

The agile workforce: competency based careers

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In the Chatham House report 'Open horizons' Oliver Sparrow argued that the world has become a complex network of societies, organisations and relationships [*Open horizons: three scenarios for 2020*. The 1998 Chatham House Forum. The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998]. It is increasingly difficult to pigeon-hole people by ethnicity, class, marital or work status in order to determine how they will vote, react, plan their futures, or earn their living. In this world people need the skills to handle complexity and to navigate around loosely structured organisations.

This recognition of complexity is beginning to shape the way organisations are structuring themselves and their perception of the people they need. Networks of organisations working together to provide services and products to an informed and demanding market place are already replacing the traditional supply chain models. Private, public and voluntary sector organisations are building multi-disciplinary teams and taking project-based approaches in order to increase their flexibility and impact.

The agile workforce

Flexibility and mobility are fast becoming key features of today's workforce. The 'agile workforce' is set to become the next corporate mantra. Working across geographic regions with a mix of people based in offices, at home and on client sites brings the challenge of virtual team working.

To thrive in the agile workforce, an individual needs to feel comfortable in situations that change rapidly and repeatedly; with work colleagues who have a variety of relationships with the organisation; and where their contribution has to count towards the corporate goal. They need to enjoy a work environment that is dynamic and exciting, but is also demanding and not necessarily secure.

These environments should present information specialists with unprecedented opportunities. The critical success factor of networked organisations and 'the agile workforce' is reliable and effective information flow: information handling is the critical success factor.

The career challenge

So how do you build an information-

focused career in this flexible and demanding world? Perhaps the first step is to abandon any preconceived ideas you may have about career ladders and focus on preparing to spot and take opportunities. These opportunities may be another step up the ladder, extend your experience, or give you time to develop other aspects of your capability. This focus presents two specific challenges:

- an understanding of yourself — your own SWOT analysis (strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats); and
- an understanding of the different roles that you may play whilst employed as part of the agile workforce.

Understanding yourself

Assessing your own strengths and weaknesses is a difficult but essential exercise. Evaluating what you have achieved and your potential is not always easy: you will always take some of your own skills for granted and not recognise others. And your weakness may only be obvious to others. Working with a friend, colleague or counsellor can be invaluable in this process.

Understanding the roles you play

Any job has a primary role which may be:

Strategic: determining strategy, winning and directing resources, and monitoring outcomes and return on investment.

Developmental: steering and undertaking projects to develop new processes, procedures, products or services.

Operational: providing and maintaining day-to-day services and functions.

In many cases this primary role predominates but a job can straddle two or three roles reflecting the size of the organisation and how it works. But whatever their primary role most people contribute to two or all three roles.

The job will also have a 'role position'. This refers to the role within the team structure: strategic leadership; team leadership; or team member.

The job description may well have one of these roles as a primary focus but one person can play many parts. For example, a researcher in a corporate information service may be employed as a team member, take a team leader role

for a specific project, and a strategic leadership role for a particular specialist area.

Understanding the different roles that you may be required to play — or those you wish to play — will enable you to define and consider the competencies you need and ways of developing them.

The competency challenge

What are competencies? Despite the fact that 'competencies' has become part of corporate language, there is still little common understanding of what is meant by the term. For some it has connotations of levels of skills, identified by some quantifiable measures. But competency as currently used in the corporate setting, misses the mix of skills, personal attributes and experience that enable an individual to successfully fill a role.

TFPL has developed a competency dictionary for knowledge and information management. Both management and individuals can use the competency definitions, and the behaviours that underpin them: management to assess the competencies needed to achieve their objectives; individuals to assess the competencies they have and those they want to develop. A benefit of this approach is that competencies are essentially transferable — between organisations and roles.

There are different career strategies for different people and different times. A step forward is a risk you may be ready to take. A sideways move may extend horizons or build competencies for the future. A step back is not necessarily about demotion or failure, it can be part of a strategy or re-assessment, a way of dealing with changing personal circumstances, or a way of developing other aspects of your personality.

Building a successful future is more than relentlessly moving up a career ladder. A complex world needs a complex mix of competencies and there is more than one way of developing them. Life long learning is not for wimps — it requires time, bravery and commitment — but it is an essential competency for today's agile workforce. ■