

Skills Measurement for Effective Competency Modeling— Lessons from the Field

Improve performance. Manage organizational transformation. Accelerate employee development. These are key objectives that determine an organization's ability to stay competitive in a constantly-changing business environment. Over the past ten years many companies and government agencies have addressed these needs in part by implementing competency modeling programs, strategic initiatives aimed at aligning employee performance with job requirements.

"Unfortunately, corporate competency modeling initiatives have developed a reputation for becoming mired in cumbersome processes," says business consultant June Maul, a "But the opportunity for achieving business goals is great, and simplifying the competency modeling process can dramatically affect a company's ability to achieve the results they need."

Currently president of Arizona-based consulting firm Vantage Value, Maul has more than a decade of experience working with knowledge companies, including global telecom leaders such as AT&T and Qwest Communications. Today, she continues to focus on improving business performance for organizations in the telecom and educational markets. According to Maul, skills measurement systems provide a valuable resource for simplifying competency model implementation and aligning modeling initiatives with measurable skills data as a leading indicator for performance improvement.

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Measurable Business Goals Provide Crucial Level of Focus

In the past, competency modeling initiatives have frequently been subject to the shortfalls of over-engineering. For every job in a traditional competency model, there may be dozens of descriptions and qualifications. "If you have two dozen competencies for each job, and then you try to develop a model for hundreds of jobs in the company," says Maul, "you soon find yourself trying to establish thousands of competencies before you deploy your program. Soon, the process slows down to a point where employees and job roles change before the competency modeling program even gets off the ground."

To avoid the downfalls of over-engineering, Maul points out a fundamental cure for the issue: careful planning and focus. "What organizations need to do is to identify exactly what business outcomes they plan to achieve through their competency modeling program. I've seen competency modeling used to transform a sales organization into a consulting organization, for example. In some cases, an IT department may need to switch focus from mainframe programming to Web or e-commerce engineering. These are types of goals that businesses can expedite through competency modeling initiatives."

Once primary business objectives are identified, decision-makers can build a program based on core competencies. By identifying select competencies that influence specific outcomes, companies can not only build smaller, more actionable competency modeling programs, they can then track program success by tying it to measurable business results.

Skills Measurement Innovations Simplify Competency Model Implementation

In an effective competency modeling strategy, an organization will focus on key competencies, and then identify and track the skills that make those competencies effective. "The idea of developing competencies based on critical skills has been tried many times," says Maul, "but in the past, the systems haven't been in place to pull off the skills-based competency initiative."

"Today's skills measurement systems make skills-based competency modeling much simpler," she explains. With enterprise accessibility and immediate reporting, skills measurement systems make key business skills immediately identifiable. The systems enable decision-makers to quickly build requirements for key competencies, and they provide the tools for tracking skills levels for individuals and across the organization with enterprise reporting flexibility. With definitions and online assessments for a broad range of professional skills, online measurement systems dramatically simplify the process of determining competency requirements.

Ensure Program Support with Planning, Communication and Incentives

For any competency modeling initiative, participation will ultimately determine program success. To ensure acceptance and participation by employees and company decision-makers, a results-oriented focus is needed for all facets of implementation. Maul points out three areas of opportunity for dramatically improving the effectiveness of the competency modeling initiative:

Planning—Link Program Implementation to Measurable Business Goals

“As a consultant, one of my main roles is to help program decision-makers establish a strategic linkage between the competency modeling program and key business objectives,” says Maul. “Without that strategic link, executive buy-in is likely to be passive at best. With no buy-in, the program will eventually fall into disuse.”

“If a program is meant to transform an organization from a sale-focus to a consultative focus, that’s a clear objective,” she says. “With a clear and common goal, the individuals can take an active role in creating the competency model. I’ve been in situations where the individuals involved were building the model, setting the standard, and even establishing a job promotion process in the model. As a result, ownership is established through all levels of participation.”

