Moving from Training to Competence Systems

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1. INTRODUCTION

What is wrong with training systems?

Companies have invested a great deal of time and effort into training over the years, and it is not the intention here to say that this has all been wasted. However, unless training is closely linked to a competence system it is likely that the training provided may not be what is required by the business and/or the cost of that training may be greater than the benefit achieved.

Is this just about money?

No, the drivers for changing to a competence system are less to do with costs and more to do with benefits to the business, but it is interesting to look at the sums of money involved. Whilst there are no official figures on how much companies spend on training, a survey carried out by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) suggested that UK employers spent £38 billion on training in 2007, which at the time was showing an upward trend.

But it is a good thing that companies are spending money on training?

If a company spent nothing on training in a year its employees would be right to worry about the impacts on their career progression and even the company's viability. But if you think back to the training you have received over the years the chances are you will remember some that was poor, did not help you at work and was a waste of your time. This is the reality for a lot of training, and is a massive waste of resources. It is not always because the person providing the training is a poor trainer (although obviously that is the case sometimes) but often caused by a lack of focus on the needs of the trainee or choosing the wrong method of training. It is likely that taking a more systematic approach, spending more time on examining training needs and planning its delivery could significantly improve effectiveness whilst also reducing costs. A classic 'win win' scenario that should satisfy everyone.

Key point: a lot of training is not very effective because it does not address the specific needs of the trainee

So what is training?

Before we move on it is useful to consider what training actually is. Many people feel they have only received some training if they have been on a course, although the reality is that a lot of training is done 'on the job.' This is part of the problem because training is often defined by the inputs (cost, time and effort) rather than its outputs. What we are interested in is how people learn the knowledge and skills they need to work safely, effectively and efficiently.

Key point: there are lots of ways people learn that don't involve training courses

Why talk about competence?

The advantage of talking about competence instead of training is that its value to the business is clearer, which makes it is easier to justify the costs in achieving it. Also,

defining competence requirements does not have to include a specification of how it is to be achieved, which gives the flexibility to use the most effective and efficient methods available.

Tip: it is much better if you think clearly about what competencies your business needs rather than what training is available

What is competence?

Whilst competence is a widely used term, it is not always well understood.   A useful definition, taken from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), is that competence is 'the ability to undertake responsibilities and perform activities to a recognised standard on a regular basis. It is a combination of skills, experience and knowledge.' This shows that competence is something that is held within your company without specifying how it is achieved. This is your opportunity to develop more streamline and efficient training and learning processes, but does also require you to have some way of identifying where you may be lacking in competence.

Key point: training and competence are not the same thing.

Who needs to be competent?

The answer here is that everyone needs to be competent, from the boardroom to the shop floor. But it is important to note that the competencies needed vary considerably depending on role, which is why the 'one size fits all' approach to training that is often applied is not very effective. Also, it is useful to recognise that competencies can be held by a team, and hence not everyone in the same role necessarily needs to have exactly the same competence, as long as those competencies are available within the team when required. Some competencies can be bought in when required (e.g. specialist contractors for one-off jobs or consultants to provide specialist advice when required) whilst others may be unique to your company and so you need to develop them yourselves.

When does someone become competent?

The reality is that there is not a single point when someone is fully competent. Instead it is something that develops over time. When considering if someone is competent the question is whether they have gained enough knowledge and skill to progress to the next stage of their development.

Key points:

- A focus on competence will help you improve the effectiveness of your training
- Everyone in your company needs to be competent, but the competencies they need and the level of competence required will vary
- Becoming competent is a progression, there is not simple cut off when someone is considered 'fully competent'

2. IDENTIFYING COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS

What competencies do people need?

At the most basic level everyone working in your company needs to know enough about the hazards and risks that they may encounter in order to keep themselves and other safe. On top of that people need knowledge and skills to perform the tasks and roles that make up their job. Some competencies will be widely applicable across your company (i.e. the same task or role is performed by many people across the business) and some will be very specific. Some competencies will be very easy to define and others will be far less tangible. In simple terms competence relates to the tasks people perform and the responsibilities they hold.

Identifying the tasks that people perform

One of the key considerations when identifying competency requirements is to consider the tasks people perform. In doing this it is important to recognise that there are different types of task, and the way people become competent and maintain they competence varies as a result. In simple terms tasks can be:

- Performed frequently, on a day to day basis;
- Performed less frequently but to a routine (e.g. weekly or monthly);
- Non-routine but planed (e.g. annual maintenance);
- Infrequent and unplanned (e.g. responding to a breakdown or emergency).

