

Chapter 1

Frameworks

Without having job criteria in place, there is simply no way of predicting with any degree of confidence whether your people decisions are fair and rational. Practitioners rely on job descriptions and talent management frameworks to combat the risks of poor people decisions, because when you start racking up all the direct and indirect costs of an unfilled vacancy or a poorly placed new hire, the costs are striking, especially for roles that are core to the business.

One of my clients put its business analytics team to the task of figuring out how much it costs to replace a front-line employee. These are not high level positions, but rather staff working in retail branches and call centers. By the time the analyst calculated the cost of advertisement, the time spent by the recruitment team to screen and interview candidates, the loss of productivity because the role was vacant, and the cost to induct a new employee, the total figure was a staggering \$57,000 per vacancy.

You might be skeptical and think this sounds too high, but even if you accept that the cost is only half as high, the damage of hiring the wrong people or failing to address engagement issues are substantial. When you consider that an annual turnover rate of 30 percent is the norm for certain industries, a modest improvement in retention (i.e., people staying on for a few extra months on average) can save a large organization millions of dollars and potentially gain a few customers along the way, through a more positive customer experience with an engaged company representative.

Before employees can be hired or money spent on development, practitioners must establish criteria about what they are trying to accomplish. For recruitment, identifying critical skills and experiences

ensure that they hire the candidate most likely to perform well on the job. For development, understanding what needs to be improved and for what reason can ensure that training budgets are invested wisely.

This chapter is devoted to exploring the frameworks put in place by practitioners to help guide people decisions throughout their organization. By defining what the employee and organization, respectively, bring to the table, as well as the glue that holds them together, it is hoped that decisions can be made by their collective ability to strengthen the employment relationship.

The chapter begins by charting the origins of job analysis and the subsequent change in emphasis from the division of labor to the drivers of employee performance, followed by the rise of behavioral competencies as the language practitioners use to define the workplace. We will then look at the complexities of defining a structure that works effectively across levels, functions, and jobs, as well as two of the common applications for talent management frameworks in recruitment and development.

I aim to demonstrate that there exists an inherent tradeoff between defining a framework that accounts for the intricacies between jobs and its usefulness for making sound talent management decisions. The role of the practitioner is to use his or her best judgment in weighing the pros and cons of each alternative, settling on the framework that will have maximum utility for the organization at this specific point in time. Right now, I believe that the pendulum has swung too far, with frameworks accounting for only a fraction of the employment relationship (focusing excessively on behaviors) and applying generic language across highly divergent roles. Together, these trends provide practitioners with the greatest opportunity to help their organizations reframe what top talent looks like.

Origins of Job Analysis

Modern day practitioners are not the first to be interested in the content and structure of jobs. The origins of job analysis are evident with the development of more complex and interdependent civilizations. For example, Imperial China had a long-standing tradition of regularly testing the worthiness of government officials. In 1115 BCE,

six skill sets were defined as part of this testing regime, specifically writing, arithmetic, music, archery, horsemanship, and ceremonies and rites. As a second example from the other side of the world, Socrates in the 5th century BCE mused about the allocation of work in his description of the ideal state.

The first major work that can be considered a precursor to job analysis was completed in 1747. Diderot, busily writing his encyclopedia, was so disturbed by the lack of clarity around how jobs were defined in the trades, arts, and crafts that he took it upon himself to create a job classification system. Diderot kicked off a trend that would continue in France for nearly a century. Between 1780 and 1830, France defined an encyclopedia of occupations and the basic qualifications required for civil service, implementing bureau examinations to select the most suitable candidates. The British Empire was quick to follow, similarly focused on the civil service and the challenge of effectively managing colonies located around the world.

The late 19th century witnessed reform in the United States, initiated by Lincoln voicing his displeasure at the “inefficient and wasteful results of political appointments.” A firm tradition of assessing abilities and skills was thus established. The full potential of job analysis was not realized until it was applied beyond the civil service, coinciding with the establishment of Industrial Psychology as something different than other psychological disciplines. Early pioneers include Frederick Taylor, who relied on job analysis to fuel his principles of Scientific Management; Hugo Munsterberg and his quest to identify worker characteristics that would result in greater job fit; and Frank and Lillian Gilbreth with their development of time and motion studies (see Figure 1.1).

A huge amount of momentum for job analysis was gained as an outcome of the First World War. The U.S. Army was keen to improve how soldiers were selected and placed into service (Figure 1.2). When the Great Depression hit, attention turned to utilizing worker abilities and getting the great masses of civilians back to work. The Social Science Research Council and the National Research Council sought to utilize job analysis to identify the core characteristics of jobs and how they differ by vocation. This work led the U.S. Employment Service to establish the Occupational Research Program in 1934, which sought to draft a Dictionary of Occupational Titles



FIGURE 1.1 Image from Frank and Lillian Gilbreth's 1918 Ball Brothers Mason Jar Study That Targeted How to Improve Worker Efficiency by Reducing Motion

(DOT) and create a taxonomy of worker characteristics that could be used to select candidates. The program resulted in a taxonomy of forty-five characteristics used by states to hire and relocate staff, with the DOT itself published in 1939.

