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COMPETENCIES & WORKPLACE LEARNING: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RHETORIC & THE REALITY

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COMPETENCIES & WORKPLACE LEARNING: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE RHETORIC & THE REALITY

DR. THOMAS N. GARAVAN & DAVID MC GUIRE

ABSTRACT

The use of competency frameworks as a basis for workplace learning initiatives is now relatively commonplace in organisations. This is reflected in the emphasis given to competencies in the HRD literature. However, the terrain of the competency discussion is somewhat ill defined. This article attempts to define the context within which the value of competencies as a basis for workplace learning can be considered and discusses the philosophical and epistemological perspectives found in much of the literature. Competency definition and competency measurement issues are explored as are a range of other issues concerning the value of competencies in a workplace learning context. The article concludes that in the interests of clarity, consistency and reliability of measurement, consensus needs to be reached on the basic parameters and definition of competency.

KEYWORDS

Competences, Workplace learning, Human Resource Development, Competency Assessment

INTRODUCTION

The literature on HRD increasingly focuses on how best to select and develop effective performing employees. Such preoccupations are in direct response to demands for higher productivity, increased flexibility and lower costs by organisations (Garavan et al., 1999; Hodgetts et al., 1999; Losey, 1999). Increasingly, organisations seek, through the implementation of sophisticated human resource development and workplace learning strategies, to develop competencies to enable employees to respond quickly and flexibly to business needs. The need for greater flexibility has resulted in a more widespread use of competency approaches as a basis for workplace learning provision (Lei & Hitt, 1996; Spangenberg et al., 1999).

Evidence suggests increased usage of competency models by organisations to drive workplace learning initiatives in the U.S. and more recently in the U.K. The use of competency frameworks as the focus of workplace learning, serves the dual purpose of facilitating the identification of learning needs and ensuring that learning provision addresses business needs (Reid & Barrington, 1994; Thomson & Mabey, 1994). Furthermore, the drive for mobility, flexibility and employability has also resulted in employees expecting that their enhanced competencies be recognised through certification processes. The increased usage of competencies is also reflected in the burgeoning academic literature on the topic.

The two most recent Price Waterhouse / Cranfield Studies (1999) reveal a significant increase in the usage of competency frameworks in Europe. Empirical evidence exists to suggest that the competency movement has taken hold in a number of countries, among them Australia (Comford & Athanasou, 1995), the U.S. (Boyatzis and Kolb, 1995), the U.K. (Newton &
Wilkenson, 1995), the Scandinavian countries (Mabon, 1995) and Israel (Reichel, 1996). This trend can be attributed to the proactive role played by national governments in recognising the benefits that can accrue through the creation and adoption of recognisable competency standards. The instigation of the National Skills Standards Board (NSSB) in the US and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) in the UK as government appointed bodies responsible for the development of skills standards highlights the emphasis attaching to national competency frameworks as a means of increasing economic competitiveness (Horton, 2000). Consequently, national competency standards are now considered to be invaluable in establishing a foundation for the implementation of workplace level training and development initiatives (Winterton & Winterton, 1996). However, recent empirical research by Matlay (2001) suggests that such training initiatives are having little impact in addressing the training needs of the small business sector. Specifically, he concluded that the actual provision of training in small firms fails significantly to keep pace with the perceived needs of owner/managers and their workforce.

The utilisation of competency models in the workplace is considered problematic. In particular, commentators find difficulty with the notion that the components of effective performance can be clearly isolated and identified and that employees can be selected utilising rigorous competency frameworks (Townley, 1994). Indeed the very idea that effective employees should exhibit a set of specific competencies is problematic for some (Raelin et al., 1995; Schroder, 1989), particularly in instances where competency frameworks are linked to promotional opportunities and organisational career development paths (Thomson & Mabey, 1994). It is worth pointing out however, that the competency movement has, in a HRD context, served the needs of lower level employees as well as those at managerial level and in this sense does not reinforce status differences in the workplace (Reid & Barrington, 1994; Grugulis 1997).