Tasks often involve physical activities performed in defined sequences. This means they can be captured in procedures that can be used to train people and to assess them against a standard.

What other competencies do people need?

On top of the tasks they perform, people will often require other competencies that are related to their wider responsibilities. Due to their nature these competencies cannot be described in procedures and are instead captured in more general job or role descriptions. For example, anyone in a managerial or supervisory position must be able to:

- Make the workplace safe and eliminate or control risks to health;
- Ensure plant and machinery are safe and that safe systems of work are set and followed;
- Ensure articles and substances are moved, stored and used safely;
- Give workers the information, instruction, training and supervision necessary for their health and safety;
- Consult workers on health and safety matters.

Some of these can be addressed in part by performing certain tasks. However, in many cases they will require additional skills. Some of them may require particular personalities that cannot always be learnt, whilst others will not be achieved until someone has had experience in the workplace.

Key point: not every competence someone requires is directly related to a task

Defining a level of competence

Having identified what competencies people need, you then need to consider what level of competence they need for each. . The following may help you decide what levels of competence are required:

- Awareness – has some knowledge but not enough to act on;
- Basic – has the minimum needed to work under direct supervision;
- Intermediate – able to work unsupervised under routine 'normal' conditions.
- Advanced – able to work unsupervised under all conditions.
- Expert – able to improvise and adapt working practices in response to events and unusual conditions.

From this list you can see that in any role there may only ever be a need for an 'awareness' level of competence in some areas, even though the same person will need to be an expert in others. Also, it is clear that there are not distinct cut-offs between the different levels and it may be appropriate to define two levels. One as the minimum required to do the job and the other a desirable level that people should be aiming for.

Key point: your company does not need everyone to be an expert in everything

3. FUFILLING COMPETENCY REQUIREMENTS

How does someone become competent without training?

Although we have suggested that you need to focus on competence, we are not saying training is not required. Instead, you may need to think more carefully about the type of training you provide to make sure you use the most effective methods. By effective we mean the most reliable way of assisting people in the learning process so that they become competent.

So we can carry on with our training courses?

Many traditional training courses essentially involve a trainer lecturing to a group of people. The advantages of these are that they are easy to organise and a large number of people can receive the training at the same time. However, people often forget what was covered in the course and find it difficult to apply what they learn when they return to work. Livening them up with practical demonstrations, discussions, videos and case studies can make them more entertaining for the participants, but may not increase the amount learnt enough to justify the additional time and effort required in preparation. The traditional lecture based course is unlikely to disappear completely, but should really only be used to raise awareness or give a general introduction to a subject.

Tip: when using a course to provide training you should be very clear about what you expect people to learn. Making it more fun or interesting does not automatically mean people will learn what they need for their job.

What about computer based training?

Using computers to provide training has been tried for many years, and there is no doubt that advances in technology have made it a more viable option than ever before. If you have access to relevant training modules the set-up costs may be quite modest. However, you will often need to tailor what is available to your needs and develop some content from scratch, which can be expensive and time consuming. Computer based training is still a fairly specialised option that can supplement, rather than replace other forms of training.

So what is being suggested?

A problem with the types of training mentioned so far is that they usually take the trainee away from the workplace. Not only does this add to the indirect costs of training, because the person cannot be productive, it can make it difficult for people to relate what they have learnt when they get back to work. The reality is that most learning, even where people are sent on regular training courses, occurs 'on the job.' For routine competencies this learning takes place whilst the job is being done. For less frequent tasks some form of simulation is required. For competencies that are not specifically task related, coaching can be used.

Key point: people learn much more 'on the job' than they ever will on a course

Can we use simulation? I thought it was only for airline pilots and astronauts.

Whilst it is true that simulators can be hugely sophisticated and expensive, there are many low tech ways of using simulation. The easiest way to do this is to 'talk though' and/or 'walk through' a task or scenario, with the aim being to create a situation where someone can learn a task or how to react to a situation.

And, isn't coaching only for sports people?

