Competency-based Workforce Development

A Synthesis of Current Approaches

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute
Learning, Leading, Changing

NCWWI | National Child Welfare Workforce Institute | December 2015

Children's Bureau

Acknowledgements

This publication represents a collaborative effort by the partners of the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI)—University at Albany, University of Denver, University of Maryland, Michigan State University, Portland State University, and University of Southern Maine. Thanks also to Melissa Thompson, Sharon Kollar and Sara Munson, for their editing and design assistance.

The NCWWI is funded through a Cooperative Agreement with U.S. DHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Award No. 90CT7002. Special thanks to Melinda Baldwin, former Children's Bureau Project Officer, Rebecca Huffman, Children's Bureau Project Officer, and Robert Lindecamp, Child Welfare Program Specialist (CB/ICF), for their support.

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Recommended citation:

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. (2015). *Competency-based workforce development: A synthesis of current approaches.* Albany, NY: Author.

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Introduction

The child welfare field constantly strives to improve practices that will result in better outcomes for children and families. Finding, selecting, preparing, and retaining the right people for the workforce historically has been a challenge and often an impediment to consistent and positive outcomes. The use of competency models to guide recruitment, selection, preparation, and retention offers one strategy in a comprehensive approach to enhance the child welfare workforce.

This paper defines and explains a competency-based approach, the rationale for using competency models, the history of competency models, a comparison of various approaches, the connection to the National Child Welfare Workforce (NCWWI) Workforce Development Framework, the intersection of social work education, and strategies for integrating competency models into agency practice. The paper is designed for child welfare agency staff and their human resource management departments to provide an overview of competencies and the role that they can play in a comprehensive workforce development system.

Background

Defining the Terms

A

performance evaluation, resulting in a fuller understanding of expectations and measurement of outcomes.

Connectivity: Competencies help to link behavior to outcomes either through deductive reasoning (that is starting with the desired outcomes) or inductive reasoning (starting with the behavior and making a logical link to outcomes) (Campion et al., 2011). For example, a deductive approach could start with the desired outcome of achieving permanency and identify the required competencies such as knowledge about child welfare laws and the skills necessary to achieve that outcome such as engaging families and managing conflict. On the other hand, an inductive approach would start with the job tasks (the knowledge and skills to engage families) and then link to outcomes (achieving permanency). Competency-based approaches may also capture the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in the present and in the future, both individually and collectively as an organization (Shippmann et al., 2000; Campion et al., 2011). For example, as agencies increasingly become tech savvy, "flexibility" may become even more important for individuals within the organization as a competency that is necessary to adapt to rapidly changing technical environments. Competencies can signal an agency's future orientation, articulating necessary skills so that agencies can build those skills in an intentional way.

Distinguishing Job vs. Training Competencies

The term "competency" has been used broadly to apply to both job functions and training goals. We make the distinction between *job competencies* - behavioral statements specifying the knowledge and skills that are necessary for a given position - and *training competencies* - specific behavioral statements of awareness, knowledge, or skill that will be achieved by the conclusion of a training event (learning objectives reflect specific dimensions of a training competency and help guide training by delineating discrete topics within the training competency). Achievement of all the learning objectives will result in mastery of the specified competency.

With this distinction, the relationship between job and training competencies becomes clear; job competencies are the larger pool of knowledge and skills that are necessary to perform a task or function while training competencies are focused on the content provided at a training event.

The next example helps to distinguish between the two:

EXAMPLE

Job Competency: Consistently gather qualitative and quantitative data from a variety of sources, form coherent meaning from the data, and use the resulting information to make recommendations and to plan interventions that meet standards for child welfare social work practice (California Caseworker Competency)

Training Competency: Training participants know how to interpret data from a county data report to inform decision making and case planning.

History of Competency Based Approaches

Major approaches to job competency development are: job or task analysis, competency modeling, or a holistic approach that combines both.

Job Analysis

Job analysis has the longest history. In the 19th century, Frederick Taylor provided the methodological structure for scientific management in the workplace by using time-motion studies to break down jobs into their component parts and analyze the way that tasks were performed (Taylor, 1911). He coined the phrase "task analysis," promoted the notion of clear job descriptions, and quantified performance standards and the evaluation and compensation of workers based on job-related competencies related to measurable program outcomes.

