

A Universal Organisational Performance Dimension (OPD) Model: The Development of a Theoretical Based Competency Model

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The development and use of competency models in the westernised business world has grown substantially over the last decade. Despite their universal popularity, from a measurement perspective competency models typically lack the rigour and robustness in the work environment.

To partially fill this gap, this paper proposes the use of a competency model developed purely from a theoretical perspective. As a result of a content analysis, clusters of core job specific knowledge, skills and abilities were identified. This revealed twenty key behavioural descriptors, grouped under thirteen Organisational Performance Dimensions (OPD's); Accountability, Analytical Reasoning, Communication, Cultural Awareness, Customer Orientation, Decision Making, Ethics, Initiative, Planning and Organising, Relationship Skills, Resilience, Self Awareness / Development and Technical Skills. This Universal OPD model provides a framework for practitioners to integrate strategic and operational human resources functions, however in-house validation work against performance predictors (e.g. job performance, turnover) would be necessary to determine its overall effectiveness in the work domain.

Introduction

From reviewing current literature over the last decade in competency modelling both nationally and internationally it appears that the use of competency models is a widespread practice throughout the westernised world (Athey & Orth, 1999, Bartram, 2004). To investigate this phenomenon, the Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology (SIOP) commissioned a task force in 1997 to investigate and review the use of competency models.

The key conclusions from this research are outlined below:

- Competencies mean very different things depending on whom you are speaking with (Zemke, 1982). Generally there is a lack of consensus around what defines competency however this is not surprising given the multiple domains in which the term is prevalent.
- Competency models are increasingly being used to replace job analysis methods, however the approaches used to develop such models are less rigorous, with the exception of establishing a link to business goals and strategies (Shippmann, Ash, Carr, Hesketh, Pearlman, Battista, Eyde, Kehoe, Prien & Sanchez, 2000).
- A number of key factors impact on the overall appeal and attractiveness of competency models over traditional job analysis (Shippmann et al., 2000):
 - Relevance at individual, team and organisational level;
 - Relevance across jobs, occupational groups and organisations;
 - Alignment to organisational and business goals;
 - Inclusion of value and personality orientations;
 - Face validity of content;
 - Ability to drive selection, performance appraisal, HR decision making applications;
 - Emphasis on core competencies rather than specific technical skills; and
 - Longer term match.

Some of these findings are reiterated in Bartram's 2004 paper, however, despite its universal popularity there continues to be considerable debate in the industry regarding the definition, use and application/validity of competencies for both jobs and organisations.

In an effort to address many of these pertinent issues, this paper aims to provide an outline of the competency model approach, the terminology used and competency validation in the work environment. Moving forward, a revised terminology and generic theoretical model is proposed based on a comprehensive literature review of competency models since 1990.

1.0 Background of the Competency Movement

McClelland (1973) first initiated the competency movement as an alternative to the trait and intelligence approaches to measuring and predicting human performance. The principles underlying the adoption of such an approach are outlined below:

- The best way to understand performance is to observe what people actually do to be successful rather than rely on assumptions about underlying traits or attributes such as intelligence (Athey & Orth, 1999).
- The best way to measure and predict performance is to have people perform key aspects of the competency you want to measure (Athey & Orth, 1999).
- Competencies can be learned and developed over time (Athey & Orth, 1999).
- Competencies should be made visible and accessible to people so that they can understand and develop the required level of performance (Athey & Orth, 1999).
- Competencies should be linked to meaningful life outcomes that describe the way that people must perform in the real world (Athey & Orth, 1999).

These basic principles have laid the foundation for thinking about human performance and have guided the development of existing competency methods for addressing the challenges of twentieth century organisations. However despite its attractiveness to organisations based on the principles above, from a measurement perspective the use of competency models lack both rigour and robustness in the work environment.

2.0 The Competency Modelling Approach

This primary role of the competency model approach is to identify the essential skills, knowledge and personal characteristics needed for successful performance in a job. This approach is based on the criticism that common ability tests do not sufficiently focus on job relevant characteristics (Schapel, 2004).

In order to develop the job relevant characteristics two analytical approaches are used: an empirically oriented bottom up approach and a strategically oriented top down approach. Traditional bottom up approaches focus on analysing the behavioural indicators of high and low performers on various situations (both typical and difficult) on the job. This approach focuses on the actual state of job relevant competencies. In contrast, a strategy oriented approach focuses on the competencies that will become relevant in the future and are needed to fulfil the strategic goals of the company. The intention of this method is to align the competency model with the company's core competencies and its future goals. Both a top down and bottom up approach are often combined to get both a validated and strategically oriented competency model.