Again, whilst it is true that the term 'coach' is often used in the sporting arena, it can be applied to business, often for higher level business skills. Coaching involves setting someone goals and regularly meeting, observing and discussing their progress to ensure those goals are being reached. New goals are then set, which may include some training or requiring the individual to become involved in another part of the business. A coach may not actually have the knowledge or skills that the trainee requires, but is instead competent at coaching. After all Tiger Woods may be the best golfer in the world, but he still has a coach.

What counts as on the job training?

It is pretty rare that a trainee can go on a training course and be able to do their job fully when they return. Instead they need to spend time with an experienced person learning 'on the job'. Often the experienced person is not a professional trainer, but equally often it is this person that teaches the trainee by far the most relevant knowledge and skills. On the job training is an opportunity for a person to perform tasks under the close supervision of a person competent in that task. It can be very effective because it takes place at the worksite, so there are no issues with its practicality. Also, it allows a gradual transition for the trainee from being a complete novice through to full competency. This means it can be paced to the individual, but as they learn they become a useful asset to the business. Equally there can be problems, many of which occur because of a lack of structure or monitoring. There is the potential to pick up bad habits from experienced personnel and, whilst the very basic skills and knowledge may be picked up because they occur on a regular basis, the more in-depth aspects of the job that may occur less frequently may be overlooked. The reality is that lots of on the job training takes place in every company, but its role in making people competent is very often overlooked.

Tip: if you can make on the job training more systematic, you will be able to improve your overall training whilst reducing costs at the same time

Is on the job training only for routine, frequently performed tasks?

It is true that on the job training is particularly easy where tasks are performed very frequently, but that does not mean that is its only role. Addressing less frequently performed tasks does take a bit more organisation, but the benefits do make it worthwhile. For less frequently performed tasks that are planned, making sure the trainee is present and available to be involved under supervised conditions is one away that they get to learn more of the job. Also, whilst for the unplanned events it is

normal to call in an 'expert', involving a trainee at these times and getting the 'expert' to explain what they are doing is also effective. After all no one develops that expertise automatically. Where this cannot be organised some form of simulation can be used.

Tip: whilst on the job training can be very effective, you do need to make sure infrequent tasks and events are being covered

Key points:

- There are lots of different ways that people learn without going on training courses
- The methods used should be appropriate for the knowledge of skill needs of the individual
- What is most important is not what training people have received but what they have learnt and are able to apply at work

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4. COMPETENCE ASSESSMENT

Do we need to assess competence?

Unfortunately, there is only way of making sure that people have the competencies they need, and that is to assess them. This is something that a lot of companies shy away from because it can result in some difficult situations, especially where competency gaps are identified. However, with careful execution it can become something that everyone starts to value.

Tip: many people will be reluctant to have their competence assessed

What are we assessing?

It is easy for individuals to feel an assessment will decide whether they pass or fail a test. Not only can this create resentment, this approach misses the main objective, which is to ensure your company has the competencies it needs to achieve its business objectives. Therefore, instead of aiming to identify whether an individual passes or fails, competence assessment is a process of establishing what level of competence has been achieved and identifying what needs to be done to achieve further improvement. Rather than testing the individual it should be testing your systems and identifying where they can be improved.

Key point: competence assessment is a test of the systems you have to improve an individual's knowledge and skill, and not a test of the individual

How do we assess competence?

There are many different ways of assessing competence. It can involve simple written or verbal tests of knowledge, observing people using a skill whilst working, collecting evidence of work for examination (written or physical items), or setting up an assessment exercise to test how they act and respond to a situation. The method used should be appropriate for the knowledge and skills, and the level of competence your staff require.

Who can assess competence?

There are formal qualifications for people who are involved in assessing competence. For example the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) scheme includes qualifications for people acting as assessors and verifiers. However, this does not mean every assessment carried out in your company needs to be carried out by a qualified assessor. For simple tasks a peer assessment, carried out by someone competent in that task, is often enough to make a judgement. You may want a qualified assessor to oversee the system, ensuring the peer assessment process is working, and assessing more critical or complex competencies. For your most critical competencies you may want some form of external assessment to be carried out by someone qualified and well experienced in assessment.

Key point: not all competence assessment needs to be formal or carried out by a qualified assessor

We already run tests at the end of training courses. Is this enough?

Whilst assessing after training may appear to be the obvious, it does rather miss the point. In particular how do you know what training people need if you have not assessed their competence? Also, there is a danger that you will assess people against the training syllabus, which may not match exactly what you need, especially if you are sending people on standard or generic training courses. Finally, it also misses the fact that most training takes place 'on the job.'