This paper considers some of the more specific issues surrounding the use of competencies for workplace learning and posits that many of the issues identified relate specifically to the assumptions of the particular philosophical and research tradition reflected in the use of competencies to date. This paper initially considers some of the philosophical and epistemological dimensions of competency as concepts and their usage in a workplace learning context. The paper focuses on three significant pragmatic issues related to their value in a workplace learning context: the difficulties involved in defining notions of competence and competencies; the related difficulty of assessing the existence of competence and problems related to the classification of competencies. The paper finally addresses their limitations as a basis for workplace learning and the need to understand their philosophical bases and their limitations.

**PHILOSOPHICAL & EPISTEMOLOGICAL TENSIONS**

The literature on competencies sometimes fails to make explicit its underlying philosophical assumptions specifically its assumptions about the nature of work, the individual and the organisation. Philosophically, the competency movement finds its roots in the writings of Taylor (1911). His espousal of the "one best way" of fulfilling a task, thus improving efficiency and increasing production, together with his functional view of management led ultimately to the development of the competency approach (Sandberg, 2000; Grugulis, 1997; Raelin et al., 1995). At a simplistic level, competency models seek to identify the ideal combination of skills, knowledge, attitudes and experience, the possession of which enables employees to become high performers and who have the potential to add value to the organisation (Gorsline, 1996).

One perspective argues that the notion of competencies can be both liberating and empowering; an equalising force in the context of workplace learning. Such a perspective is
based on developmental humanism. This philosophical position posits that employees should be provided with a broad degree of self-control and self-regulation on the basis that such committed employees will actively work towards fulfilling the aims of the organisation. Others suggest that, in reality, competency notions espouse a more utilitarian instrumentalist philosophy challenge this line of argument. This philosophical position advocates that the "rational" management of employees will lead to the ultimate aim of increased competitive advantage. This position is characterised by tight management control, close direction and prescription of required competencies as well as advocating the concept of "Fit" between strategic objectives and competencies possessed by employees. This latter perspective is the more common one espoused in the managerial and human resource management literature Holms (1995) would support this view. He posits that the power relations that exist within the competency approach do not reflect developmental humanism, but instead everything that developmental humanism is not. Competency frameworks present a dilemma in that those wishing to be considered competent are in effect forced to reshape and reinterpret themselves, to reconfigure their experience in order to match the specific demands of the competency discourse. He posits that even the assessor, where there is one, lacks autonomy because of the requirement to make judgements within a specified vocabulary and to maintain appropriate records. Notions of control therefore permeate competency approaches. Thus, the competency approach fits comfortably within a strategy/structure/systems model of organisations and consequently, it may have questionable value within contemporary post-modernist notions of workplace learning and more person focused development initiatives. Indeed, a fundamental premise underpinning utilitarianism, the idea of strategic integration is itself somewhat problematic and lacking in precision both at a theoretical and measurement level. It does however, represent a common justification for the utilisation of competencies by organisations. A utilitarian perspective poses a number of dilemmas for workplace learning activities, specifically the need to justify workplace learning in strategic terms and treat employees in a rational and quantitative way. It may result in very narrowly defined, short-term type learning activities at the expense of more developmental-type learning. It is arguable that the advocacy of utilitarian-instrumentalist notions of competencies are associated with learning initiatives designed to contribute to bottom-line performance, so this means that line managers' efforts will concentrate on revenue producing learning at the expense of ensuring that employees are developed.

There are also epistemological tensions associated with the use of competencies in a workplace learning context. The competency literature generally espouses a rationalistic, positivistic perspective and makes some important assumptions about work and behaviour. A significant proportion of the literature considers competency to be an attribute-based concept and in particular defines it in terms of a specific set of attributes that employees utilise to perform work. There is a clear assumption that those who perform effectively are considered to have a superior set of competencies. There is a strong bias to consider notions of competency in a context-free way. This tendency manifests itself in prescriptive comments about how possession of specific competencies can lead to high performance irrespective of the organisational context within which they are utilised. This literature tends to postulate a notion of competency as atomonistic, mechanistic, bureaucratic and one that reinforces a notion of competency as a straitjacket.

