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**Competencies and KSAO's**

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## Origin of Competency Profiling

The competency approach to Human Resource Management is not new. The early Romans practiced a form of competency profiling in attempts to detail the attributes of a "good Roman soldier". The leadership literature is replete with research attempting to define the characteristics of a "good leader". Personnel psychologists have been working to define the relationships that exist between attributes of the individual, behaviour, and work outcomes for the better part of a century.

As Furnham (1990) states "the term competence is new and fashionable, but the concept is old. Psychologists interested in personality and individual differences, organizational behaviour and psychometrics have long debated these questions of personality traits, intelligence and other abilities."

Competency-based methodology was pioneered by Hay-McBer company founder David McClelland, a Harvard University psychologist in the late 1960's and early 1970's (Czarnecki, 1995). McClelland set out to define competency variables that could be used in predicting job performance and that were not biased by race, gender, or socioeconomic factors. His research helped identify performance aspects not attributable to a worker's intelligence or degree of knowledge and skill. McClelland's article, appearing in *American Psychologist* in 1973, entitled "Testing for Competence Rather Than for Intelligence," was a key point of development of the competency movement as an alternative to the intelligence testing movement.

McClelland's competency methodology can be summed up by two factors - use of criterion samples (systematically comparing superior performing persons with less successful persons to identify success factors) and identifying specific thoughts and behaviours that are causally related to successful outcomes. McClelland's work in this area was important, but its exposure was limited.

The McClelland approach and the concept of competencies as key drivers of organizational success found a widespread audience and popularity in North America with the publication of Boyatzis' 1982 book *The Competent Manager: A Model for Effective Performance* in which he outlined competence as applied to managerial work. At more or less the same time (1984), John Raven was published *Competence in Modern Society* in the UK.

From these two publications the competency approach moved from the academic setting, where it was considered an interesting, if somewhat controversial, into the world of line managers, consultants and HR practitioners. The popularity of the competency approach peaked in the early 1990's and continues to have an influence in

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many organizations.

### **Competencies and KSAO's - Are they different?**

Traditionally, the acronym KSA or KSAO has been taken as the shorthand for attributes of the individual related to job performance. Originally, the acronym that appeared was KSA - meaning Knowledge, Skills, and Aptitudes. Over the years, and depending on the source, the acronym has evolved to take on different meanings. The "K" and "S" always stood for Knowledge and Skills. The "A" and "O" components have varied. "A" has stood for either abilities (which are synonymous with skills), attributes, or aptitudes. "O" usually represents "other characteristics" and usually appears when "A" represents ability.

Interestingly, the Canadian federal Public Service *Standards for Selection and Assessment* uses the term "Qualifications." Qualifications consist of the following eight elements.

- Knowledge
- Abilities/Skills (note that abilities and skills are synonymous)
- Personal Suitability (meaning analogous to "Other Characteristics" in KSAO's)
- Experience
- Education (author's note - this is usually a proxy for knowledge)
- Occupational Certification (author's note - this is usually a proxy for knowledge and skills)
- Official Language Proficiency

This paper will adopt the current usage of KSAO's (Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other characteristics - recognizing that Skills and Abilities are synonymous).

Given that KSAO's pretty well cover the bases in describing the characteristics of the person as related to job performance - especially when the "O" or "other characteristics" category is included, does the movement to use of the word competency represent anything new?

Yes and no. It depends on how one defines competency. Some definitions of competency may help here.

From the PSC's Learning Resource Network (<http://learnnet.gc.ca>)  
Excerpted from "A Word on Competencies" (emphasis added)

*Competencies are general descriptions of the **abilities** necessary to perform successfully in areas specified. Competency profiles synthesize **skills**,*

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**knowledge, attributes and values**, and express performance requirements in behavioural terms....

The review of competency profiles helps managers and employees to continually reassess the **skills and knowledge needed for effective performance**. Competencies, however, only provide a foundation for these purposes. They are building blocks which must be assembled and used in a variety of combinations and in a variety of circumstances to determine the **skill sets needed within a given function or field of expertise**.

From the PSC's Wholistic Competency Profile (1996)

*Competencies are the characteristics of an individual which underlie performance or behaviour at work.*

Note - the WCP includes competency eight competency groupings, two of which are labelled Knowledge and Skill and Ability.