The emphasis on efficiency and clarity of performance expectations achieved further importance in the 1950s and 1960s as a way to establish job-related criteria that would not provide bias against women, racial minorities and persons of lower socioeconomic status (Shippmann et al., 2000). The publication by the federal government of the *Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures* provided more support for valid approaches to identifying the important work behaviors and desired outcomes of the job (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 1978). Various methodologies (e.g. direct observation, expert panels, interviews of workers and supervisors, surveys, questionnaires) can be applied to assemble information about tasks and to infer the knowledge and skills needed to perform the tasks. This information can be used to produce job descriptions, as well as other workforce development applications.

In social services, the National Task Bank, developed by Sydney Fine, one of the pioneers of Functional Job Analysis (FJA), provided a comprehensive listing of over 600 tasks and their associated competency requirements (Fine & Bernotavicz, 1973). Competency-based approaches were adopted more broadly in the child welfare field in the late 1980's. Beginning in Ohio, Hughes and Rycus (1989) produced comprehensive listings of task-related competencies. Using a task-analysis approach, they defined a competency as "a grouping of the knowledge and skills necessary for the performance of a job task. Competent workers have the knowledge and skills they need to perform their jobs" (Hughes & Rycus, 1989).

This work provides foundational and specialized competencies for caseworkers and supervisors and has been adapted by multiple states most especially for competency-based training systems. The National CPS Competency-based Training Project was another early effort to identify the work competencies necessary for effective practice and to develop prototype training curricula and assessment instruments as a basis for a certification system applicable across the states (Pecora, 1990).

Competency Modeling

Competency modeling began during World War II to screen applicants to the United States Office of Strategic Services (OSS) using an approach to identify the job-related competencies needed to be successful as intelligence agents. This movement continued with the work of Douglas Bray, beginning in the 1950s, to identify competencies of successful managers for AT&T and led to the development of assessment centers (Thornton & Byham, 1982). A seminal article, "Testing for Competence rather than for intelligence" (McClelland, 1973), drew attention to the fact that education and performance on standardized tests were not good predictors of job performance.

Instead, McClelland proposed a radically different approach to job analysis based on two key principles:

1. Identifying star performers in a particular job and analyzing the competencies that made them outstanding.
2. Identifying overt thoughts and behaviors that are causally related to the successful outcomes. The best predictor of what a person can and will do is what he or she spontaneously thinks and does in an unstructured situation – or has done - in similar past situations (Spencer, McClelland, & Spencer, 1994).

Where traditional job analysis looks at elements of the job, competency assessments instead study the people who do the job well, and define the job in terms of the characteristics and behaviors of these people. This work led to understanding the role of underlying competencies in effective job performance and the following definitions in a progression from observable to underlying competencies.

DEFINITIONS AND TYPES OF COMPETENCIES

Cognitive and Behavioral Skills: the ability to perform a certain physical or mental task
Knowledge: information a person has in a specific content area
Self-concept: a person's attitudes, values or self-image
Traits: physical characteristics and consistent responses to situations or information
Motives: the things a person consistently thinks about or wants that cause action.

(Spencer, McClellan, & Spencer, 1994)

Comparison: Job Analysis verses Competency Modeling

Both of these approaches – job analysis and competency modeling - have merit. There are three key differences: the unit of analysis, the level of analysis and the focus. Job or task analysis, as the name implies, looks at the duties and tasks, the "what" of the job to determine the competencies needed to perform them (the "how").

Competency modeling looks at the person performing the job, probing beneath the surface to identify underlying values, personal attributes and other characteristics of the worker to provide information on the "how" and the "why". Job analysis and competency modeling produce different levels of data. Job analysis provides more detailed information about the observable competencies (the cognitive and behavioral skills and knowledge); whereas competency modeling provides information on the underlying competencies (the self-concept, traits and motives). Each approach has a different focus: from what is (the present competencies and tasks) in job analysis to what drives the person doing the job in competency modeling.

While Frederick Taylor selected an outstanding worker, a "first-class man," as the subject of his original study to observe, it is clear from his interview data that his focus was on what the worker did (his tasks and how he did them), rather than what drove him to work so hard (his underlying competencies) (Taylor, 1911). By focusing on the behaviors that are associated with or predictive of superior job performance, competency modeling often distinguishes top performers from average ones. The two approaches also differ

fundamentally in the flow of analysis. Job analysis uses inductive reasoning (starting with the behavior and making a logical link to outcomes) while competency modeling uses deductive reasoning (that is starting with the desired outcomes, the vision, mission and values of the organization) (Campion et al., 2011).