Although interest in job analysis has remained steady, especially in light of Equal Employment Opportunity legislation, a major overhaul of the DOT did not occur until 1995, with the creation of O*Net. A consortium of prominent psychologists was hired by the U.S. Department of Labor to replace the DOT with a new classification of jobs that were representative of the U.S. economy. In addition to basic labor market information, O*Net provides a breakdown of each job by four categories.

- ◆ **Worker Characteristics: Abilities, Interests, Values, and Styles** held by the employee that are considered enduring and likely to influence their performance and acquisition of skills.



FIGURE 1.2 Image of U.S. Army Air Corps Cadets in 1942 Taking a Group Test to Help Determine Their Proficiency as Pilots, Navigators, or Bombardiers

- ◆ **Worker Requirements: Skills, Knowledge, and Education** that are gained by the employee by either doing their jobs or in preparing for a career.
- ◆ **Occupational Requirements: Tasks** required by the employee and the **Tools and Technology** that he or she will likely utilize on the job.
- ◆ **Occupation-Specific Information: Work Activities** describing the behaviors expected from employees and the **Work Context** (aka environment) that they are likely to experience.

O*Net was an ambitious project and the final product contains 571 job elements across 821 detailed occupations. Such an array of job elements provides a mindboggling number of potential combinations, and practitioners are well aware of the value O*Net brings to their toolbox.

I have had the pleasure of working alongside one of the creators of O*Net. Wally Borman is an expert practitioner, having a résumé that would make anybody deeply envious. Wally is the “chief scientist” at PDRI, as well as a professor of IO psychology at the University of South Florida. He has penned over 350 publications, served as president for the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, edited four professional journals, and above all, is one of the most genuine and supportive people I have worked with.

When writing this chapter, I arranged some time to speak with Wally about the creation of O*Net and what it strove to achieve. According to Wally, the motivation for O*Net was to get beyond the DOT, which had a clumsy underlying framework that failed to provide a true comparison between jobs and did little beyond providing generic job descriptions. True comparison between jobs, with rich and thorough taxonomy, was beyond the DOT and required a major rework.

To create the content used across *worker characteristics*, *worker requirements*, *occupational requirements*, and *occupation-specific information*, the O*Net designers relied on a combination of existing theory, logic, and their extensive practical experience working in the field performing job analysis. For example, O*Net’s taxonomy for *work styles* is based on the Big 5 personality model, which is the most highly researched and validated personality structure available today. Moreover, Wally was keen to point out that O*Net has a hierarchical structure that extends beyond the categorization of jobs. The hierarchy applies at a lower level to the *work activities* that drive these distinctions, accomplished by looking at differences among task complexity, importance, and frequency.

According to Wally, the greatest challenge in creating O*Net was not in drafting the content, but in gaining enough data to validate what was written. Realizing how enormous the task was of surveying job incumbents from each of the 821 jobs included in O*Net, the designers decided instead to opt for a practical approach. The designers targeted eighty jobs, which, surprisingly, made up 80 to 90 percent of people employed in the U.S. economy at the time. The design team went out to organizations with significant populations of employees working in these occupations and was warmly welcomed.

But the designers hit a roadblock. Despite a resounding initial interest from employers to participate, the response rate was shockingly

poor, and solid data was captured for only thirty-five of the jobs. The design team went to Plan C and used other industrial psychologists to validate O*Net's content. This is a lesson for any practitioner working on a large scale job analysis project. Gaining commitment from job incumbents or subject matter experts is usually not a problem until they see the full extent of what is asked of them.

With the content validated to the highest practical degree, O*Net provides a solid foundation for a range of talent management activities. Wally points out its usefulness in providing criteria for recruitment or reward decisions, identifying training requirements, guiding the redeployment of staff, and informing career guidance. As an area of future application, Wally believes that O*Net could be used to inform what types of reasonable accommodation could be made for people with disabilities. But for this to occur, he believes that O*Net requires even more granular content and extensive validation with job incumbents.

Unless your day job looks like mine, you are probably wondering why anyone would ever need to do job analysis again. It appears that O*Net has done it all. O*Net has a robust content model, applies to every conceivable role in the U.S. economy (which translates well to an international context), has been validated, and, best of all, is free to use courtesy of the U.S. Department of Labor (a link is provided in the notes section of this book).

Yet, for all these advantages, O*Net does not provide a total solution. The language used in O*Net is necessarily generic and therefore cannot account for how a given occupation is interpreted by each organization. One of the popular statistics HR professionals quote is a finding that it takes six to eight months for the average employee to become fully competent in his or her role. Assuming that a suitably qualified candidate was chosen (having the skills and experiences that would be listed on O*Net), then it is not too much of a stretch to imagine that the six to eight months a new employee requires is due to the way job roles are interpreted and connected to work within a specific organization.