As a result, competency models often serve as a general framework for HR management. By utilising this approach, organisations find it possible to match and co-ordinate activities such as recruitment, performance management, training activities, succession planning, career pathing in a uniform conceptual way. Additionally, this approach is increasingly becoming favoured due to its perceived ability to support the alignment of HR activities to the business strategy.

3.0 Defining Competence/Competency

McClelland (1973) first defined competence as “components of performance associated with of life outcomes” (p.15). This definition incorporates all factors that are predictive of job performance, including general mental ability, personality traits, knowledge and skills that all differentiate between high, average and low performance. In the desire to develop a “one size fits all” strategic model to organisational competencies the term organisational competence has referred to the “collective learning and performance capabilities of entire companies” (Athey & Orth, 1999, p. 216).

The literature in this area appears to see both competence and competency as interchangeable terms. However, the meanings of these are quite distinct. Competence in any environment is taken to refer to a standard of performance reached i.e. to obtain your drivers license you have to meet a minimum standard of performance. The driving instructor either rates you as competent (e.g. obtain your drivers license) or incompetent (e.g. you cannot receive your drivers license making you unable to drive). This form of competence system is common throughout New Zealand’s education system through the use of unit standards. Unit standards refer to the skills that are satisfactorily performed.

In contrast, competency refers to the behaviour by which it is achieved (Rowe, 1995). To directly compare the two, competence describes what people can do while competency focuses on how they do it (i.e. competency refers to the behaviours adopted in competent performance). To summarise, the table below (Rowe, 1995) shows how competence and competency are fundamentally different from one another.

Table 1. The distinction between competence and competency.

COMPETENCE	COMPETENCY
Skilled – based	Behaviour based
Standard attained	Manner of behaviour
What is measured	How the standard is achieved.

As this literature indicates there are a number of common themes that are essential to defining competency. Competencies must be;

1. Factors that contribute in differentiating between high, average and low performers.
2. Strategic i.e. must contribute to organisational effectiveness.
3. Behaviour based or observable.

As the debate continues to surround these two terms, with little agreement on how it should be defined it is recommended that we move to a universal term, Organisational Performance Dimensions (OPD) that incorporates the three key themes outlined above. This definition can be broken down into three key components:

- *Organisational*: the descriptors must contribute to overall effective and strategic functioning of an organisation. This includes individual, team and process capabilities of an organisation. It is necessary that the descriptors are relevant at an individual, team and organisational level to enhance the overall strategic functioning of an organisation.
- *Performance*: to have utility in the work environment, it is necessary that the descriptors differentiate between high, mediocre and low individuals, teams and organisations.
- *Dimensions*: the observable measures that predict individual, team and organisational performance including abilities, attitudes and behaviours.

By combining these key three terms, OPD can be defined as observable measures including abilities, attitudes and behaviours that are relevant at an individual, team and organisational level and are linked to performance that can provide the organisation with a sustainable competitive advantage.

4.0 *Single Job vs One-size-fits-all Competency Models*

4.1 Single Job Competency Model

The first competency models were developed for single jobs and were for a long time the most common approach to competency modelling. The development of these models begins with a data collection / gathering phase collecting information about the job from focus groups, interviews, surveys and direct observation. Once complete a qualitative data analysis is complete to identify 10-20 traits or skills, each with a definition a list of specific behaviours that describe what effective performers do and how to achieve effective results.

Whilst this is an expensive method, it does provide a framework for describing key job requirements. As the model is developed with job-holders and managers, they are likely to feel ownership over the results. However the cost, time and effort required to develop a competency model for a single job make its use impractical and given the significant changes in jobs over time, the single job competency model is likely to have a short shelf life and would need revised every 1-2 years.

Additionally, as each single job competency model is likely to be different and not connected to the organisations business strategy, it is difficult to compare the competency requirements of one job to the requirements of another job or an individual's competency assessments in one job to the requirements of another job.

4.2 One-size-fits-all Competency Model

Part of the attractiveness of a "one size fits all" competency model to HR practitioners is its broad, quick and consistent application across a number of jobs. As such, any HR programmes based on the universal competency model can be applied to a large number of employees thereby reinforcing the cost-effectiveness of implementing the model.