A comprehensive review by Shippmann and colleagues (2000) compared and contrasted the two approaches, competency modeling and job analysis, and made recommendations for leveraging strengths in one camp to shore-up weaknesses in the other. They concluded that job analysis approaches are in general more rigorous, although competency modeling makes a more direct link with the organization's goals and strategies. Competency modeling approaches provide descriptions that are core or common for a group or for the organization as a whole. Job analysis typically describes what is distinct or different across jobs and produces a more detailed level of data. Competency modeling approaches tend to emphasize long-term organizational fit versus the shorter-term job match resulting from job analysis data. Competency modeling tends to include more of an iterative review process resulting in a higher level of content validity, of people in the organization recognizing their own values and language in the competency model that results.

The authors concluded that because job analysis tends to have more rigor it is more suitable and defensible for human resource management applications such as selection, job descriptions and performance appraisal. However, proponents of competency modeling argue that it is more cost effective for the screening process to focus on the underlying competencies that applicants bring to the job and train them in the knowledge and skills needed to do specific jobs (Spencer, McClelland, & Spencer, 1994). The level of detail produced in job analysis is well suited for developing job descriptions and for training.

The tension between a desire for detail and sufficient information and the desire for simplicity and communication can be challenging. More detail is helpful for developing HR applications and for legal defensibility but parsimony is better for communication and helping everyone in an organization remember the core competencies. The total number of competencies should be limited (Campion et al., 2011) and presented in the format described earlier with more specific information on the behaviors associated with each competency listed under the competency heading and definition.

For example, with the goal of providing clarity and simplicity, the core competencies for integrated behavioral health and primary care include nine competency categories each with related behavioral indicators. The authors explain that "in order for a core competency set to be practical and useful, it has to have a manageable number of competency categories and individual competencies. Long and detailed competency sets overwhelm the reader, the educator, the interprofessional team leader and the direct care provider (Hoge, Moms, Laraia and Farely, 2014, p. 6.).

In addition to looking at the tasks and the person, it is also important to pay attention to the context or organizational setting. Research shows that the organizational setting and climate have an impact on the performance of staff. According Hoge, Tondora, and Marrelli, (2005), what truly matters in the work setting is the performance of employees rather than the possession of competencies in some abstract sense. Thus, managers striving to increase the effectiveness of their workforce must attend to both the competencies of their employees and the characteristics of the organization where their employees function.

A Holistic, Blended Approach

A *blended approach,* combining job analysis with competency modeling, presents a third and more holistic approach. According to Campion et al. (2011), the combination of methods can allow for a highly robust approach to competency modeling.

An example of this holistic view is based on the experience of the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Service, and as described below, focuses on the following three aspects influencing performance: the specific job tasks, characteristics of the individual performing the job, and the organizational context (Bernotavicz, 1994):

BLENDED MODEL

Job Tasks: Jobs are more than a sum of the specific job tasks. Jobs are not static. Particularly in today's volatile work environment, they are made up of a variety of responsibilities that change in response to emerging needs of the organization. People do not perform tasks in a neat sequence, one at a time. In the real world, people juggle several tasks at once, shifting gears and setting priorities. Thus, anticipating new priorities, collaborating with others, and managing the workload are all essential job functions, in addition to the specific tasks that form the core responsibilities for any job. The mechanistic view of jobs, as a listing of job duties that can be defined in a job description, is being replaced by a more organic view of jobs as a fluid set of responsibilities.

Further, new organizational patterns are promoting the concept of inclusion and participation, recognizing that to be effective an organization needs input from all levels. As we move towards these new organizational structures, the concept of people performing specific tasks in isolation becomes less relevant. The concept of "contextual performance" (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993), recognizes that effective organizations need people who commit significant time and effort to extra-job activities such as volunteering on committees, mentoring new employees, and supporting the organization's goals.

Individual Characteristics: People at work are whole persons. We can think of individuals at work as being like icebergs. Above the surface, we can observe the knowledge, skills, and abilities (often called the KSAs) needed to perform the job tasks. However, below the surface are a number of personal characteristics (their attitudes, values, traits, and motives) that influence how well they do their job as a whole. This entire range of KSAs and personal characteristics make up the competencies needed for effective performance.

Studies have shown that the competencies that distinguish outstanding performers tend to be the underlying personal characteristics such as flexibility or results orientation rather than KSAs such as interviewing skills or the ability to operate a particular piece of equipment. Because the underlying personal characteristics are more difficult to change, it makes sense to screen and hire for individuals with the necessary underlying personal characteristics and train for the KSAs once people are on the job (Spencer, McClelland and Spencer, 1994).