Bottom line, job analysis is required to capture all the idiosyncrasies that fall between the cracks of the generic job descriptions. What makes Microsoft different from Apple or Coca-Cola different from Pepsi has a lot to do with the mix of talent they have working in

their organizations and the processes that they have defined for how individuals work together. Competitive advantage from a people perspective is having insight into what makes your culture, processes, and roles different from those of your rivals and then finding and nurturing the talent according to what you find. It all depends on job analysis.

The Art and Science of Job Analysis

To conduct a job analysis, practitioners are tasked with defining the essence of a job, accomplished through interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, observation, or existing knowledge. This information is bundled together into a snapshot of a job that represents what employees are doing at that particular moment in time. As a job adapts and changes to new ways of working or different end products, the onus is on the practitioner to revise the job description. The reality is far from ideal, and I will talk more about this in a few minutes.

Below, I will present eight popular ways of conducting a job analysis. Each employs a slightly different way at gaining relevant information and, as a result, yields different information about tasks, behaviors, or personal attributes. No matter which combination of techniques is chosen, a successful job analysis is systematic (having a predefined objective and structure), comprehensive (gaining multiple, relevant viewpoints that represent the job), and timely (before any major staffing decisions are made). When done right, job analysis forms the basis for selection, appraisal, compensation, and development activities, as well as compliance with fairness legislation. Here are the main techniques trained practitioners utilize.

WORK LOGS

Job incumbents are asked to keep a written record of the work they accomplish, either after a specified period of time (e.g., hourly or daily) or when they switch between tasks. Individual accounts of the workday are compiled across job incumbents to discover the key activities that make up a particular job.

STRUCTURED OBSERVATION

A trained observer watches job incumbents fulfill their work throughout the day, using a checklist of tasks as a reference. The observer keeps track of the frequency of tasks, duration, and accuracy of the

items included in the checklist. The observer will often ask questions of the job incumbent about what he or she is doing, how he or she is doing it, and why it has to be done in order to fully capture key activities and necessary behaviors.

JOB SAMPLE

Trained observers take on the job for a set period of time. Through their experience, they take note of how they use their time, the tasks they are asked to accomplish, the approach they take in fulfilling tasks, and the required skills they should have to effectively accomplish their work. This technique is more appropriate for jobs that can be learned quickly or that take advantage of transferrable skills.

HIERARCHICAL TASK ANALYSIS

This technique involves breaking a job down into the typical tasks performed and then breaking these down into subtasks, usually through an interview with job incumbents or a line manager. The technique elicits information around the key objectives of a job and the skills and abilities that employees should have to fulfill them.

REPERTORY GRID

In this technique, a line manager is interviewed and presented with a series of staff comparisons. With each comparison, the manager is asked to differentiate how two staff members are different from a third staff member, in their effectiveness in performing the job. The technique can elicit a broad range of content, from how someone treats colleagues or customers to the skills he or she brings to the workplace. In my experience, coordinating the range of comparisons (to ensure a range of unique combinations) and explaining the task to the manager makes this technique impractical.

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Job incumbents or managers are interviewed and asked for examples of critical situations that involved the target job. An example could involve the winning of a key account, prevention of a major catastrophe, or major change in a business process. The interviewer explores the incident from multiple vantage points, asking how the job incumbent solved the situation, the skills or experiences that enabled her and what could have been done differently.

CARD SORT

Using a predefined competency framework (either generic or specific to the organization), job incumbents or managers are asked to select the core competencies required for a job. I typically ask for four essential competencies and two desired competencies. Once these are selected, follow-up questions are used to reveal the rationale for each selection. By compiling results from multiple card sorts, trends in competencies can be discovered.

VISIONARY INTERVIEW

Unlike the other interview types described above, this technique focuses on the future of a job. Senior leaders or others who have deep insight on the organization are asked about how the target job is likely to change in the medium to long term, with the aim of eliciting a list of behaviors, skills, experience, and motivations that should be prioritized now to future-proof any talent management strategy. These techniques are summarized in Figure 1.3.

When bundling job descriptions, practitioners should establish and maintain a model that will work well within their organization. Having a common job template drives consistency and allows for comparison or links across jobs. One such model could be the categories used in O*Net. Although this is a fine model to employ, I have found that the majority of clients prefer a simpler model that focuses squarely on the individual tasked with doing the job (not so much

Direct Experience	• Job Sample
	• Structured Observation
Via Job Incumbent	• Work Logs
	• Critical Incident
	• Card Sort
Via Line Manager	• Hierarchical Task Analysis
	• Repertory Grid
	• Visionary Interview

FIGURE 1.3 Summary of Job Analysis Techniques by Source of Information

the organizational context). In my client interactions, I commonly refer to the five key ingredients of any job, which are not so different from the categories used by other consultants:

- ◆ **Key Activities:** What the individual is typically tasked to do.
- ◆ **Behavioral Competencies:** How effective job incumbents go about the job.
- ◆ **Skills:** The education and training that enable job performance.
- ◆ **Experience:** Knowledge gained in a given context that can be applied to the job.
- ◆ **Motivation:** Employee needs and preferences that require fulfillment.

