

THE GENERALISABILITY OF COMPETENCY FRAMEWORKS

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Introduction

The Centre for Executive Development at the Ulster Business School has been commissioned by the Management Development Division of the Training and Employment Agency to develop an assessment centre targeted at senior management of small to medium-sized companies (SMEs) within Northern Ireland. The assessment centre is to be based upon the development of a generalisable framework of managerial competencies that is comparatively simple to understand and that has perceived relevance and applicability to that senior management population. The research required to develop such a framework will address a number of the more complex issues within the area of managerial competency, none more so than whether any two managerial jobs or situations are 'the same' or 'different'. It is this issue which forms the basis of the present discussion of generalisable versus specific competency frameworks.

Background to the Competency Debate

Within the sphere of management development, 'competency' has undoubtedly been the buzz-word of the 1980s. The buzz looks set to continue into the 1990s with training agencies, academics and more recently, organisations themselves, seeking to apply the concept. The competency debate came to the fore as far back as the

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late 1970s when James L. Haynes, President of the American Management Association (AMA) asked, 'What are the characteristics that distinguish superior performance by working managers?' McBer Associates carried out the study and findings were published by Richard Boyatzis (1982), triggering the popularity of the term 'competency'.

In recent years, the competency debate has received considerable attention from within organisations/institutions in the UK. The adoption of this approach to business education for, and the development of, managers has been stimulated, in particular, by the Handy (1987) and Constable-McCormick (1987) reports. Such ventures as the Management Charter (MCI), with its strong emphasis on a competency approach to management development, have brought the debate into the open arena.

Generalisable v Specific Frameworks

The current debate surrounding managerial competence and management competencies is both complex and confusing. A number of frameworks for identifying management competencies already exists, for example, the Schroder and McBer models which have been used by National Westminster (Cockerill, 1989) and Manchester Airport (Jackson, 1989) respectively. In the context of Northern Ireland, therefore, the question arises: "Why not adopt one of these 'off-the-shelf' frameworks?" However, as highlighted in the introduction, the target group for this research and development project is 'senior management' of 'SMEs' in 'NI'. The existing competency frameworks are primarily focused on more junior management levels (as with the MCI); are based on research carried out within large companies; and are American in origin. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume *a priori* that these frameworks will bear little relevance to the specific NI context. This may, however, be an overstatement of the extent of the problem. For example, a major research project being carried out at Henley Management College, has analysed the qualities, characteristics and abilities companies report that they seek in their managers, and grouped them together into three or four main areas: intellectual, interpersonal, adaptability and results-orientation. Dulewicz (1989), who is one of the major researchers at Henley, asks "is a national system of common, assessable management competencies either desirable or practical?" He argues that there are significant major areas of commonality, saying, "When pressed, I have often given a 'guesstimate' that 70 per cent are general requirements

across different organisations and 30 per cent are organisation specific". As mentioned above, research by Schroder in the US, which has been utilised by National Westminster Bank (Cockerill, 1989), also validates a general model of competencies; and which claims to be particularly relevant to managerial performance in a rapidly changing environment. Whilst evidence suggests that common competencies exist within different organisations, some argue that using a generalisable framework is settling for second best. This view is presented in a recent study by the AMRG (1989) which found that while competency-based training was being used by a large number of organisations there was a great diversity in the competencies that were being developed and in the terminology being used to describe them.

Where does this argument position the MCI, which aims to develop the whole area of managerial competency and indeed to establish standards for assessing them nationally? The MCI has focused on more junior levels of management using standards to decide whether someone is a qualified manager. The standards used are highly detailed and complex: there is a danger, however, that the person achieving them will not require or have the opportunity to demonstrate a significant number of them in a particular managerial job and that (s)he will need additional areas of competence not covered by the MCI list. A survey, which was recently carried out by BDO Consulting, asked companies to give their response to the MCI. Paul Taffinder (1991) of BDO said he believed "employers thought the initiative was too general and did not take account of organisations' culture and needs."

At this point in the debate over generalisable versus specific competency frameworks, it is helpful to distinguish between 'individual', 'job specific' and 'organisational' competencies. Whilst the MCI focuses on the first two areas, the third component is also important in that it relates to the behaviours which are effective within the structure and culture of a particular organisation. Organisational competencies, therefore, appear to provide an answer to the critics who reject the MCI and similar approaches as trying to build an 'identikit' manager. Iain Mangham (1986) of Bath University is particularly associated with this criticism, saying that, "among other things, the competency lists fail to take account of the person's fit within the culture of the organisation".

In a recent study, also involving the design and administration of assessment centres, Julie Hay (1990) identified a list of nine core competencies which she

argues stand up well within rapidly changing environments and in comparison with other studies. She indicates that deviances from the list “are accounted largely through terminology and organisation-cultural expectations.”