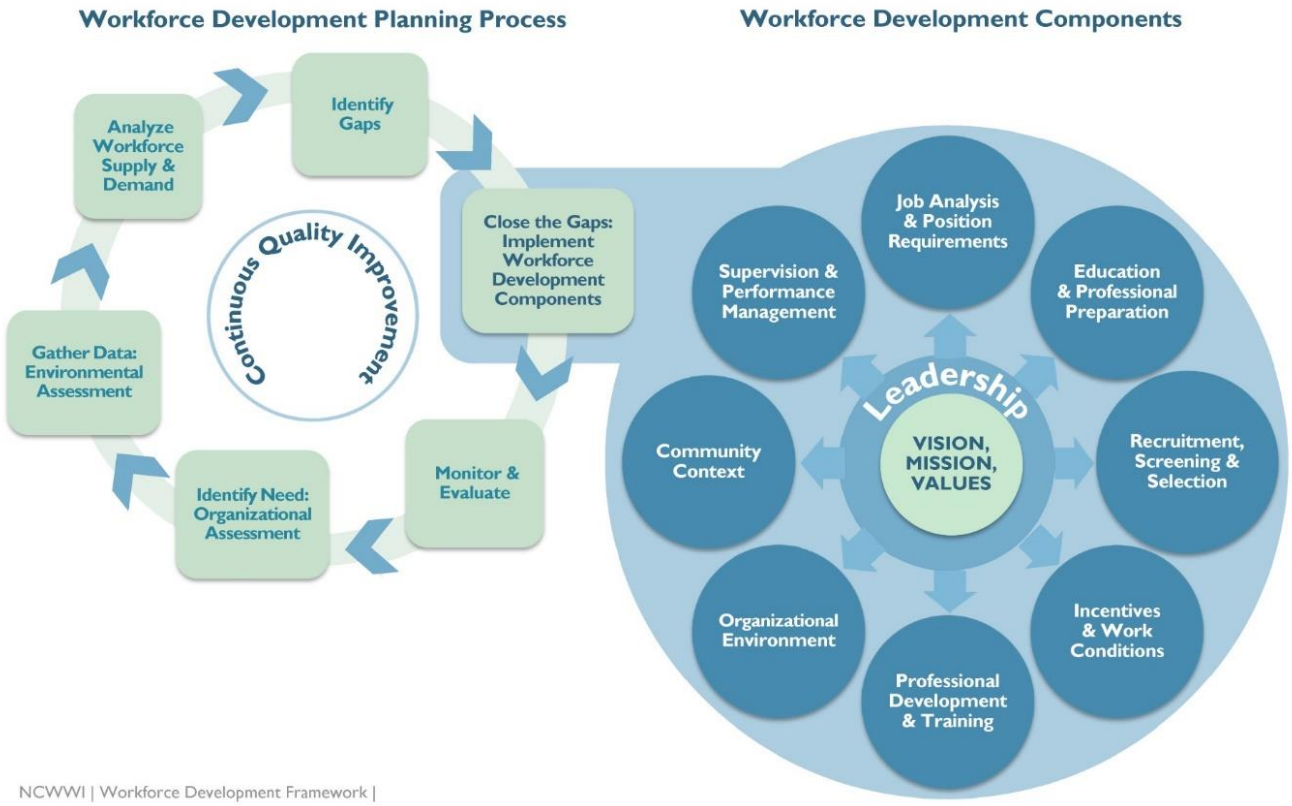
Organizational Context: Jobs are not performed in a vacuum but in specific organizational settings. The mission and goals of the organization, its customers or clients, policies, procedures, structure, and culture and climate all impact on how the job is defined and what constitutes effective job performance. Therefore, a holistic view of competencies also includes the contextual knowledge and skills needed to be effective in a specific organization.

Competencies within a Workforce Development Framework (WDF)

Much has been done in child welfare to reduce turnover and develop a competent and committed workforce, however it is clear that without an integrated approach, child welfare agencies often implement isolated interventions rather than crafting targeted and cohesive strategies in a comprehensive approach. To create synergy, all of these systems need to be aligned and consistent (Fixen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman & Wallace, 2005). Job-related competencies provide the glue to align a comprehensive workforce development system in which all employees are recruited, selected, developed, appraised and promoted based on the same set of attributes allowing the HR system components to reinforce each other for maximum impact. (Cascio & Aguinis, 2005; Campion, Fink, Ruggeberg, Carr, Phillips & Odman, 2011).

NCWWI WDF & Competencies

To provide guidance to the field, NCWWI developed the Workforce Development Framework (WDF) (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015a). This framework is tailored to reflect the complexity of the work and the unique features of child welfare work:



This framework is described in detail elsewhere,[1] but here we will focus on the role of competencies within the framework, using the example of partnering as a competency.

