Competencies: The Next Generation Article Critique

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to summarize and critique Patricia McLagan’s article, titled “Competencies: The Next Generation (1997).” In doing so, the role and definition of competencies are explored, the competency model approach is introduced, and the changing role of HRD practitioners is addressed. This paper seeks to examine these topics not only through the lens of McLagan, but various other HRD experts and perspectives. Through careful analysis of the article’s arguments and propositions, the reader investigates the role of theory, analyses, and evaluation in the competency model approach advocated, noting its strengths and weaknesses. This paper also provides practical implications for HRD practitioners and explores the article’s relevancy in the world of performance improvement.
Competencies: The Next Generation Article Critique

**Article Summary**

In “Competencies: The Next Generation,” Patricia McLagan explores the definition of competencies along with its past, current, and anticipated roles in performance improvement efforts (1997). Much of her article is centered on this phenomenon and the challenges and benefits associated with such delineations. She notes that there are many different types of competencies depending on the profession, job role, and organization. To some, competencies are tasks, outputs, and results. To others it consists of knowledge, skills, and behaviors or simply all of the above. One important point introduced very early in her article, is the current emphases on defining and developing leadership competencies that is pervading organizational development in the U.S and beyond. Acknowledging this trend assists McLagan in justifying her competency model approach introduced later in the article. According to McLagan, this prevailing fascination with leadership competencies is rooted in the belief that organizational wealth and profits are dependent upon the skills and knowledge of workers. This recent discovery, and shift from a job focus to people focus, is one of the dominant platforms used to make her main point.

She notes that in a world of rapid change, global economies, and steep competition, redefining old competency models, and adopting a new competency approach is critical; however, letting go of the models of the past is just as imperative. While this idea of the competency model approach has been around for decades, the appearance of such models must be modified to meet the present needs and demands of modern organizations. More specifically, new competency models should be more flexible, simplistic, and participative in nature.
McLagan purports that models should shift from a job focus to an organization emphases, more time should be invested in the application phase of the model instead of the analyses phase, it should be less dependent on experts, and should include KSA’s and outputs.

Conceptual Framework

In addition, McLagan reviews the past roles of HRD professionals and asserts that administrative work and policy enforcement should no longer be the primary role of an HRD professional. Instead, HRD professionals should be addressing issues revolving organizational development and organizational culture; leaving the task of staffing, training, and record keeping to the managers.
Importance for Students in AHRD 600

As an AHRD student, this article broadens one’s view of the organizational processes involved in performance improvement interventions. Its emphases on defining, identifying, and implementing competency models sheds light into some of the potential elements that may be incorporated in an intervention. It is particularly relevant to the needs assessment phase of performance improvement, and encourages future professionals to move beyond traditional ways of identifying desired performances and shows the importance of accuracy in conducting a needs assessment. In viewing the competency model approach, students are challenged to analyze job roles and organizational functions from multiple perspectives in order to gain a holistic and representative data sample. In addition, the article was also very insightful in outlining the future roles of HRD professionals. It is important for students to recognize what their roles will be in the future and what they should not be as well. In addressing the changing workforce, students are forced to think ahead and to begin discovering ways where their skills will be utilized and needed as they enter the field.

On the other hand, understanding needs assessment and performance improvement is not just important for future HRD professionals. The knowledge gained from studying these concepts can be employed in all walks of life and professions. Needs assessment is about understanding and uncovering organizational gaps and desired outcomes. Assessing where one stands in relation to their goals is a crucial part of the process as well. This knowledge is not just derived through questionnaires and interviews. There is a systematic process that must be employed and these concepts take time, skills, and study to incorporate and use effectively. Rushing through either of these processes can have detrimental consequences.
Role in Performance Improvement and Practical Implications

From reading this article, practitioners should be able to define competencies and recall the importance of identifying them in the workplace. Practitioners should also be better able to understand the competency model approach and ways in which it can be implemented in a performance improvement plan/intervention. Although there may be some debatable points in the article, it elicits a number of important questions for HRD professionals. It causes the reader to question the current approach used to create competency models that serves as the bases for job descriptions, and performance improvement. Such questions include: is the competency model aligned with the organizational goals, mission, and strategic plan, to what extent should the experts be involved in the process of creating competency models, and how should the model be simplified in order to increase the odds of employee use and comprehensibility, yet be broad enough to encompass all of the responsibilities and anticipated outputs? More so, questions regarding the time spent on the analyses phase should be addressed as well. With the recent shift from job to leadership competencies it also imperative that HRD practitioners continuously conduct research related to their field and the organizations they will impact.

