5. **The relevance of your competencies.** Are your competencies still culturally relevant? Do some reflect an older way of working and speak more to a time when our working lives were less dominated by social media, mobile technology and digital communication? Are they sufficiently forward-looking? Do they convey a 'them and us' message, separating out groups such as managers, leaders, full time employees, product specialists or customer-facing roles? Are they inclusive, reinforce the value of diversity and provide a fair platform for assessment and decision-making? Is the language clean, simple and reflects the way that people actually talk?

Often, a review results in subtle changes rather than radical ones and there is a balance to be had between shifting the goalposts too frequently and making sure things stay relevant and up to date. Once you're confident that your framework reflects current priorities and supports delivery in the near future, then you can turn your attention to putting it to work.

How do competencies 'live' in an organisation?

Once you have refreshed and updated your competency framework, you can now begin to think about where the opportunities are for competencies to show their face in the day to day operation of an organisation. In what ways are competencies visible? What would we see if a competency framework was really 'alive'?

Competencies can be expressed in any of the following:

- What we **do and what we show to be important** – as a manager or leader of people.
- How we **treat our colleagues** or team members.
- How we **collaborate with people** in other teams, work cross-functionally, share resources and support others.
- How we **work with people outside of the organisation**, such as delivery partners, agencies, suppliers and contractors.
- How we **deal with conflict**.
- How we **conduct and manage meetings**.
- How we **communicate** with colleagues or customers.
- Who we choose to **recruit**, and how we do that; how we **on-board people and settle them** into the company.
- How we **train, teach and learn** about the organisation, our customers, or roles and our areas of specialism.

- How we go about **solving problems** or overcoming challenges in our work.
- How we **make decisions** – and what is judged to be ‘right’ and ‘wrong’.
- What’s **acceptable and what isn’t**, with regards to behaviour and actions; what do we challenge and confront, and what do we overlook?
- What **information is shared**, how it’s communicated and how it’s framed.
- How we **deliver against expectations and goals**.
- How we **interact with our customers**.
- The **level of risk** we are prepared to take, individually and collectively; attitudes towards risk management, safety and wellbeing.
- The **pace at which things are done**, the standards applied and the level of quality assurance that takes place. What gets ‘special attention’ and what gets the ‘good enough’ treatment.
- What is **given priority** (and what isn’t).
- What is **recognised, celebrated, reinforced and rewarded**.

And there are clearly others.

The key point is that there are many opportunities to generate dialogue about behavioural expectations, to see how people are doing against them and to make competencies a more fundamental part of ‘business as usual’.

Take action

As a starting point for you to see how your competencies are ‘lived’ in your organisation, review the list above, add any other ways in which you see competencies evidenced in your organisation, and generate some actions which would help to bring your competency framework to life.

For example, do you train leaders to make effective decisions? Decision-making is a critical part of organisational life, and we do it all the time, but people are rarely taught how to make a ‘good’ decision. Values and competencies can help leaders to be more rigorous, mindful and fair in their decision-making, so you could consider introducing a values-based decision making module into management and leadership programmes.

Daily reminders

In their book *‘The 31 Practices’*, Alan Williams and Dr Alison Whybrow describe an interesting methodology for making a set of values ‘live’ within an organisation. Essentially, they help organisations to turn their values into a set of 31 practical, tangible behaviours (one for each day of the month) which employees are then reminded of – either via a daily desk calendar, email, app reminder or intranet pop-up – to help them understand how they can express these behaviours in their role, on a daily basis. This reinforcement leads to a much greater understanding of the values and more consistency between what the organisation says its employees do, and what they actually do. Whilst 31 Practices is more about making values come alive, competency frameworks should also be in service of this and should be the behavioural representation of your organisational values.

Draw on the values whenever you can

Business communications expert Carrie Bedingfield also recommends creating one simple version of the competency framework which can be referred to and drawn on at any time. Many organisations use posters, coasters, mugs or other corporate paraphernalia to act as constant reminders, but these are often a cause for derision and seen as propaganda. It’s probably better to have them accessible somewhere (e.g., via a link on the intranet home page) rather than decorating offices with them. Providing reminders at opportune times is also a more subtle way of communicating competencies: reminding learners which competencies or values a training programme will be focusing on; restating relevant values or competencies about collaboration, respect and decision-making at the top of meeting

agendas; self-assessment against behaviours before a performance review and setting expectations around how the team is going to work together at the start of a project are all examples of this.