Workforce Planning

The left hand circle on the WDF identifies the steps in *Workforce Planning*, a proactive process based on an assumption that the nature of the work as well as the nature of the workforce, will change over time. In this process an organization defines goals for the future and plans how to build a workforce to achieve the goals. By comparing the current workforce with anticipated future needs, the organization identifies any gaps in the "human capital" especially competency gaps (Hoge, Tondora, & Marrelli, 2005). Closing the gaps results in a targeted plan of action shown in the right-hand circle.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, an organization might anticipate creating more collaborative relationships with the formal and informal local community network requiring more emphasis on the competency of partnering.

Vision, Mission and Values

An organization's vision, mission and values are at the center of the gap-closing components as they ground the agency's work as well as establish future direction and the expectations for staff. Since competencies are inductive (starting with outcomes and the link to performance effectiveness) (Campion et al., 2011), a clear statement of the Mission, Vision, Values, and Practice Model provides the starting point and touchstone for developing competencies within the organization. A set of competencies is the guide to how everyone in the organization needs to behave in order to achieve the mission. To achieve greater synergy, many organizations develop a set of core competencies which are common across the organization, not tied to specific jobs or positions.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, the importance of the competency of partnering, defined as "develops networks and build alliances; collaborates across boundaries to build strategic relations and achieve common goals" could become part of the organizational communications about the future direction of the agency.

Leadership: Leadership at all levels enables an organization to identify and operationalize the components of workforce development, engaging the whole organization in the work. Effective leaders create an environment where workforce development is everybody's business, align vision and values, and practice strategies that support an organizational culture that values people. Leadership competencies, such as those defined by NCWWI's Leadership Competency Framework,[2] provide a template for how leaders can perform and again are not necessarily tied to specific jobs or positions.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

[1] See **http://ncwwi.org/index.php/special-collections/workforce-development-framework**
[2] See **http://ncwwi.org/files/LeaderCompFrame5-31-2011.pdf** or **http://toolkit.ncwwi.org/**

For example, leaders could emphasize the importance of partnering and provide examples of how the competency of partnering could be demonstrated and encouraged at various levels in the organization.

Job Analysis and Position Requirements

Job analysis is the fundamental building block in the workforce development process (Cascio & Aguinis, 2005) and for many years has been a required first step in a workforce development system according to both professional and legal testing guidelines (SIOP, 1987; EEOC, 1978). Job analysis is the process of identifying the job tasks, knowledge, skills and competencies needed to perform the tasks and includes position requirements such as reporting relationships, working conditions and performance indicators. This is critical information about specific jobs used throughout the workforce development process particularly for developing job descriptions, the basic communication tool between the employee and the organization on performance expectations.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, all job descriptions could be reviewed to identify appropriate elements to include related to the competency of effective partnering.

Education and Professional Preparation

To develop a pool of qualified staff to fill positions, there needs to be alignment and synergy with the education and professional preparation process. Having a clearly defined competency model provides a communication tool between the agency and the higher education institution, thus improving the chances of having staff prepared for the reality of the work. Social Work programs can design curriculum geared to developing the competencies needed to perform child welfare work.

The NCWWI Traineeship program developed a listing of 58 items in 10 topical areas related to child welfare practice. The competencies were developed collaboratively and represent competencies from several models used by other universities and accepted as practice standards for the field. Evaluation showed that students significantly increased their child welfare knowledge and skills within one year in their programs and continued to develop competencies after they graduated (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015b).

The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC), a state coalition of educators and practitioners has developed competencies as the basis for their internship program and ongoing professional development through their training academies. They have also integrated these competencies with the Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) core competencies used in all academic social work programs. This integrative work facilitates development of a statewide learning continuum that links Social Work education to in-service training (CalSWEC, 2011).

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, the organization could communicate with local higher education programs to talk about the vision of collaborating and the importance of including the competency of partnering in their preparation of students, through both course materials and field placement activities.

Recruitment, Screening, and Selection

Finding the right person for the right job at the right time requires a concerted, multipronged approach. Effective recruitment begins with a consistent message and image and aims to promote the affective connection between the agency's vision, mission and values and those of potential candidates. Competency-based selection is based on the premise that a closer match between the requirements of the job and an employee's capabilities will result in higher job performance and satisfaction (Hoge, Tondora & Marrelli, 2005). Competency-based screening and selection systems emphasize competencies that are most likely to predict long-term success on the job; make the difference between average and outstanding performance; and are the most difficult to change through training and supervision. The competency-based screening process for child welfare caseworkers (Bernotavicz & Wischmann, 2001) has been adopted in Maine, North Carolina, New Hampshire, and nationally for the Children's Corps program.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, the organization could revise the recruitment materials to highlight the fact that people skilled in the competency of Partnering are encouraged to apply. They could revise the screening materials to include ways to assess the degree to which applicants have the competency.