The best job descriptions are focused and concise. Practitioners and line managers have a tendency to create a laundry list of characteristics across these five key ingredients. They want a little of everything, and by the time they are done, they have described a superhuman and written a document that is totally useless for selection and development decisions.

When writing a job description, I challenge my clients to hone in on no more than six absolutely essential points to include for each key ingredient. Next, I have them describe with as much precision as possible what is meant by that characteristic, to give direction to those responsible for talent management decisions. For example, if I were creating a job description for my favorite coffee shop barista, I might include the following for one of the key activities:

Key Activity of Pulling Shots

Prepares to pull shots of espresso by using the portioned amount of coffee from the grinder, tamping the grounds flat, and inserting the filter handle into the group head. Pulls each espresso shot for approximately twenty to twenty-six seconds, watching to see that a rust colored Crema has been produced. Empties the filter handle of the used grinds, wipes clean with a towel, and purges the machine.

What you'll notice is that this description captures the essence of the activity from beginning to end, using the actual names of the equipment being used. This level of description would be

absolutely the same if I went on to describe the behaviors, skills, experience, and motivation characteristics included in the job description.

The reality is that most job descriptions I come across suffer from three fatal flaws. I have already mentioned the first, that job descriptions must be focused. Including too many characteristics waters down the effectiveness of the document for identifying candidates who have the greatest fit, as well as which skills and experiences should be nurtured by on-the-job development. Moreover, a lack of focus could interfere with the legal defensibility of decisions, by pulling attention away from critical characteristics onto those with anecdotal attachment to the job.

Second, the language of many job descriptions is so vague that it renders the document useless. It is no longer surprising to me just how many job descriptions still use phrases like *talented*, *team player*, or *self-starter*. It goes without saying that employers want a candidate who can do the job, get along with other people, and strive to achieve goals. To me, generic phrases like these are a warning that the person who wrote the job description has limited knowledge about the job or has not taken the time to commit his or her thoughts to paper.

Third, job descriptions start aging the moment they are drafted. As market conditions, technology, work processes, and organizational structures change, so does the content underlying the job description. Often job descriptions are not updated until absolutely necessary, when some major talent management decision is made. I witnessed this first hand during the economic downturn experienced in Ireland. Many of the organizations I encountered had not revised their job descriptions for years, as they had become accustomed to the Celtic Tiger years when any warm body would do. When faced with a decision about who to cut (in some cases, literally half the workforce was made redundant), they had nothing to stand on. These organizations lost precious time creating legally defensible job descriptions and assessment processes, before they could begin reacting to the downturn.

Conducting job analysis and drafting job descriptions is time-consuming and extremely repetitive work. It is, thus, not surprising that employers settle for unfocused, vague, and outdated job descriptions to guide their people decisions. Practitioners tend to

under-appreciate the power of getting this right, not only for creating a standard for key talent management decisions, but for engaging business leaders in people decisions by asking for their expert opinions.

There is an alternative. Instead of looking at all five key ingredients, many practitioners advocate for drafting a competency model that applies across roles and drives the majority of talent management decisions. As will be discussed shortly, competencies can still be unfocused, vague, and outdated, and, in many ways, a competency approach makes matters worse by discounting the depth of understanding gained by using the full five key ingredients. What is captured at the individual job level will differ significantly from the group or organizational level, similar to the level of detail captured by a handheld camera compared to a satellite in space.

Behavioral Simplicity

The definition of a competency is hard to nail down, as each organization and practitioner interprets the idea in a slightly different way. Some practitioners use competency frameworks to communicate the core mission of their organization to both job candidates and incumbents, aiming for a common way of working and a guide that can be used by managers to set priorities. Other practitioners are not so concerned with such lofty goals, but rather latch onto competency frameworks as a means of aligning human resource activities, ensuring that the criteria used for hiring are linked to development and performance management.

Because competencies serve many masters, there is a great deal of ambiguity about their definition, which is not helpful if you are a practitioner and trying to convince business leaders that they need a framework. This ambiguity is apparent in an early definition by Boyatzis (1982), who states, "A job competency is an underlying characteristic of a person which results in an effective and/or superior performance of a job . . . it may be a trait, motive, skill, aspect of one's self image or social role, or body of knowledge that he or she uses." As long as some personal characteristic is thought to drive performance, it appears to be fair game for inclusion using this definition.

Some practitioners believe that this ambiguity is a good thing, as it allows companies to make competencies their own. If business leaders call for the role-modeling of new or different types of behavior, perhaps the competency framework should take an aspirational tone or profess some unifying values. Alternatively, high tech IT or engineering companies may want to emphasize technical achievement and, therefore, knowledge and skills could take priority in their framework.

Other practitioners don't like this. They argue that frameworks should be robust and legally defensible, especially if they are used for important people decisions around hiring, promotion, or pay. Emphasis should be on what is critical for the organization to accomplish its work. A great example for the need for rigor was a religious organization I worked with in the UK. Within their framework was the competency of "holiness." Highly relevant for their work, but hardly defensible if used to make a hiring decision. Exactly how would you evaluate how "holy" someone was?