Hirsh & Bevan (1988) put this argument slightly differently, saying that even though there appears to be a single language to describe management competencies, this language only exists in terms of common words and not in terms of shared meaning. This view is prevalent within certain organisations; BP (Greatex & Phillips, 1989) and Royal Insurance (Wackley, 1989), for example, make it very clear that their competencies are personal to them, if only in the language they use to describe corresponding attributes and behaviours. This suggests, therefore, that whilst common competencies do exist across a range of companies, organisation-specific competencies also prevail to the extent that they reflect the very culture of a company and its values.

Considering the complexities of the above debate, our remit to provide a generalisable framework of managerial competencies that is simple to understand and applicable to senior managers of SMEs in N. Ireland is not an easy task. If we lived in an ideal world our preferred framework of managerial competencies would be:

- generalisable rather than situation-specific
- simple to understand (and use) rather than complex
- accurate rather than an at best approximation to the truth

Warren Thorngate (1976), in a different context, has asserted that in the real world of theory and practice, for any framework – only two of those desirable qualities are attainable at any one time. Thus, “Thorngate’s Impostulate” suggests three alternatives:

- simple, accurate but specific;
- simple, generalisable but approximate;
- accurate, generalisable but complex.

In our work there is a need to keep any emerging frame simple and comprehensible so that it can be readily understood and used by a wide range of managers. Accepting Thorngate’s assertion then means that we again are faced with the issue of generalisable versus specific. Given the requirement of the T&EA to service the development needs of the broad range of SMEs in Northern Ireland, it is essential that the framework of managerial competencies which is developed is generalisable across these companies. How then are we to deal with the implications that a

framework when viewed from the perspective of the particular manager in the particular organisation will be seen as at best an approximation to the truth. The answer would seem to lie in developing a process of translation – a process which will enable the individual to translate the generalisable into the specific.

Translation Process

Our research, therefore, seeks to achieve a means of identifying a translation process which will enable users of the generalisable framework to apply it in their own organisation. In an attempt to explain such a process, the main phases of the research can be briefly outlined. The first phase will involve the identification of key competencies which have relevance and applicability for the senior management population of NI. Managers will be encouraged to examine and give their views on their criteria for distinguishing effective managerial performance. The views of a variety of companies will be considered and the outcome of the comparison will be a generalisable framework of managerial competencies. During the second phase an assessment centre will be designed which includes simulation of critical senior management activities; managers will receive feedback on their performance against the generalisable frame. Whilst the framework is NI-specific, it is not, however, organisation-specific. If maximum benefit is to be achieved, managers need to interpret their performance and future development plans from the perspective of their particular organisation. This is where the translation process takes place. We believe that this process is vital to an organisation's acceptance of a framework and its applicability. Charles Woodruffe (1991) supports this saying, "It is most important that organisations gain a list over which they feel a sense of ownership". We anticipate that the translation process will include some, all or a combination of the following:

- Using corporate language: Describing listed competencies in the jargon/language of the organisation.
- Comparative listing: Adding certain competencies to the given framework and /or deleting others.
- Prioritising: Ranking the revised list in order of organisational importance and not merely adhering to suggested core competencies.
- Situationalising: Exemplifying the competencies with situation-/organisation- specific examples.
- Recognising corporate culture: Imbuing the competencies with the culture, values of the organisation.

The exact format of the translation process will only be determined by the findings of the research. At one end of the scale, it has been suggested that the very culture and value system of an organisation permeates their competencies. This is acknowledged by Jacobs who argues that certain competencies “may require greater understanding of the particular values and context in which they are being defined and used”. To call this whole process ‘translation’ may be more appropriate than we currently realise; in that, at the other end of our process scale, quite simply, what may be required is a competency language which is recognisable, understandable and applicable to the population of senior management in NI.

Hay (1990) suggests that “a detailed list of core characteristics should be written in the jargon of the organisation, so that it becomes part of the folklore and as such is understood and can be applied consistently.”

Conclusion

As the literature around the competency debate grows, so too, it appears, does the confusion. So much has been written about competence and competencies that it is often difficult to determine whether the authors are using the same terminology to describe different things or different terminology to describe the same things. This confusion is an inevitable outcome of the complexity of the debate which looks set to increase as writers contribute to it.

For the purposes of this research and development project, complexity in terms of the competency debate is acceptable; in terms of a competency framework, however, complexity would render it unworkable. It has been suggested that an emerging frame should be generalisable across SMEs in Northern Ireland and be accurate and simple to use. If Thorngate’s Impostulate is accepted, such a combination is impossible.

Nevertheless, this project challenges existing research in that it addresses the key issue of developing competencies within the context of Northern Ireland and an SME environment. The outcome will be a framework that is generalisable to SMEs in Northern Ireland.

Given the wide range of companies, however, it is unlikely that such a framework would capture their uniqueness. It is anticipated that the senior management population of Northern Ireland will use the generalisable framework and by means of a translation process, organisation-specific frames will be developed.

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