The competency framework can also be aligned with the company's mission and values and any other key organisational initiatives providing the link to business strategy and a sustainable organisational advantage. All employees in the group for whom the model is developed can be assessed against the same competencies, and, therefore, can be compared with each other. The cost associated with the development of such a model is modest given the breadth of its impact, and because the competencies are not based on any individual job, the competency model does not need to be updated every time an individual job is redefined.

Despite its advantages, it is obvious the universal approach does not clearly describe what is needed in any specific job. Employees covered in the model may see the competencies as espoused values rather than as skills they need to use to obtain results, or they may accept the value of the competencies but fail to see how they apply them in their own jobs. Because the common competency model does not differentiate among the requirements of different jobs, it is of limited use in guiding selection for specific jobs. This use of a universal model ignores technical skill/knowledge which is a key consideration in matching individuals to available job assignments.

Given the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches, there appears a need to combine the two models to form a universal, multiple job OPD model for organisational use. The purpose of this is to obtain a common set of building block OPD's from a variety of jobs to differentiate between high, mediocre and low performers. Although the building blocks will form the base framework, organisations can then customise by using organisational language and concepts and adding those OPD's that reflect the skills and qualities being emphasised as part of ongoing organisational change efforts.

5.0 Development of a Universal OPD Model

To develop a generalisable framework of OPD's across professions a search was completed on ABI Inform using the search word "competency model" with articles reviewed 1990 or after. All articles outlining a single job competency model (with specific competencies) were included in the table 2. The majority of the literature available on competency models was for managerial or professional roles, with only three articles investigating competency requirements for low skill level trade roles. Due to the lack of representativeness of this group, these competencies were excluded from table 2. As a result, the competency model below is representative of professional/managerial roles.

From the list of competencies highlighted in the research, clusters of OPD's utilising similar knowledge, skills and abilities were grouped together. Some of the competencies cited in the literature were technical job specific skills and therefore were grouped under the Technical OPD.

As table 2 illustrates thirteen OPD's and twenty one descriptors emerged. Definitions of each OPD are outlined in Table 3.

Table 2. Observable behaviour measures cited in literature since 1990 and linkage to OPD and Descriptors.

Behavioural Measures	Organisational Performance Dimension	Descriptor
Accountability	Accountability	Accountability
Willingness to accept responsibility	Accountability	Accountability
Willingness to make decisions	Accountability	Accountability
Intelligence	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Thinking skills and reflection	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Analytical skills	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Multiple ways of knowing	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Higher level thinking skills	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Interprets and communicates information	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Interprets and relates data to courses of action	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Assemble data and apply statistical techniques	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Reads, analyses, synthesize and draws conclusions from data	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Understands complex interrelationships	Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning
Demonstrates effective questioning skills and techniques	Communication	Communication
Uses questioning as an inclusion technique	Communication	Communication
Demonstrates effective presentation and platform skills	Communication	Communication
Facilitation skills	Communication	Communication
Negotiation skills	Communication	Communication
Constructive criticism	Communication	Communication
Provides feedback without appearing critical	Communication	Communication
Responds appropriately to learners needs for clarification	Communication	Communication
Communicate effectively in visual, oral and written forms	Communication	Communication
Listens actively to all forms of communication	Communication	Communication
Tailors communication styles to needs of others	Communication	Communication
Explains complex ideas so they can be easily understood	Communication	Communication
Non verbal communications	Communication	Communication
Engaging communications	Communication	Communication
Communications are clear, concise and grammatically correct	Communication	Communication
Assisting the clear statement and communication of problems	Communication	Communication
Facilitation techniques and skills	Communication	Communication

Intellectual differences	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Intellectual versatility	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Knowledge of one's own culture	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Respect for the values and practices of other cultures	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Works with diverse backgrounds and roles	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Relevant corporate culture knowledge	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Knowledge of target culture	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Global perspective	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Open to diversity	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Cultural flexibility	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Cultural factors	Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness
Service orientation	Customer Orientation	Customer Orientation
Measures customers needs, values and satisfaction	Customer Orientation	Customer Orientation
Identifies customers and other stakeholders	Customer Orientation	Customer Orientation
Customer focused programmes	Customer Orientation	Customer Orientation
Responsiveness	Customer Orientation	Customer Orientation
Creative thinking	Decision Making	Creativity
Creativity and imagination	Decision Making	Creativity
Visualising	Decision Making	Creativity
Information search skills without regard to format	Decision Making	Creativity
Flexibility	Decision Making	Creativity
Select, modify, or create a design and development model appropriate	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Thinks critically when making decisions and solving problems	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Problem solving skills	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Anticipates and identifies problems	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Collects, identifies and utilises data to define problem causes and solutions	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Producing effective and efficient solutions	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Gathers, processes, evaluates, and distributes information	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Improves or designs systems	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Diagnoses client needs by collecting data and formulates recommendations and solutions	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Facilitates the diagnosis of problems	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Open-mindedness	Decision Making	Problem Solving
Objectivity	Decision Making	Problem Solving

