Developing Core Competencies

About Core Competencies and Proficiencies

Core competencies are the professional skills an applicant must possess from their first day in the position you're hiring for, while *proficiencies* gauge how skilled an applicant is with the given competency depending on years of experience, the scale of the organizations they've worked in, or the complexity of the projects they've participated in.

The job analysis workshop bridges what may be a standardized position description (PD) with the actual job your agency is hiring for. By defining your core competencies and proficiencies, your group will have a shared understanding of the core competencies and proficiencies an applicant needs to be successful in performing the duties for a given role. You'll also:

- Decide how to accurately describe your role to applicants in your job announcement.
- Determine the assessment criteria and qualifications for your role(s).
- Develop structured interview questions.

Documenting Job Tasks

For your job analysis to be legally defensible, the required competencies you develop must be based on actual job tasks that you expect people in this role and level to perform starting on their first day. Work with SMEs to complete a job task exercise to identify your competencies.

Begin your job analysis workshop by asking SMEs to document typical job tasks for a given role based on their experience with, or knowledge of, the position. Job tasks should be detailed and begin with a verb, indicating that they're an action a person in that position would actively take.

To facilitate this 10-15 minute exercise, give each participant a stack of sticky notes and a permanent marker. Ask them to write down the typical tasks they have done, or would do, in the posted position, using one note per task and writing as many notes as possible.

To focus their thinking, suggest that participants consider the tasks they have completed in this position within the last month. Guide them to be specific, breaking broad tasks into more specific, detailed tasks that clearly explain the work. For example, a general task like "Manages stakeholders" would be broken up into more specific tasks like "Send emails

updating stakeholders on a project to avoid miscommunication" and "Organize one-on-one meetings with senior stakeholders to ensure everyone is on the same page."

When the note-writing exercise is complete, as each participant to stand up and read each note aloud to the group as they stick them to a large space on a wall or several easel boards.

Converting Job Tasks to Competencies

Once SMEs have listed their common job tasks, group similar tasks to create your competencies.

When the job task writing exercise is complete and the notes are on a wall, ask all participants to stand up together and group similar tasks. When the groups of tasks are adequately organized, brainstorm a short, summarizing title for each grouping. These titles are the core competencies required for your position.

Generally, you'll want to define four to six core competencies for your position. To pare down your competencies to this amount, give each participant three to four dot stickers to vote on the competencies they feel are the most important for this position from day one. The results of the dot voting, along with the frequency of the sticky notes per competency, determines which competencies are necessary to consider an applicant minimally qualified for your position.

While brainstorming the names of your competencies, you may find it helpful to refer to existing competency names like the OPM qualification standards for the series you're hiring for. However, if the output of the exercise results in a difference, use the required competencies SMEs identify as the qualifications for your position.

Competencies for Specialized Roles or Parentheticals

For a more simple, straightforward hiring action, an agency should have multiple vacancies (around five or more) for one role. However, in some cases, hiring managers and SMEs may determine during job task analysis that there are different roles within the overall position being hired.

Use the job analysis workshop exercise to define any additional role- or parenthetical-specific competencies. To be considered qualified for that role, an applicant must meet or exceed *all core competencies* for the announcement, in addition to the role- or parenthetical-specific competency.

Defining Competencies

Resume reviewers and interviewers must be able to clearly and objectively evaluate an applicant against competencies that you've defined before assessments begin. To define your competencies, document what it looks like when an applicant has that skill. You'll list these definitions in the job announcement as required qualifications.

In this example, the job tasks in a grouping resulted in a Customer Support core competency. The grouped job tasks were:

- Resolve technical and customer reported issues pertaining to mail routing and connectivity issues.
- Communicate and escalate across issues to a given vendor.
- Assist customers with deployment and installation of new or updated applications.

The competency definition should be 1-3 sentences long and avoid a laundry list of specific tasks. Based on the job tasks, the definition for Customer Support is:

Customer Support: Works with external and/or internal customers in a large, geographically dispersed organization to assess needs, provide information or assistance, and resolve their problems. Knows how to best utilize ticketing systems. Is committed to providing quality products and services.