To minimize confusion about what should be in a competency framework, practitioners commonly differentiate between two types of competencies, either behavioral or technically based. Woodruffe (1992) focuses on behavior when defining a competency as "the set of behavior patterns that the incumbent needs to bring to a position in order to perform tasks and functions with competence." Still present in this definition is a link to job performance, but absence is talk about knowledge, skills, or abilities. I'll come back to these at the end of the section. For now, I want to talk more about behaviors, as they make up the lion's share of competency frameworks.

A benchmarking survey conducted in 2006 found that behavioral competencies are well embedded in UK companies (we can assume similar take up in other geographic locations), with applications across a wide variety of people decisions. For selection, 59 percent of companies reported using their framework for sifting job candidates, while 68 percent asked competency-based interview questions. In managing existing employees, 77 percent of companies used behavioral competencies within their appraisal systems and 58 percent used competency performance to inform promotion decisions. The greatest use of competencies was in development, with 82 percent of companies using their framework to inform training content.

A well-articulated competency has three components. The first component is a short and punchy title that captures in a few words the gist of the behavior. An example for a fictitious and slightly odd company highly concerned with employee nutrition could be *Eating and Drinking*. The title is followed by a definition that embellishes what is meant by the title. So our definition could read “*Consume enough food and drink during the day to ensure that they are happy and healthy to take on work challenges.*”

Close on the heels of the definition are the specific observable traits that ensure a competency is robust and defensible. Common practice dictates that competencies should be defined by a set of behavioral indicators, which is jargon for a series of short statements that would describe whether a person is satisfying the competency. These indicators should be discrete (only represented once in the framework), observable in the workplace, and measurable (where a positive or negative score could be given.). Back to our competency of *Eating and Drinking*, I might provide the behavioral indicators of “*Eats lunch at 1 p.m. each workday; but not at his or her desk; consumes a healthy balance of types of food, inclusive of two servings of vegetables or fruits a day; uses the microwave only for food that will not irritate co-workers (i.e., no leftovers).*”

For any given role, it is recommended that six to eight behavioral competencies be selected, each with the same structure of title, definition, and behavioral indicators. This recommendation is thought to balance the need to cover the variety of work inherent to any job with the need to focus on the competencies most related to overall job performance. Identifying over eight competencies can result in an unwieldy assessment regime that does not adequately identify the right types of job candidates.

Complementing behavioral competencies are the skills, knowledge, and experiences that enable performance, often referred to as technical competencies or capabilities. Personally, I like to use the word *capability* here to minimize confusion with behavioral competencies. A technical capability framework takes account of all the certifications, education, and on-the-job learning that individuals acquire in their careers.

Capabilities answer a different question. An employee can possess all the training required to do a job (has the technical capability), but

not apply this learning to the job (lacks competency performance). The process of defining capabilities is similar, with job analysis used to identify a focused list of qualifications, certifications, or training attained by employees, as well as experience working in a given job, geography, or industry. A definition is drafted and some examples provided about what demonstrate the fulfillment of the capability. Yet, unlike a competency that can be evaluated across a range of effectiveness (a scale running from very effective to not effective at all), a technical capability is binary (an employee either has attained a qualification or has not).

To illustrate what a technical capability could look like, our fictitious employer who is overly concerned with employee nutrition could define the capability of *Lunch Safety* as “*Attended a half-day, in-company course on the five food groups, using cutlery, and storing leftovers, which will not be consumed on company grounds.*” The capability could also include alternative ways of demonstrating fulfillment, for example, through the completion of “*A food nutrition or personal training certification.*”

There is a temptation to create a laundry list of capabilities that an individual should have and, taken to the extreme, there will be very few candidates or employees who will meet these requirements. Eight competencies and eight capabilities provides plenty of scope to make a decision, even without considering an individual’s job performance or motivational profile. Focus is key, and we as practitioners are responsible for deciding which competencies and capabilities to include in the final mix.

Now we come to the complex part. Coming up with behavioral competencies and technical capabilities is a fairly straightforward task if considering a single job. You perform some job analysis with a representative group of job incumbents and managers, this information is then synthesized into competency and capability definitions that are circulated around to your experts for approval. They make some changes. Job done.

Yet, what happens when you are tasked with creating an organization-wide competency or capability framework that can represent hundreds of jobs and thousands of employees? There are not enough days to allow for a full job analysis, let alone the writing and validation of the resulting frameworks. The task of building

organization-wide frameworks is thus littered with tradeoffs. I demonstrate below the choices practitioners make to create practical and scalable frameworks.

The Tradeoffs

In my opinion, there is only one universal truth when it comes to building a competency or capability framework. This truth asserts that *a perfect framework does not exist, but rather all frameworks will fail to a greater or lesser extent.*

This is a bold statement that contradicts an industry built around talent management. There is no shortage of consultants who tout their ability to build a framework that will drive business success for their clients. Other consultants go further by claiming that they have already solved this problem by identifying a list of characteristics that are universal to successful employees across industries and geographies.