A skills measurement system can play an important role in the planning phase by streamlining the effort to link skills to competencies. Such a system can provide pre-defined skills selections to help decision-makers establish skills objectives quickly. The system can offer assessments for those skills, and thereby provide all participants with a point of action (taking an assessment) that will deliver measurable results.

Establish Communications—Convey Clear Goals to Create Champions and Motivate Participants

Once goals are established, a competency modeling program requires a concerted effort from all participants for a successful implementation. Maul points out that a continuous communication effort is needed to ensure participation. How a program is presented to participants will go a long way toward determining that program’s success. “A top-down mandate is bad,” says Maul. “People will resent it, and they will participate reluctantly.”

“In an effective competency modeling program, the participants will not only have an intimate understanding of the business goals they are pursuing, they may actually have a hand in building the program themselves,” she says. In the sales organization mentioned earlier, the competency modeling program was created by the participants.

Whether the goal of the program is organizational transformation, performance improvement, or any number of business-level objectives, the ability of every participant to understand why and how they are being held accountable for certain competencies is crucial. A skills measurement system can provide a clear system for the “how” of verifying skills, with online assessments and objective metrics that provide detailed immediate feedback, and repeatability to track skills improvement.

Create Incentives—Link Program Participation to Career Development

Learning from failed competency modeling initiatives, smart companies are now focusing on communicating a clear path for career improvement through their competency initiatives. “People need to know why they’re doing this. They need to answer the question, What’s in it for me?”

“The positive value of an assessment system is significant,” says Maul. “If positioned properly and communicated effectively, every assessment becomes an opportunity—an opportunity for career advancement, for self-fulfillment, for financial improvement. Backed by an effective communications effort and a skills measurement system for taking action, competency models can be tied to what Maul refers to as “positive consequences,” a key strength for any competency program.

Skills Measurement System Streamlines Competency Model Implementation

For most businesses today, gaining control and predictability over key business assets is often a difficult challenge, particularly when that asset happens to be the competencies of employees and partners. Nevertheless, companies can take control of key competencies with the speed necessary to keep pace with market-driven change, thanks in part to innovations that enable skills to be measured and improved across the organization.

In addition to the definition and measurement of key skills, online measurement systems provide objective metrics for tracking improvement. “Objective skills data is important to anyone who is tracking improvement,” says Maul. “While skills data does not serve as a business-level program objective, skills levels are a leading indicator of performance improvement—an important resource for keeping the program on track toward achieving measurable business results.”



Vendor-neutral Program Provides a Cost-effective Solution

Past experiences have made many decision makers wary of security strategies that tend to grow in size and budget after their implementation. The classic scenario of project “scope creep” includes a service-intensive implementation followed by timeline issues and subsequent planning that reveals more work to be done.

The advantage of the ITAA program is that it is not a precursor to a vendor service. The online assessment, educational material and reporting system is delivered as an end-to-end vendor-neutral program, providing a self-contained solution that delivers an unbiased view of security awareness across the enterprise. However, companies that seek to deploy additional training resources in a post-assessment phase can do so with a clear picture of organizational strengths and weaknesses, resulting in a significant increase in training efficiency.

Putting Information Security Awareness Into Practice

Companies and government agencies are recognizing the need to build awareness and establish accountability for information security knowledge. Major federal agencies such as the USDA are exploring strategies in these areas, and critical information networks such as those that run the New York Stock Exchange are also turning to a skills-based approach to build information security skills of system administrators.

Using online skills measurement to build awareness is a relatively new approach to improving information security. However, it is an approach that is delivering results, helping organizations track and improve employee awareness with a new level of consistency, objectivity, and ease. The ITAA Information Security Awareness Certification program provides a model example of how online skills measurement can help companies and government agencies improve the information security readiness of employees across the enterprise environment.

* From The National Strategy to Secure Cyberspace,
February 2003. p. 38.
Available at www.whitehouse.gov/pcipb/