Embed values during applicant attraction

Remember that your opportunities to put your competency framework to good use start before someone even walks in through the door. You can use the values and competency framework to provide new and potential recruits with realistic job-fit and culture-fit information before they join. Create examples and stories of what people actually do, get high performers to 'show and tell', put together 'a day in the life' for key roles; share on the web, in videos, in blogs, at events; show those coming in to your organisation what the values look and sound like in action.

The impact of values on customers

Ask customers to talk about their experiences of your organisation – how they felt, what your employees have done to make a difference to them, what it's like to be a customer, what they value about your company. There should be observable evidence of your competencies and values in these stories and they're great for connecting people to the impact of what they do, and how the right behaviours lead to the right results.

Work values into training and development

When designing training and development courses or programmes for those in critical roles such as customer service, first line management or business partners, consider engaging industrial actors to help bring important behaviours and values to life. Learning through watching scripted sketches, one-to-one situational role plays and forum theatre workshops can be a really good way of exploring what's important, what works and what doesn't work, in a way that is less threatening than some training methodologies.

Making competencies work – auditing your competency assessments and embedding the common language

Embedding the framework across all your assessment processes is another critical step. Again, it is surprising how often we find that different processes (e.g., leadership development programmes, 360 degree questionnaires and executive search briefs) adopt different criteria and use language that is not consistent with the core behavioural expectations in the organisation.

You may need to:

- **Review your job descriptions** to ensure they don't speak a different language to what people see when they are assessed in role.
- **Check that your 360 questionnaires do not create confusion** over what's really important in your business. Off-the-shelf questionnaires in particular might lead to this.
- **Take a look at your interview questions.** When you are recruiting people from outside the organisation, do your interview questions, criteria and other assessment processes all measure the same criteria? When people are assessed internally – either for development or for a new role – are the same criteria applied?
- **Check what information is given to prospective employees**, pre-induction. Are they given a realistic appreciation of what's expected of them when they join? What they need to do to be effective and successful in the organisation?
- **Look at your on-boarding process.** Does it help people to understand their current strengths and potential development needs in line with the competency framework? Are they clearly pointed towards sources of support and help in developing the required competencies for their role?



- **Be clear how you identify high potential** (for leadership, for customer-facing roles, for cross-functional projects etc.) Your competency framework should also set out the criteria by which you would spot this potential in people, rather than having a separate 'potential model' which just creates another layer of complexity and confusion for people.
- An obvious one, but **check that your performance management processes are consistent with the competency framework**, and that people have the opportunity and facilities to self-assess - whenever they want – against the competency framework.
- **Work through career paths and succession plans** to ensure they are informed and supported by your competency framework. Are people able to look at their competency strengths and identify other roles and functions which would enable them to play to these strengths, and develop other areas further?
- **Take a look at how your customer-facing staff are assessed.** What feedback is gathered about them, and shared with them? Embed values and relevant competencies into customer feedback questionnaires or surveys, to help customer service specialists to understand how the behaviours impact their work and the effect it has on their customers. Seeing the relevance in this way (and understanding the impact your behaviour has on others) can bring your competencies more into the consciousness of employees, and reinforce the 'right' behaviours.

Summary

Like performance management, competencies might not be fashionable right now, but many of us (for good reasons) are still using them to ensure that there is a clear understanding of what 'great' looks like, that there's a shared common language to form the basis of assessment, that people are able to plan and manage their own careers, job moves and promotions and that the organisation's 'external' brand is brought closer to the 'internal' brand and the employee experience.

Next steps

If you'd like to explore how your competency framework can be brought to life and embedded in the talent management activities across the organisation, then please get in touch.

About Head Light

Head Light is an award-winning talent management and talent retention software and consulting firm that works with clients to define and implement impactful talent management strategies.

Talent Cloud® is our cloud-based portfolio of integrated talent management platform tools designed for those who expect the maximum return from talent management processes. Our training and consulting services uniquely complement our platform that engages employees, managers and senior leaders in the selection, development and progression of people in their businesses.

Companies in the FTSE 350, public sector, large and small, from retailers to high tech innovators have all benefitted from our tools, techniques and expertise. Founded in 2004, we are headquartered in the UK.

Head Light has attained the ISO27001 standard for Information Security.
Certificate No 217613.





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transition to Continuous Performance Management

How do I...

introduce robust Succession Planning

How do I...

spot High Potentials and Future Leaders

How do I...

boost Recognition

How do I...

drive Engagement through Career Conversations and Development

How do I...

embed new values and improve culture

How do I...

develop Skills of the Future