Analyses the environmental characteristics	Decision Making	Strategic
Ability to see larger view	Decision Making	Strategic
Forecasts future training and development needs	Decision Making	Strategic
Direction	Decision Making	Strategic
Futuring skills	Decision Making	Strategic
Systems thinking skills	Decision Making	Strategic
Ability to conceptualise	Decision Making	Strategic
Given change, adapting strategies and solutions	Decision Making	Strategic
Respects the values and practices of others	Ethics	Ethics
Trust and Integrity	Ethics	Ethics
Ethical	Ethics	Ethics
Honesty	Ethics	Ethics
Professional behaviour	Ethics	Ethics
Professional manner	Ethics	Ethics
Courteous	Ethics	Ethics
Credibility	Ethics	Ethics
Credible	Ethics	Ethics
Initiative	Initiative	Initiative
Facilitates administration	Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising
Course logistics and arrangements	Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising
Event planning skills	Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising
Organises and maintains information	Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising
Develops plans for the department and programs	Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising
Maintaining reporting systems	Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising
Organises and maintains information	Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising
Administrative functions and skills	Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising
Assigns roles and tasks	Relationship Skills	Delegation
Achieve results through delegation	Relationship Skills	Delegation
High energy level	Relationship Skills	Energy
A sense of humor	Relationship Skills	Energy
Enthusiastic	Relationship Skills	Energy
Competitiveness	Relationship Skills	Energy

Ability to handle conflict	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Relates to others	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Patience with others	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Interpersonal awareness	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Coping Skills	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Empathetic	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Interpersonal relationship skills	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Interpersonal Communication techniques	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Socially skilled	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Averts conflicts and resolves when aversion failed	Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity
Coaching and mentoring employees	Relationship Skills	Leadership
Actively impacts upon and as a catalyst in group and other situations to achieve results	Relationship Skills	Leadership
Ability to take charge	Relationship Skills	Leadership
Provides leadership intradepartmentally and interdepartmentally	Relationship Skills	Leadership
Promotes collaboration, partnerships and relationships	Relationship Skills	Networking
Collaborative Skills	Relationship Skills	Networking
Develops and sustains social relationships	Relationship Skills	Networking
Interacts effectively with fellow professionals	Relationship Skills	Networking
Diverts and encourages client relationships	Relationship Skills	Networking
Managing internal and external relationships	Relationship Skills	Networking
Consulting skills and techniques	Relationship Skills	Networking
Team building techniques	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Team performance	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Facilitates implementation of team based processes	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Leading, creating or participating in team processes	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Operates in a manner appropriate to the norms and tasks of groups or teams	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Provides positive reinforcement	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Group process skills	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Group dynamics skills	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Group facilitation skills	Relationship Skills	Teamwork
Persistence	Resilience	Resilience
Views barriers as opportunities not obstacles	Resilience	Resilience
Patience with and tolerance of ambiguity	Resilience	Resilience

Monitors and corrects performance	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Self worth	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Self esteem	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Self knowledge of strengths and weaknesses	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Self awareness	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Aware of professional development activities and opportunities	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Maintain current skills	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Professional Development	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Pursues personal and life-long learning	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Self development of learning and career	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Knowing how to learn	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Desire to accomplish	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Industry awareness	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Shares knowledge with others	Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development
Interviewing techniques	Technical	Technical
Utilises computer and telecommunication technologies	Technical	Technical
Operates basic computer programmes	Technical	Technical
Software and hardware selection skills	Technical	Technical
Information technology skill, vocabulary, and concepts	Technical	Technical
Strategic planning for professional development	Technical	Technical
Support organisation strategic plan	Technical	Technical
Participates in strategic planning processes	Technical	Technical
Strategic planning skills	Technical	Technical
Cost-benefit analysis	Technical	Technical
Financial analysis skills	Technical	Technical
Budget management	Technical	Technical
Knowledge to support and shape organisation as a continuous learning community	Technical	Technical
Redesigns organisational structures and systems to support a continuous learning environment	Technical	Technical
Contracting skills	Technical	Technical
General business knowledge	Technical	Technical

Table 3. Definitions of key OPD's Descriptors.

