

# Competencies: the basics

**Susan Ainsworth demystifies the new buzzwords and shows how they may affect us all**

**C**OMPETENCIES. *Competency development, standards, assessment and training.* In the areas of employment, education and training, these seem to be the buzz words of the moment. They appear over and over again in government reports and newspaper articles. Yet what do they actually mean? When new terms are introduced or old words given new meanings, repeated explanation is essential before people feel comfortable with them and their underlying concepts.

Let me start with a definition. Every government report, newsletter and research paper on the topic can provide one. In its information bulletin, the Joint Australian Public Service Training Council (JAPSTC) uses the National Training Board's standard definition:

*Competence is the ability to perform activities within an occupation or function to the standard expected in employment. The focus is not the task as such but the level of underlying ability to perform the required job components. (Jan 1992)*

Perhaps a more fundamental question is why are these terms figuring so prominently in the Commonwealth Government's training and industrial reform agenda. In the drive to make Australian industry and economy more productive and internationally competitive, much Government attention has been focused on the skills of our workforce and the adequacy of the training and education system to meet the current and future needs of industry. The initial steps towards competency-based reform that we now witness are part of the drive to make education and training more relevant to Australian workplaces.

The nature of a competency-based training and education system can be illustrated by comparing it with the model of formal compulsory schooling. In schools, students are provided with a general, non-specific education. Competency-based training, on the other hand, involves targeting specific skills and fostering their development for a particular set of conditions. Further, what will be assessed in a competency-based system is performance in the workplace rather than only the ability to pass examinations.

In Australia and overseas the term 'competencies' is being used to refer to a composite of knowledge, skills and attitudes or attributes. In this context knowledge is having information about, understanding, being acquainted or familiar with something, someone or how to do something; skill is the ability to use one's knowledge effectively; and attitude is a mental or emotional approach to something or someone. The theoretical knowledge of how to do something is necessary, but it is not sufficient by itself to enable someone to perform in a realistic work

setting. The same is true for the other components of a competency.

There are different types of skills and some are more easily recognised than others. For example, the mechanical abilities needed to perform a task involving manual dexterity are more readily 'observable' than many of the skills needed by professional and para professional staff. The latter often require 'invisible' qualities and skills such as judgement, initiative, a complex and broad understanding of work contexts, and an awareness of professional ethics and standards.

The third component, attitudes or attributes, are the black box of the competency debate. Every employer and manager knows that a worker can possess the requisite knowledge and skills and still not perform up to expectations in the workplace. It is harder to teach and objectively assess qualities such as enthusiasm, confidence, motivation, willingness to learn, and inquisitiveness, than the ability to perform a routine skill. Yet they are important contributing factors to the level of performance on-the-job.

The development of competency standards is occurring on a number of fronts. The National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR) works with professional groups to develop standards, training and assessment methods in this field. In its research material, it suggests that the process involves the following:

- a review of what professionals do in their work
- a description of clear and appropriate competency standards
- a direct assessment of performance with an emphasis on demonstrated skills and knowledge; and
- a comparison of performance with described competency standards

There is no single right way to review what people do in their work ('occupational analysis'). There is a variety of methodologies, which have been outlined in publications of TAFE, NOOSR and the National Training Board. Although the methods may seem abstract, they serve to base the competency standards firmly in reality and show what happens in actual workplaces. Whatever method is chosen, NOOSR recommends that in describing competencies, professions (and other groups) seek to answer two key questions:

- (i) what is usually done in the workplace in that particular profession, and
- (ii) what standard of performance is normally required.

The standards developed by different groups have to mean something within a national system, so they are written to align with the Australian Standards Framework.

This framework was established by the National Training Board to ensure a nationally consistent education and training system. Its eight competency levels are designed to serve as reference points for the development and recognition of competency standards.

Clearly, no two jobs are the same. All librarians share skills and knowledge in general principles and practices, but in such an occupational group the range of work and work settings vary enormously. So how can competency standards accommodate and reflect this diversity? They have to be written or described in a multi-layered fashion. The major functions of the profession and para profession are called units of competency. These correspond to the common core competencies shared by members of a profession. From these main units stem the elements of competency—they describe in more detail what is done in the workplace within each unit (what is specifically required by the organisation and/or the job). These elements are then accompanied by performance criteria which describe the minimum standard of competency needed in the workplace.

The assessment of competency standards is a vital part of the whole process. It needs to be undertaken objectively, by people familiar with the profession or trade and trained in the assessment methodology selected as the most appropriate on the basis of resources and reliability. After the competency standards have been identified, training and education can be designed and structured accordingly, its main purpose then being to assist individuals to attain the levels of performance required in the workplace.

So, those are the basics. They have all been taken from other sources. If you want to go further there is plenty to read. A new report seems to come out every fortnight. You can start with various publications written for TAFE such as *Training for Australian Industry*, *Getting to Grips with Competency-Based Training and Assessment*. NOOSR's Research Papers *Establishing Competency-Based Standards in the Professions* (N° 1) and *Competency-Based Assessment in the Professions* (N° 2), the National Training Board's *National Competency Standards: Policy and Guidelines*, VEETAC's *National Framework for the Recognition of Training*, NBEET's *Progress and Prospects in Improved Skills Definition*, and the Mayer Committee's discussion paper on *Employment-Related Key Competencies for Postcompulsory Education and Training*. However, the system is evolving rapidly, so if you really want to stay on top of this topic keep scanning the major newspapers, especially their higher education sections.