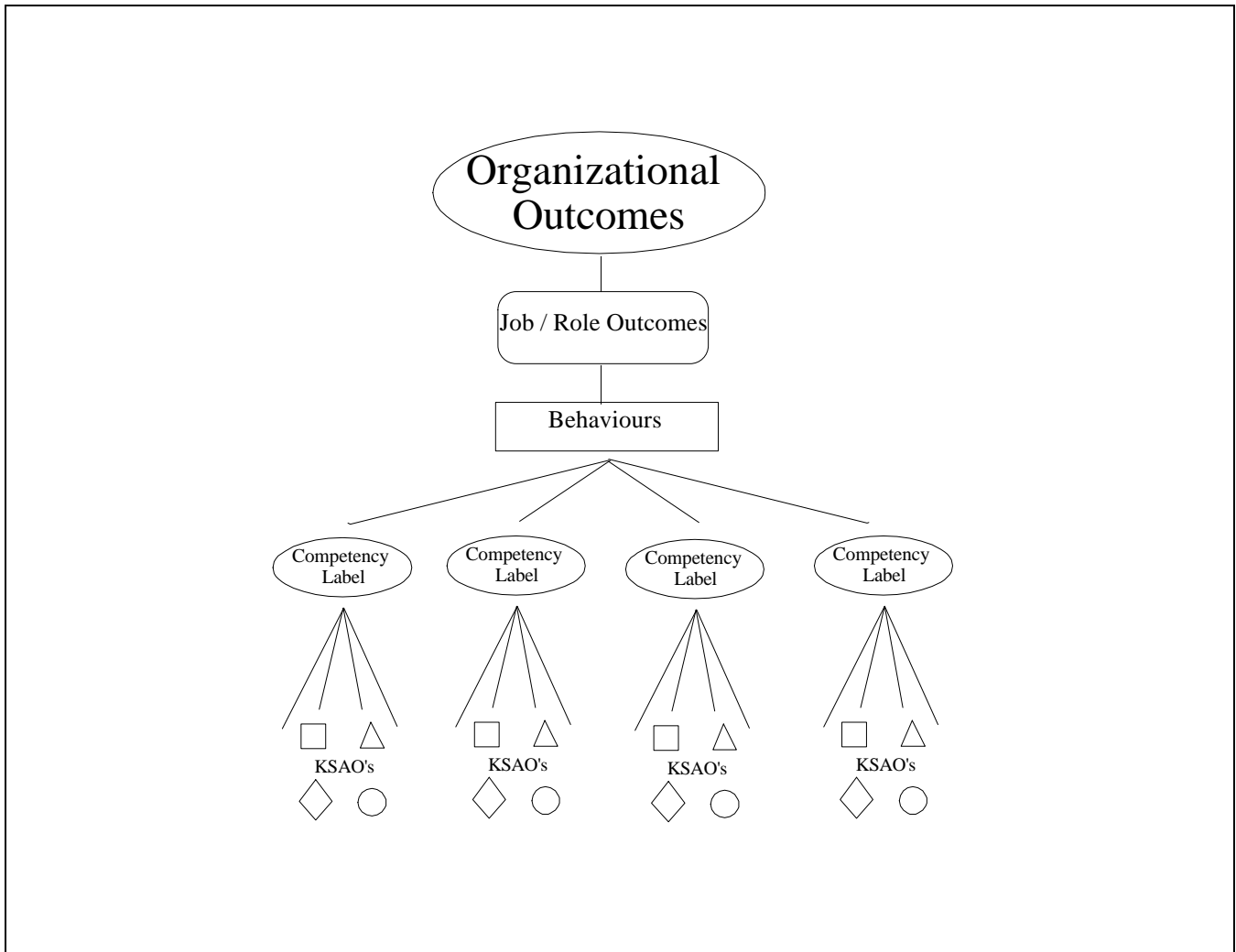
From Competencies and Organizational Success (Byham and Moyer, 1996)

*Behavioural Competency: What a person says or does that results in good or poor performance.*

*Knowledge Competency: What a person knows regarding facts, technologies, a profession, procedures, a job, an organization, etc.*

*Motivational Competency: How a person feels about a job, organization, or geographic location.*

From this sampling it is apparent that competency definitions often contain, either explicitly or implicitly, elements that most certainly are KSAO's. Competencies can best be described as representing another level of analysis - one that sits at an order above KSAO's. This is implied in some competency models and definitions and is often represented by the relationship shown in the figure below.



**So why are people convinced that competencies are something new?**

In a way, competencies are new, or at least somewhat different from the KSAO approach in applied HR. Competencies are different in application, not necessarily different in content or meaning than KSAOs. Competencies differ from KSAO's in that competency-based HR activities clearly shift the level of analysis from the job and its associated tasks to the person and what he or she is capable of. This shift is extremely important in the context of the modern workplace, where the environment demands that organizations structure around projects and the work to be done, rather than around clearly delineated and narrowly defined jobs.