OPD	Descriptors	Descriptor Definitions
Accountability	Accountability	Willingness to make decisions that have an impact on the overall functioning of the organisation, and take responsibility for those decisions from that point forth.
Analytical Reasoning	Analytical Reasoning	Able to make logical assumptions and critical analyse both verbal and numerical information.
Communication	Communication	Uses language, style, and effective expression (including non verbal) in speaking so that others can understand and take appropriate action.
Cultural Awareness	Cultural Awareness	Able to effectively relate to, understand and respect others from a diverse range of backgrounds
Customer Orientation	Customer Orientation	Understands both internal and external customers and their needs.
Decision Making	Creativity	Ability to invent, explore, imagine new approaches, frameworks, or solutions, ability to stimulate ideas in self and others
Decision Making	Problem Solving	Able to make rational and realistic decisions based on factual information.
Decision Making	Strategic	Able to maintain strategic focus; projecting trends and visualising possible and probable futures and their implications.
Ethics	Ethics	Possesses fidelity to fundamental values (respect for the individual, responsibility, honesty, reliability, fairness, integrity, respect for property).
Initiative	Initiative	Able to go beyond the obvious requirements for a situation.
Planning and Organising	Planning and Organising	Ability to identify options, and establish courses of action, goals, methods and resources for self and others.
Relationship Skills	Delegation	Ability to effectively delegate tasks and duties to others.
Relationship Skills	Energy	Expresses and relates to others with intensity and vitality.
Relationship Skills	Interpersonal Sensitivity	Ability to appropriately respond and identify other people's concerns and to position one's ideas to address these concerns.
Relationship Skills	Leadership	Uses appropriate interpersonal styles and methods to guide and inspire individuals or groups toward task and goal accomplishment.
Relationship Skills	Networking	Able to establish rapport, relationships and networks across a broad range of people and groups.
Relationship Skills	Teamwork	Understanding how to collaborate and foster collaboration amongst others

Resilience	Resilience	Ability to maintain stability of performance under pressure and/or oppositions and to make repeated efforts to overcome obstacles.
Self Awareness/Self Development	Self Awareness/Self Development	Possesses a high degree of self awareness of own strength and weaknesses. Has high performance expectations for self.
Technical	Technical	Job specific knowledge, skills and abilities required to successfully complete job.

As table 3. illustrates twenty descriptors were found across the literature competency models. Of the twenty descriptors, thirteen universal OPD's emerged that were common across the wide range of jobs sampled.

These thirteen are outlined below:

1. Accountability
2. Analytical Reasoning
3. Communication
4. Cultural Awareness
5. Customer Orientation
6. Decision Making
7. Ethics
8. Initiative
9. Planning and Organising
10. Relationship Skills
11. Resilience
12. Self Awareness/Self Development
13. Technical

6.0 *Defined Levels of OPD's*

As with any competency approach, it is important to define a consistent set of levels for the OPD's to distinguish the extent to which and OPD is required in different jobs. The accurate assessment of levels required for jobs facilitates individual assessment, by identifying the individuals who possess the OPD's required for a particular assignment or job. With no defined levels of a competency, individuals are assessed according to the frequency or effectiveness with which they demonstrate the behaviours associated with effective performance.

7.0 *Limitations of the OPD Model*

The Universal OPD model outlined above presents a framework for HR practitioners for recruitment, selections, performance management, succession planning, remuneration and many other key HR functions. Although the model is based on an extensive qualitative literature review there is little to no knowledge with respect to the rigour and robustness of the original competency models utilised in this study. Furthermore, this research is based upon a qualitative content analysis, and therefore there is no quantitative analysis to determine that the OPD's described above differentiate between high, mediocre and low performance as well as the enable an organisation to gain a sustainable competitive advantage based on high ratings on the OPD's.

One of the advantages of utilising the Universal OPD model is that it provides a framework for integrating measures such as knowledge, skills, ability and personality, however validation work against performance predictors would be necessary to determine its overall effectiveness in the work domain.

8.0 Reflection

Overall, the development of a universal OPD framework offers much promise for the integration of HR processes across organisation with the obvious benefit of the approach being aligned to business strategy and values. Despite this, there still remains a lack of rigour, robustness and validation work in organisations with the competency frameworks used. Moving forward, as academics and professionals it is our role to assess and question the framework utilised to ensure they have a solid research base of both qualitative and quantitative science – they must add value and utility to an organisation.

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