This just doesn't feel right, as compromises are unavoidable whenever a practitioner builds a framework. Any abstraction beyond a single employee working in a specific job and the competency and capability requirements begin losing their credibility. Aggregating roles, geographies, functions, or levels collectively results in a framework's failure to adequately address the variance in how staff perform their jobs and the skills that they need along the way.

I was once told an anecdote about how Napoleon chose the uniforms for his army. In order to save money and time, he decided to tailor all uniforms based upon the measurements of the average soldier and, of course, the resulting uniforms were a disaster. The sleeves were too short for some, the waist too loose for others, and only a few soldiers felt comfortable in their new duds. True or not, the same applies here. Taking broad generalizations about jobs and workgroups loses precious detail.

So the real question is how close a practitioner can come to identifying the characteristics that have the greatest power to drive performance and engagement on the job, without creating a cumbersome mess of a framework. Ultimately, we want to determine whether frameworks can achieve this tipping point and capture enough information to make informed people decisions. If not, we may need a new approach.

Practitioners make four major tradeoffs when drafting a talent management framework. These choices fall on the same continuum, with greater job detail resulting in a more cumbersome application to hiring, promotion, or development decisions. Practitioners often succumb to the temptation to choose frameworks that are easy to apply, but often fail to recognize key differences between roles.

CUSTOM OR GENERIC CONTENT

The first decision is whether to create content from scratch or to adopt an existing framework. Creating an organization-specific framework often leads to greater acceptance by employees, as they can see their own history and culture being reflected in its wording. For example, a competency that focuses on customer service is strengthened if it talks about the specific customers and services offered. Sophisticated organizations also see these frameworks as a source of competitive advantage by aligning employees to the behaviors and skills they believe make the biggest difference.

There are situations when an off-the-shelf version may be more appropriate. Many of the frameworks created by human capital consultancies, such as Lominger, have gone through extensive validation, ensuring that competencies are distinct, measurable, and well-written. Similarly, many professional organizations have defined the training and experience seen as essential for people within an industry, which can become the basis of a capability framework. If the organization does not have the appetite or ambition to create a custom framework, adopting a generic alternative may be a valid strategy. Also, if the business environment is likely to change drastically in the short term, this may buy some much-needed time. In practice, many organizations begin by drafting their own frameworks and then use a generic alternative as a reference point.

LEVELED OR FLAT STRUCTURE

Although organizations are hierarchical by nature, many practitioners choose not to make distinctions in the types of competencies or capabilities they define for their workers. This may seem odd, as the responsibilities held by senior staff are surely different from what would be expected of direct reports. Yet, if the organization is attempting to focus on what is held in common among all workers, in order to embed a behavioral code that employees should adhere

to or establish the same base of technical knowledge, a flat structure may be appropriate.

Leveled structures are cumbersome to create, as changes in behavior likely do not escalate the same way that job titles do. For example, on a competency like “following procedures,” there may be little to no distinction in what employees at different levels are expected to do. Either they stick to company policy or they don’t. Another pitfall for practitioners is to assume that all competencies escalate with greater seniority. In many organizations, proficiency in writing or analysis is highest at the individual contributor level, which calls into question whether these competencies should hit a plateau or even be adjusted downward for senior staff.

FUNCTIONAL OR ORGANIZATIONAL SPAN

A similar decision is made about whether a framework is broken up by function, with distinct content that applies only to be given function, or tailored for organization-wide competencies or capabilities. Functional frameworks link more directly to what employees are asked to do in their jobs and, therefore, are generally more accepted when used for people decisions. Moreover, functional leaders feel empowered when asked to build a framework and are often only too happy to speak about what makes their divisions unique.

On the other hand, functional structures jar with efforts to create a common code of behavior across an organization. A greater number of functional models can muddy the waters about what is valued, in addition to increasing the responsibility for practitioners to keep the frameworks current. If employees are performing similar jobs, but happen to fall into different divisions, the standard that they are held accountable for may differ between functions, leading to inconsistencies in promotion and rewards. In practice, a middle state is possible and often employed by my clients, whereby certain competencies and capabilities are identified to cut across the organization, balanced by core differences spelled out by functional leaders.

SEPARATE OR BLENDED CONTENT

I have purposely made distinctions between the content underlying job analysis, for example, in the labeling of my five key ingredients or in defining competencies as distinct from capabilities. When it comes to framework design, a great many clients I have worked with have