Incentives and Work Conditions

A physically and emotionally safe and secure work environment, resources to do the job, and incentives to provide motivation and recognition are critical to retaining staff. Competency models can identify the personal characteristics such as resilience that help workers handle the stress, burnout, and secondary trauma associated with the work. They can also provide the basis for rewards and recognition for competencies the organization prizes such as leadership, or proficiency in a second language.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, the organization could establish formal and informal recognition programs for the competency of partnering, e.g., "Team Player of the Month" or a newsletter spotlight on teams that are successfully fostering the competency of partnering.

Professional Development and Training

Helping staff grow professionally is a key workforce development strategy. This component includes both a comprehensive training infrastructure and promoting a learning culture where continuous learning is encouraged. By providing a specific level of detail, the job analysis approach is particularly helpful for identifying training competencies for specific positions and for many competency-based training systems in child welfare (Rycus & Hughes, 2000). In competency-based professional development programs, the training and development programs, curricula, and activities are built around the competencies required for effective performance. The competencies provide the communication tool to link each of the components to each other and to a career-planning system. By identifying the competencies required for each step of the career path, employees and their supervisors can prepare for career movement (Hoge, Tondora & Marrelli, 2005). Iowa has developed a supervisory curriculum that includes both supervisory and worker competencies as the

foundation for a professional development system (University of Iowa School of Social Work, 2009).

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLES

For example, the organization's Training Unit could review the array of curriculum from pre-service to in-service and identify appropriate places to develop and enhance the competency of partnering. The Training Unit could expand the definition to include the specific behaviors related to partnering that could guide the curriculum developers. By identifying how partnering could be demonstrated at increasing levels of responsibility, a career ladder could be developed and specific training competencies identified for different job functions.

Organizational Environment

An organization's culture and climate where staff feel that they are included in the decision making, where diversity and individual differences are valued and leveraged to achieve the vision and mission of the organization, all play a significant role in the ability to attract, hire, and retain a competent and committed workforce. According to Campion and colleagues (2011), organizational development is at the core of competency modeling and, in fact, the authors argue that widespread involvement of organizational employees in the creation of the model may be more important than the model itself. The iterative process of collecting data and feeding it back helps create a shared definition of the organization and its desired future and the attributes required for success.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, all units and offices in an organization could be encouraged to promote partnering in unit and office meetings as well as prompted to do so in their internal and external interactions with visual aids and other prompts.

Community Context

A workforce skilled in collaborating with community partners on behalf of children, youth, and families promotes reciprocal positive regard, respect, and supportive interactions. Competency models provide clarity on the attributes needed, such as communication, coordination, collaboration, negotiating, and advocacy to create and sustain positive informal and formal connections with the local community.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, Unit Supervisors and Area Office Managers could use the competency of partnering to clarify expectations of how to collaborate with community partners.

Supervision and Performance Management

The quality of supervision, clear performance expectations, and a coherent, consistent performance management system are key factors in promoting commitment and retention of staff. Competency-based performance management focuses on assessing and rewarding both how work was accomplished (the process) and the goals achieved (the outcomes) (Hoge, Tondora, & Marrelli, 2005). Competencies provide the performance expectations for

workers, the "how to," and a communication tool for worker and supervisor in the ongoing performance management and coaching process.

PARTNERING COMPETENCY EXAMPLE

For example, the competency of partnering could be included as an element in the organization's Performance Management system/process. Alternatively, staff could be provided with coaching and mentoring related to how to demonstrate partnering in all of their interactions and interventions.

Comparison of Competency-based Approaches in Child Welfare

The National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) undertook a targeted, snowball scan of competency models currently in use in child welfare agencies throughout the United States. The scan relied upon referrals and web searches to collect competency models from throughout the country to make them available in NCWWI's online resource library[3] for other jurisdictions and agencies to access and review as needed.

The online collection serves as a central repository to encourage the sharing of competency models. The current scan was not exhaustive, and represents a point in time. Consequently jurisdictions may have developed or are using or in the process of developing competency models that are not included in the current collection.

The table below presents a brief summary of the current examples of competency models collected and includes the position level(s) targeted by the model, year developed/revised, and the original source or foundation for the competency model, if applicable or known.