When defining your competencies, you may find it helpful to refer to existing competency definitions like the OPM qualification standards for the series you're hiring for. Edit those definitions to match the requirements your workshop group has determined are necessary for your posted position.

Defining Proficiency Levels and Required Experience

Once you've defined your competencies, define the proficiency levels you'll use to compare an applicant's experience against the competencies. Once these levels are defined, decide as a group which proficiency level is the minimum required for each core competency. This establishes the required experience for the position.

We recommend using the levels *Unfamiliar*, *Familiar*, *Experienced*, and *Master* for each competency, along with a definition of what that level looks like. The scenarios you use to define the proficiency levels should be consistent, involving these types of differences:

- **Scale of activity:** The applicant did something at a small organization *-vs-* did something at a large organization.

- **Seniority:** The applicant did something as part of a group *-vs-* lead the group that did something.
- **Level of detail:** The applicant can explain a general concept *-vs-* can discuss the concept in detail.

The same set of competencies and proficiencies can be used for different grade levels because roles that require more seniority set the required proficiencies higher than junior roles.

Creating a Structured Interview from Competencies

As a best practice, applicants should pass through multiple hurdles with multiple SMEs before an agency considers them qualified. Two rounds of structured phone interviews, each conducted by a single SME, assess the breadth and then the depth of applicants' knowledge about your required competencies. Any applicant who doesn't receive a high enough score during the first interview will not progress to the second.

Finish your workshop by breaking participants into groups to write questions for both the first and second phone assessment interviews. Use your defined competencies, proficiencies, and required experience to create two rounds of interview questions and good example responses.

Phone Assessment Interview 1 tests the applicant's *breadth of experience* by evaluating their basic knowledge across all required competencies. Write one question per competency and include follow-up questions to determine whether the applicant meets the required proficiency level. Breadth questions tend to take five to ten minutes to answer, including any follow-up questions.

Phone Assessment Interview 2 tests the applicant's *depth of knowledge* across all required competencies. Depth questions test how an applicant reacts and responds to changes in the presented situation. Depth interview questions can cover one to two competencies per question, and should include multiple follow-up questions that add complexity to the original question, such as "Now imagine...". These questions can take 10-15 minutes for an applicant to answer, including follow-up questions.

Types of Interview Questions

Ask applicants questions about *past experience*, a *hypothetical situation*, and *applicant viewpoint*. In all cases, you can establish additional *probe questions* help SMEs to draw out more information, such as "What was your role?" or "Can you tell me more?"

- **Past Experience:** Ask the applicant for a story from their work experience that describes the required level of proficiency (for example, "Tell me about a time..."). A qualified applicant will give specific and detailed answers, including the events leading up to the story, why they made the decisions they did, the lessons they learned, and what they would do differently.
- **Hypothetical Situation** Give the applicant a situation they are likely to encounter in the role you're interviewing for (for example, "Imagine we have a problem with..."). Ask them to analyze what might be the cause, develop a plan or solution, or describe the pros and cons of a proposed approach. The setup to this question may be longer than other types and might be based on real challenges their organization has faced in the past. Ground a hypothetical situation in an applicant's own experience by always including a follow-up question, such as "Can you tell me about a time you experienced a similar situation in your recent work experience?"
- **Applicant Viewpoints:** Ask the applicant's opinion about an issue with different schools of thought (for example, "What do you think about..."). Assess the applicant on their ability to justify their perspective, or if they lack a strong preference one way or other, to identify and contrast different opinions.

To get the best information about an applicant, related to the competencies and proficiencies you've documented, avoid creating these types of questions.

- **Brain teasers or puzzles** create stress for the applicant and don't test their skills.
- **Self-assessing strengths and weaknesses** creates disingenuous answers that don't relate to competencies.
- **Five-year plans and future goals** don't test competencies and can reveal inappropriate information that introduces bias.