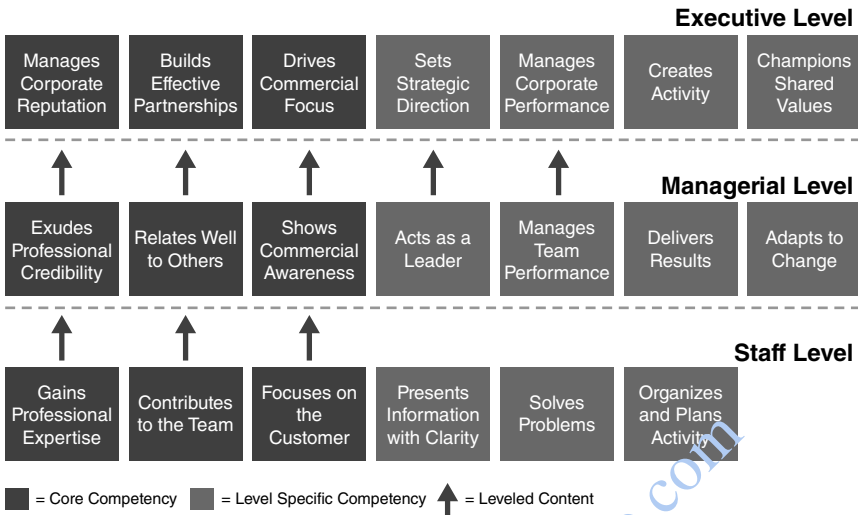


FIGURE 1.4 Example of a Blended Competency Framework

chosen to blend content in their frameworks, mixing behaviors, skills, and values under a common heading, much to my chagrin. I personally favor keeping competencies separate from capabilities, as they answer different questions. Competencies drive at how individuals go about their jobs, while capabilities highlight the skills, knowledge, and experience that employees should possess. As will be discussed in later chapters, keeping competencies separate from capabilities allows for better assessment and development techniques.

Values are a different story. I find it difficult to understand why an organization would decide to create a separate framework to talk about corporate values. Surely, what an organization values can be expressed in the behaviors expected from its employees. In fact, using value-laden language can bolster the language used in competency definitions, establishing why it is important that employees adopt a similar behavioral code. The example shown (Figure 1.4) is an illustration of how common values can be embedded into a competency framework. The first three competencies in each level represent the cultural pillars the company is founded on.

When building the framework, I made conscious choices about each of the four tradeoffs, which I hoped would best meet the needs of my client. The company wished to create custom content as a means

of gaining managerial buy-in and identifying the distinct industry in which it operated. The framework supports three levels of employees (although more actually existed) with both level-specific content and slight changes in competency wording. Functional distinctions were not made, as employees across divisions held similar backgrounds and job titles. Last, three organization-wide values were identified to drive home what everyone in the company held in common.

Although the framework successfully fulfilled my client's requirements, it, too, suffers from the limitations inherent to any framework. By aggregating content into broad competency buckets, detail about an individual job is lost. For a given role in the organization, the wording of the competency can vary in how much it applies to the actual work undertaken by an employee. Moreover, the competencies themselves may vary in how important they are for the employee to perform effectively. These issues are not too different from the fatal flaws talked about for job descriptions (that is, they can be unfocused and vague). The third flaw applies, too, as frameworks are not immune from aging and can become outdated with changes in market conditions, processes, and technology.

As long as the framework is used to guide decisions at the macro level, informing how employees should be interacting across the organization or which skills should be trained universally, they provide a good basis for people decisions. Yet, too often, a framework is relied upon without considering role-specific requirements to make people decisions, informing both reward or selection decisions. More shocking, organizations tend to place an inordinate amount of weight on competencies, especially for post-hire decisions. If you disagree, I would challenge you to think about how much you know about the skills, experience, and motivations of your top-performing staff and co-workers. If you are like most managers I know, you can easily identify behaviors that lead to success, but will struggle to identify commonalities in their backgrounds, training, and work preferences.

The Good and Bad of Frameworks

In this last section, we will look at how talent management frameworks are used to guide people decisions, specifically, how frameworks are applied to decisions about compensation and to define career paths,

topics that are not talked about elsewhere in this book. As you will read later, competency and capability frameworks play a role in virtually all talent management activities.

Beyond deciding what a job is supposed to accomplish, employee compensation is the other fundamental component of any employment relationship. To find an equitable pay level, employers must establish how the job compares to other roles in the organization, as well as how it stacks up against similar jobs available in the broader labor market. Multiple pieces of data come together to establish a compensation band that can be negotiated within, depending on the specific skills and experience of a given job candidate. The bands are generally broad enough to allow for both new recruits and tenured staff to exist in the same range, with some overlap with higher and lower bands. The key is to provide practitioners flexibility in their pay negotiations.

Evaluation is the process of comparing jobs based on the organization's determinants of worth. Worth can be based on a number of different yardsticks, for example, revenue brought into the organization, innovation of products or services, smart investments, or customer service. In order for a specific yardstick to be considered valid and fair, it has to fulfill the following criteria:

- ◆ Be present in all jobs being evaluated (that is, consistently applied to a job family).
- ◆ Vary in degree between jobs (for example, senior sales jobs have higher revenue targets).
- ◆ Are unambiguous, distinct, and observable in the work employees accomplish.
- ◆ Convey meaning to both the employee and organization (that is, not arbitrary).

When evaluating jobs, practitioners vary their approach, depending on how far they want to go down the rabbit hole. If the job is not core to the business, they might favor grouping jobs across their organization into a basic hierarchy of pay levels, based on level of responsibility (for example, whether they manage teams or not). More sophisticated practitioners will classify jobs into meaningful groups (function, region, etc.) and evaluate each job within that

group, with an eye toward maintaining parity between groups. The most in-depth approach is to conduct a factor-by-factor comparison of all jobs, coming up with a mechanism to compensate jobs by their unique combination of factors. With any of these approaches, practitioners utilize labor market data (salary surveys, job postings, purchasing power between locations, etc.) as a reference point, to ensure that they are making informed choices about how they are compensating their employees and whether they want to be seen as good employers.