So when do we need to carry out assessments?

Competence assessment should not be a one off exercise, but a continuous process. In considering the requirements it is important to realise that even people who have worked in the same job for a long time may not have all the competencies they need, either because the requirements of the job have changed or because they have forgotten something they learnt in the past. Whilst it is possible to develop frequency based schedules for carrying out assessments, arrangements should be flexible enough to respond to changes within the business, incidents and other sources of information about business performance.

Key points:

- Competence assessment can make a very valuable contribution to all elements of business performance including health and safety, but needs to be carried out in a sensitive manner
- Your aim is not to pass or fail people, but to identify how best to progress their development
- Competence assessment is continual process using formal and informal methods

5. CREATING A COMPETENCE SYSTEM

Why do we need a system?

The purpose of a system is to make sure that actions you take are effective and sustainable. The benefit of developing a competence system to replace a training system is that you will have a clearer idea of what you need to do to achieve your business objectives. Also, it may allow you to streamline your training and justify your costs.

What elements does the system need?

Implementing the competency system will require a number of activities to be performed. They include:

- Identifying competence requirements – a systematic way of identifying and documenting the competencies required by the company;
- Personnel selection – making sure people new to the company or being considered for promotion have the right aptitudes and personalities for the job;
- Assessing competence – selecting the correct method of assessment and carrying out the assessments;
- Identifying competency gasps – comparing the requirements with competencies in place;
- Arranging to fill competency gasps –selecting the correct method of training or development according to the nature of the gap;
- Refresher assessments – identifying where someone who has achieved all required assessments will need to be reevaluated to ensure they are maintaining their competence;
- Record keeping – being able to demonstrate what competencies are in place and the actions being taken to address any gaps.

Who should be involved in managing the competence system?

A senior manager or director should be accountable for competence in your business. This may be the same person who is accountable for health and safety, or may be someone else (possibly human resources). Someone will need day to day responsibility for administering the system, and managers and supervisors should be responsible for implementation. Also, the system should make it clear that everyone has a responsibility for managing their own competence, and be prepared to participate in competence programmes.

Key point: a competence system will not work if it does not have support from senior managers as well as the people to administer it in practice

What records should we keep?

It is fairly normal to keep records of what training people have received. This is easy when they have attended a formal course. By moving more towards competence it is clear that this does not give the full story. Do keep a record of what training has been provided, including the syllabus and training provider. But you should also have a system for recording the outcome of any competence assessment. Ideally this should be backed up by some objective evidence, which could include how the person was assessed, copies of any paperwork they may have been completed as part of performing a task and even photos of any items produced or worked on.

Tip: there may be evidence that you can collect to show that someone is competent that does not involve a competence assessment

How do we know the system is working?

Monitoring, audit and review are an important part of any system. In this case the key message is that training records on their own do little to demonstrate that competence is being managed, and it is the ability to demonstrate that necessary competencies are in place within the company that is important. As well as examining the assessment records for individuals it is important to look for evidence that the company has the overall competencies it needs and that the competence system is functioning. This can be from formal, planned audit. Also, a great deal can be learnt from incident reports and investigations, performance and quality reviews; and staff surveys.

Tip: there are many sources of information that can indicate whether you have good competence management

Key points:

- A competence system can assist in ensuring your company has and maintains the competencies it needs to conduct its business safely
- You will need people and procedures to implement the system
- Evidence will be required to confirm competencies are in place and the system is working
- Very few regulations tell you exactly what competencies are required, and it is up to you to identify requirements from your risk assessments
- Competence and training are not as reliable risk controls as hazard reduction and engineering solutions

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6. A WORD OF CAUTION

Whilst there is no reason for anyone to fear a competence system in the long term, the first time you start talking about competence is likely to cause considerable concern. After all, the opposite of competence is incompetence, and no one likes to be put in a situation where their weaknesses are likely to be exposed. This is especially the case if people feel they could lose their job if they cannot prove their competence.

Another perception to be aware of if you replace your training system with a competence system is that people may feel they are receiving less training because they are being sent of fewer courses.   Although this is far from the truth, some may feel this will hamper their future career prospects.

There is no simple solution to overcoming the negative opinions of your employees when you start talking about competence. As in all lines of business communication and trust are key. People need to understand your objectives and benefits to the business and themselves, but management needs to be open and honest with staff.