Article Strengths

The strengths of this article lie in its explanatory nature, concise arguments, and conceptual frameworks. The purpose of the article was well articulated and it was easy to understand the author’s main points and perspective. Very early in the article, the author introduces the main idea and not long after spends a great deal of time reviewing competencies, including its meaning, types, and originations. Structuring the article in this way made it comprehensible for individuals unfamiliar with competency models and issues surrounding them. In addition, MacLagan’s arguments were well articulated and direct. She made her main
points very obvious through bolding and the like. Although some of her arguments are debatable, McLagan made some compelling ones as well.

One such argument is McLagans’s statement that competencies’ source of validity should be found in individuals, work, teams, and managers. Competency models should make everyone “participative and accountable” (2003). This view coincides with Economist Alfred Marshall and his view that the greatest capital can be derived from human investments. He too believed that wealth is found in the skills and attitudes of employees (Swanson, 2007). In addition, Richard Swanson, author of *Analysis for Improving Performance*, believed that performance improvement interventions should analyze performance at four different levels including organizational, work team, process and individual levels (2007). From a systems perspective, McLagan and Swanson’s argument demonstrates the idea that all systems in an organization are interconnected, both receiving and giving information from and to the environment. In writing competency models, this is seen in not only gaining the performance behavior and skills from line workers, but the managers, coworkers and departments in which they interact (as McLagan suggests).

Finally, McLagan’s conceptual frameworks were visually appealing, concise, and comprehensible. Her visuals detailing the definition of competencies, how they should be identified and people practices explained the main concept and its relationship to each other elements of the framework very neatly. They contained enough information to be considered informational but were not overly explanatory.

**Article Weaknesses**

While McLagan does make some valid arguments, the competency model approach advocated in this article does not appear to have a strong theoretical foundation. The diagnostic
and prescriptive nature of the article, as it relates to the competency models somewhat conceals the lack of empirical evidence used to support her claims/propositions. For instance, she asserts that there should be less dependence on experts, but fails to show how this has been implemented already and proven successful. According to Swanson, models should not substitute for theory, and theory should not be reduced to simply logical deductions (2007). Providing evidence of how her recommendations actually lead to performance improvement would strengthen her argument’s validity and overall generalizability/effectiveness.

In addition, McLagan focuses heavily on application and seems to minimize the importance of the analyses phase in performance improvement and competency model development. She purports that “the most time, effort, and money should go to the application phase” (McLagan, 1997). According to Swanson however, most performance improvement programs that provided a weak analyses of performance issues, fail within two years. With that being said, the analyses phase is critical. He notes that performance returns derive from both follow through and intense analysis. McLagan criticizes the amount of money and time invested into traditional needs analyses. From her perspective, reducing the time spent on this phase would not only save money and speed up the application process, and somewhat implies this could also make it easier for non-experts create competency models that work for them specifically. According to Hannum however, the analyses phase is often prolonged, not because of the model currently used but the individuals implementing them (2005). She argues that there is a difference between expert and novice analyzers, and the latter is responsible for the increased time spent on this phase.

Another critique of this approach, is the lack of emphases on the evaluation phase of developing and applying competency models? McLagan argues that models should be flexible in
In order to adapt to the changing workforce. While this may be true, if evaluation is not heavily emphasized, and the models themselves are constantly being modified, how will the desired performances be replicated? How is one to measure the competencies that lead to a specific performance, when the models are constantly changing? In the development of Hewlett Packers’ Lifecycle Competency Model, they noted that poor evaluation leads to diminished quality, lost opportunities, and ineffectiveness (Martin, 2004). In order to ensure evaluation in the process and the actual application of it among HRD professionals, tightly integrating evaluation in each stage of the model is necessary. This helps them to think of evaluation as an ongoing and iterative process instead of a standalone procedure. This could be incorporated in the competency model approach proposed in the article. This idea, along with providing concrete examples of how the model has been successful in the past would be included in a follow up article and the critiques mentioned would serves as the items that would be addressed.

**Conclusion**

Despite the criticisms mentioned above, this article if very informative and McLagan beautifully conveys the impact of defining and applying competency models on enhancing quality performance for organizations and their employees. Many elements of this article are related to performance improvement and needs assessment, and they also provide implications for HRD practitioners. This article has many strengths and weakness, but its overall message is still appreciated and useful for HRD professionals.
References