The best-known model for evaluation is offered by Hay, where universal factors place jobs into 15 percent pay intervals that are then tailored to each organization. The Hay model takes account of four primary factors. First, how much know-how is expected of the job incumbent in terms of procedures and techniques, breadth of management skills, and interpersonal skills. Second, how much the employee engages in active problem solving when reacting to the business environment, as well as the challenges he or she faces. Third, how much accountability the employee holds, his or her freedom to act, and likely impact on business results. The fourth factor involves extreme working conditions and only applies to a fraction of jobs, like those poor folks who clean out our sewers. When you look at the Hay system, it is plain to see the competencies and capabilities that underlie it. The application of these criteria to specific organizations and jobs allows for equitable compensation decisions.

As a second application for talent management frameworks, career paths draw out the relationships between jobs in an organization for employees to understand and plan their career trajectories. In an excellent book written by one of my colleagues, Gary Carter details the content underlying a career path as including qualifications (education, training, and certificates), critical developmental experiences, behavioral and technical competencies, and career success factors, which are all very similar to the five key ingredients that I personally focus on when conducting a job analysis.

Just like any other job analysis, pulling together a career path involves interviews with job incumbents and managers, observations of work performed, and surveys. Yet, unlike other analyses, information about the strength of a relationship between two jobs is sometimes included (expressed as a percentage of hires coming from the

previous role), as well as information about average salary, typical seniority in role, and industry trends and outlook.

By laying out how the characteristics of jobs change, it becomes obvious to employees what they need to demonstrate to move up within the organization or take a lateral job assignment. I've seen some excellent career portals that show these relationships visually, providing employees a query function to see what is different between their own jobs and others in the company. It is only a matter of time before these systems become even more sophisticated, allowing employees to audit their own personal backgrounds (rather than relying on job title) to see how they might fit other parts of the business.

The benefits are not limited to employees. If the organization wants to redeploy staff, identify skills gaps, or tap a different talent pool, career path information can be invaluable. For example, I was recently given an opportunity to define the career paths for a large national retail bank. What shocked me most about this project was the central importance of the financial planner role. If an employee worked in this position, gaining the associated skills and experience, he or she could literally move across the bank, taking jobs in head office, retail banking, or business and private banking. Until the career path was defined, my client had not realized the crucial importance of the role and the answers it provided for workforce planning. Investing in this role was key to providing a steady stream of qualified bankers.

From these two examples, you are probably wondering what's wrong with the use of talent management frameworks? In premise, nothing. Using frameworks provides the criteria by which really important talent management decisions are made and, without them, the chance of abuse goes up immensely. Where I find fault with current practice is in the content of the frameworks, as well as organizational leaders unknowingly using inappropriate frameworks to guide their decisions.

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that job descriptions and frameworks are often unfocused, vague, and outdated. I have personally seen a number of global and powerful companies adopt a list of ten or so behavioral competencies, undifferentiated by function or level and not updated to account for organizational changes, for use in

major decisions involving reward and promotion. Not only can this be dangerous ground if anyone challenged the decisions, but from a practical perspective, I find it hard to believe that these behaviors are driving performance equally across the organization. Why would I assume that the same behaviors apply to both customer-facing and admin roles, or alternatively front-line staff and corporate executives?

I'm not the first to raise such concerns, and others take a hard line with the general failures of job analysis. For example, Dr. Singh from York University in Toronto argues that traditional job analysis is inherently flawed, due to its assumptions that jobs are static, incumbents share the same way to approach a job, and that key activities lie with the individual (rather than shared by a team).

Lazy job analysis leads to irrelevant job descriptions and frameworks that defeat the purpose of having solid criteria to make important talent management decisions against. Unfortunately, I find comprehensive frameworks the exception rather than the rule. Even when strong methods are used in evaluating jobs for compensation and reward, seldom do these models make their way to recruiters and development teams. It is almost like the organization has amnesia about how compensation bands were created. Instead, the larger organization is stuck using frameworks with a bias toward behaviors, ignoring functional and level differences, and is often maladjusted to current organizational pressures.

Practitioners have the opportunity to set the story straight by refocusing leaders on the jobs, activities, and worker characteristics that matter most to current and future performance. By making the criteria for people decisions more focused, specific, and current, leaders will be able to spot talent more effectively, deploy them in the right places, and make investments to grow organizational capability even further. This is not a simple task, and it requires a great deal of influence and confidence on the part of the practitioner. The easier option will always be to adopt frameworks that are quick and cheap to implement.

Like the other topics discussed in this book, you have to make the call about whether you are satisfied with the criteria used in your organization and, if not, whether the battle is worth fighting. There are many more practices to explore in the following chapters, each with the potential to improve the employment relationship.

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