One might argue that competencies provided nothing more than the opportunity for HR practitioners to take a "fresh start" with new language. The language of competencies rather than KSAO's. This observation recognizes the impact that novelty

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combined with marketing -- the *new and improved* phenomenon -- can have in a profession. By adopting a new language, HR practitioners, consultants, and management gurus have something new (at least in terms of name) to sell to line managers. This is not as cynical as it sounds, for adopting this new language has had a positive effect. It has re-focused organizations on the importance of their human resources and recognized people, and the knowledge, skills, and abilities they bring to the workplace, as a fundamental lever of organizational success.

Certainly, the language of the competency movement has a faddishness and buzzword factor associated with it. But this is more a result of demands to use the language that is *au courant* and an issue of street credibility for practitioners than it is an indicator that competencies are something unique compared to KSAO's. After all, how many managers, executives, HR practitioners would buy services from a consultant promoting KSAO-based HRM?

### **Why the confusion about competencies?**

North American researchers and HR practitioners are somewhat late in recognizing the confusion surrounding the definition of competency. This has been a topic of debate in the UK literature since the late 1980's where the competency movement took hold earlier than in North America.

Part of the confusion surrounding competencies, writes British author and consultant Charles Woodruffe (1991), can be attributed directly to the broad definition put forward by Boyatzis in 1982. By defining a competency as "an underlying characteristic of the person" which could be "a motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses" Boyatzis, perhaps unwittingly, helped create the situation today where almost "anything goes." His definition of what can be considered a competency is certainly broad. When unconstrained by practitioners ignoring or paying lip service to McClelland's portion of the definition that states that competencies should differentiate between superior and average performance (differentiating competencies) or have an empirically demonstrable link to acceptable performance (threshold competencies), it is understandable that over the years almost anything and everything has been identified as a competency.

A second area of confusion typically arises in the failure to distinguish between what can best be termed "areas of competence" versus "person-related competencies." In this case, Woodruffe writes, areas of competence are activities at which a person is competent. For example making a presentation or writing a research paper is an area of competence. Person-based competencies, on the other hand, are attributes of the individual that allow for performance in an area of competence. They are, in the McClelland sense, the attributes of the individual that underlie observable behaviour.

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The easiest way to remember the distinction between these two often confused aspects of competency is to consider that area of competence is typically job-based, while competency, in its original sense, is person-based.

It may seem a trivial matter, but failing to distinguish between areas of competence and person-based competencies seems to be at the root of much of the confusion and lack of agreement in definition. Consider that if both types are contained in a typical competency profile, the profile will, by definition, contain redundant elements. If the *areas of competence* are the things one is required "to do" in the job, and the *person-based competencies* are the attributes that allow one to do these "things" well, wouldn't it make sense to separate the two, using the former as the description of the job or role, and the latter for assessing individuals against the job or role requirements? In the current situation, we often end up with the case where, in evaluating where an individual stands with respect to a mixed competency profile, the same things end up being assessed twice or more.

The current state of competency profiling in the federal Public Service clearly reflects this mixed approach. For example, reviewing the 14 La Relève competencies shows both types are present. Under *Visioning* - clearly an "area of competence" as it is a task associated with a particular job level - we find job related sub-tasks such as "ADM's champion the vision of the public service" and "explains how the vision incorporates the public service culture and values". Elsewhere in the La Relève profile are "person-based competencies" such as Self-Confidence, Creativity, and Cognitive Capacity - competencies, one might argue, that allow an ADM to successfully engage in the "area of competence" called Visioning. This approach clearly goes against the McClelland and Boyatzis tradition, and, perhaps more importantly, contradicts the PSC's definition of competencies found in the WCP.

Thus the confusion when a group of individuals gather to discuss competencies. Some individuals come to the table with an image in their mind's eye that a competency is primarily an aspect of the job (especially if they have a background in job analysis). Others perhaps view a competency as primarily an attribute of the person (particularly if they follow the McClelland approach). The problem is that the two aren't speaking the same language, despite the promises of the competency movement to provide researchers, practitioners, managers, and employees with a "common language" to discuss *all things HR*.

### **A possible solution**

Unfortunately, there is no end to this confusion in sight. For every definition of competency brought forward, another researcher, practitioner, consultant or management guru will bring forth a new definition that contradicts the first.

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In the final analysis, it is probably not important, nor is it likely, that HR practitioners adopt a universally accepted definition of competency. There is no right answer to the question - what is a competency. What *is* important is that organizations adopt a definition that makes sense, meets its needs, and is used consistently in HR applications. It is also critical that the organization's members share a common understanding of the definition and are able to recognize and explain how and why the definition that has been adopted is different from other definitions they may encounter. If this is achieved there will be less confusion about competencies, both within and between organizations.