State	Caseworker Model	Supervisor Model	Advanced/ Specialized Competencies	Student Competencies	Year	Derived From:
California	X			X	2013	IHS[4]
Colorado	X				2013	IHS
Illinois			X		Unknown	Unknown
Iowa	X				2014	Original
Maine	X	X	x		2014	Unknown
Maryland	X				2009	Unknown
Ohio	X	X	X		2012	Original
Pennsylvania	X	X	X		2001	IHS
Rhode Island	X				2012	Iowa[5]
Washington	X	X	X		2014	IHS

Common Themes

The competency models in nine of the ten states delineated competencies specific to the caseworker level. Four models also included defined supervisor level competencies or by a specific job function (e.g., foster care workers). Since many of the competency models were derived from the Institute for Human Services' competency model, their primary differences are in content or language that reflects practices specific to the state.

Maine's models are research-based using the approach to develop a holistic competency model described in the Appendix. The models from Iowa and Rhode Island also provide a built-in assessment tool to guide the competency-level selection. Some states (e.g.,

[3] See http://ncwwi.org/index.php/special-collections/competency-models
[4] Institute for Human Services
[5] Iowa Department of Human Services

California and Washington) differentiated foundational and advanced proficiency levels within a tabular format. Other states (e.g., Maine and Texas) have developed competency models for related job roles, such as Adoptive and Foster Parents, Licensing Workers, Child Support Enforcement Agents, Adolescent Caseworkers, and Integrated Case Managers. Several states, including Maine, North Carolina, New Hampshire, Nebraska and Georgia, have developed competency-based hiring and selection processes for caseworkers. No competency models were found for managers or administrators and only one state (California) had corresponding student competencies tied to the broader competency model.

Intersection of Schools of Social Work & Competency Models

The Council on Social Work Education's standards are grounded in a competency-based approach to social work education. The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standard (EPAS), adopted in 2008, revised standards for social work education focusing on student competencies to organize social work education curriculum, shifting the focus from teaching disparate topics to what they should be actually doing (i.e., their competencies) (Holloway, Black, Hoffman, & Pierce, 2009). Social work education then focuses on the competencies necessary after graduation to commence entry-level practice. Coordinating these student competencies with an agency's competency model will articulate the natural progression of student to employee and help to ensure that the curriculum taught in social work programs fulfills the agency's needs for their incoming workforce. Maine, for example, employed their competency assessment process for Title IV-E Waiver students to identify the students who would "fit" best with the agency during their placements.

Connecting education to practice furthers the social work profession as students who are dissatisfied with their social work education, specifically insufficient practice skills, are more likely to leave the social work field (Wermeling, Hunn, & McLendon, 2013). Social Work students heading towards child welfare careers need specific knowledge and skills, defined in a comprehensive competency model, to become committed child welfare professionals that are more likely to be retained in the long term. A stronger, more committed workforce results when curricula and field experiences are in alignment with the reality of post-graduation employment. Additionally, competency-based social work education programs better accommodate non-traditional students who bring life and work experience into their educational programs and then hone and supplement their skills as needed in a foundational competency-based program. The field will also be more professionalized by linking social work educational competencies to child welfare agency competencies.

Schools of social work vary widely in their philosophy about their role in providing competency-based education for specific fields of practice, with some preferring a generalist approach, focusing on preparing a strong theoretical social work foundation to their students. In recent years, we have seen that market forces demand students who have the skills to enter the workforce as well as a pool of degreed social workers with skills to do the work. These factors have encouraged schools to reconsider their resource expenditures as well as moving to a competency-based education. The field of child welfare is still challenged with evolving the continuum of professional development to be more competency-based, from social work education, to pre-service and on-going training and development. Now we face the challenge of determining what those skills are that will lead to a more committed and retained child welfare workforce.

Next Steps & Implications for Child Welfare Agencies

An effective competency-based approach lays the foundation for an effective and comprehensive workforce strategy. As a holistic approach, a competency-based approach grounds the characteristics of the individuals that should compose the workforce, provides concrete information regarding the knowledge and skills necessary to perform the tasks, and establishes clear expectations for monitoring job performance. See below for the full gamut of competency model uses:

Uses for Competency Models[6]

1. **Hire** new employees by using assessments and other selection procedures that measure the competencies.
2. **Train** employees by creating courses aimed at the development of designated competencies.
3. **Evaluate** the performance of employees by structuring the appraisal instrument around the competencies.
4. **Promote** employees by using the competencies to establish promotion criteria.
5. **Develop** employee careers by using the competency models to guide the choice of job assignments and make other career choices.
6. **Manage** employee information by using the competency models to record and archive employee competencies and experience.
7. **Compensate** employees by using the competency model to structure pay differences between jobs or to evaluate employees for pay increases.
8. **Support** organizational change efforts by developing broad systematic support of future-oriented competencies.

Further, competency models can align child welfare agencies, social work schools, and training programs so the right people are prepared, sought, and trained. Steps for implementing a competency-based approach are provided below.

Getting Started

1. **Convene a Workgroup:** Recruit workgroup members from all program and geographic areas of your jurisdiction as well as multiple levels and from university partners to inform and provide guidance to the overall competency model development. Set goals for the group and note the milestones along the way.
2. **Select a Model:** In collaboration with the workgroup, choose the competency model that works for your agency. NCWWI (**http://ncwwi.org/index.php/special-collections/competency-models**) offers multiple competency models from a variety of states that can be adapted for use in other jurisdictions. Rather than starting from scratch, modify an existing model as there are plenty to choose from and those presented have already undergone intensive developmental processes, often over a period of many years.

[6] Adapted from Campion et al., 2011

3. **Adapt the Model:** Determine which components of the competency model need to be revised to fit with your agency's practice, processes, and values. Make these adaptations in conjunction with the workgroup.
4. **Disseminate the Model:** Integrate the model into all aspects of the agency from recruitment to performance management with assistance from your workgroup. Use implementation science strategies to install and then scale up the use of the competency model.
5. **Monitor use of the Model:** Periodically assess how the model continues to be employed by your agency and make modifications so it maintains infusion into all aspects of agency practice.

Conclusion

Child welfare has wrestled for years with the issue of recruiting and retaining competent staff. While there are no single solutions for addressing the issue of workforce development, some keys to success in creating a committed, competent and high performance workforce include senior leadership commitment, shared mission and values, competency-based approaches, agency climate, data systems and training in workforce development strategies.

By providing clarity, consistency and connectivity (Conger & Ready, 2004), competencies provide the glue to integrate the elements of a workforce development system. Such a system is dynamic, constantly evolving and interactive at both the organizational and individual level.

At the organizational level, the planning process and the implementation of the gap-closing strategies are based on a theme of continuous quality improvement. A competency-based organization is in a continual process of assessment, planning, implementation and renewal creating an organizational learning culture of systemic and ongoing improvement by supporting the continuous learning of staff.

At the individual level, effectiveness on the job is viewed as a process, a constant spiral of learning, growth and renewal which stems from the individual's inner core of competencies, attitudes, values and motives. Because training can address this inner core only to a limited extent, the responsibility for the on-going process of effectiveness must rest with each individual.

A holistic approach to competency development recognizes that effective functioning in the real world of work involves the capacity to learn from experience and to manage change. Truly competent organizations and individual professionals are engaged in an ongoing process of self-assessment and reflective practice. In this constant spiral of learning and growth, of reflecting upon and learning from experience, the organization and the individual are engaged in a continual process of becoming competent at being competent.

Appendix: Holistic Competency Model

Following is the process used by the University of Southern Maine's Muskie School of Public Service to develop holistic competency models. This process combines several different approaches to the analysis of job performance and to the collection of data.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs)

The functional or task-related knowledge and skills are developed through task analysis using both onsite observation and expert opinion. Here the focus is on generating detailed listings of the job duties and then identifying what people need to know, or to be able to do, in order to perform these tasks. People familiar with the job (incumbents, supervisors or trainers), the so-called Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) are used to identify this information.

Personal Characteristics

The characteristics of outstanding performers are generated through a technique known as the Behavioral Event Interview. Using a structured approach, trained interviewers probe beneath the surface to articulate the underlying characteristics of individuals who have been identified as being outstanding at their particular job.

Context Knowledge and Skills

The identification of the context knowledge and skills requires yet another approach. Here the unit of analysis moves from the specific job tasks to the organizational setting. Some of this information is drawn from organizational data in policy and procedures manuals. Surveys or focus groups provide more in-depth information on the organizational culture and climate.

This holistic approach to competency identification results in a competency model which has five categories:

(1) Work Management Skills: Performing effectively in the work context.
(2) Conceptual Knowledge/Skills: Using information effectively.
(3) Interpersonal Knowledge/Skills: Relating to others effectively.
(4) Self-Management Skills: Effective use of self in the job.
(5) Technical Knowledge/Skills: Information and skills to perform the job tasks.

Each category contains a list of competencies with specific behavioral indicators that demonstrate optimal performance. Data from each of the different approaches are combined and redundancies eliminated. The resulting model is then reviewed and validated by focus groups familiar with the job in question. Such reviews ensure that both concepts and language accurately reflect the experience of those most knowledgeable about effective performance. Furthermore, the reviews reflect the commitment to shared ownership.

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