The literature reveals that a multiplicity of traditions and perspectives exist each with a different and relatively distinct set of underpinning assumptions. Cockerill & Hunt (1995), for example, suggest that these distinct perspectives may be labelled “traditionalists”, “inventors” and “scientists”. For traditionalists, the use of competencies is based on the behaviour of the most successful managers or employees in the organisation. They view successful job performance in terms of the speed of career advancement. They advocate the use of the characteristics of quickly promoted individuals as the basis for the development of an
organisation’s competency model. Inventors focus on predicting what an organisation and its attitudes will be in the future and consider this to be the most effective way of identifying appropriate managerial behaviours. The outcome of the perspective is the creation of competency lists based on imaginary future organisations. The scientific perspective place emphasis on identifying, measuring and developing behaviours, which will distinguish individuals, whom continuously outperform others. This perspective advocates that there are generalisable high performance competencies that appear to distinguish high performance from average performing employees.

Many descriptions of competency do not consider the characteristics of the human agent. In particular, they give little consideration to when competencies are used, how they are used and the moderating influence of personal characteristics on their usage. Sandberg (2000) uses the term "indirect descriptions of competency" to characterise a situation where the typologies advocated reflect the researchers' own models rather than capturing employee's notions or models of competence. The literature reinforces the general tradition of a positivist, quantitative approach, in particular the dual tendency to assume that there is an objective reality independent of and beyond the human mind and the decontextualisation of the individual in the competency debate. Work is conceptualised as objective described in precise terms and it exists independently of these employees who accomplish it. Work and worker are essentially independent.

While the intention, if not the practice, is to use workplace competencies derived from national standards, the definition of such competencies is often based on rationalistic job analysis techniques, rather than on time and motion studies which, it is argued, may lead to more effective workplace outcomes (Sandberg, 2000). One alternative, the phenomenological approach, has made only modest impact to date. However, this literature does postulate the view that our understanding of competence and competencies cannot ignore the internal organisational context, the role of the employee and their experiences of work. The tacit dimension is to the fore in this literature (Tyre & Von Heppel, 1997; Fielding, 1988). This contrasting tradition suggests that it is not the competencies themselves that are significant but instead it is the way that individuals experience work which is fundamental to their competence. Competence, this perspective suggests, must therefore, be internally rather than externally framed.

The emergence of a postmodernist lens to study competencies has some value. It is argued that postmodernism, by embracing chaos and complexity offers a coherent explanation to the unpredictable, uncertain and uncontrollable nature of the modern business environment (Raelin, 1995; Freedman, 1991). Free from the overarching ideological claims of positivism, it leaves open the possibility that competencies may need to be adjusted to take account of a range of contextual factors and as a result, competency frameworks may differ from one organisation to another (Cockerill, 1989).

**EXPLORING NOTIONS OF COMPETENCE AND COMPETENCY**

Definitional and boundary delineation issues exist at a number of levels within the competency literature. This confusion exists primarily for two reasons: differences between countries and differences arising from pedagogical theory on how people learn. The former is largely historically determined and reflects differences in relationships between education and the labour market in different countries. Pedagogical differences, on the other hand, relate to issues of how behaviourists, cognitivists and constructivistic theorists consider notions of competency. Levels of definitional confusion and differences in perspective exist:
Conceptualisations of the Function of Competency

The literature reveals that competencies are defined in terms of three distinct perspectives: competencies as individual characteristics; competencies as characteristics of organisations and the notion of competencies as a tool to structure and facilitate communication between education and the labour market (Boon et al. 2000).

(1) Competencies as Characteristics of Individuals

This perspective argues that competencies are essentially related to characteristics of individuals. Within this perspective, there are, however, differences in emphasis. The most important difference in emphasis here relates to whether these characteristics can be learned or whether they are innate. The dominant view is to emphasise the trainability dimension of competency and the potential contribution of workplace learning activities to the development of competencies (Eraut, 1994; Fletcher, 1992). A more traditional view emphasises that competencies and competence are given. They argue that characteristics such as emotion, attitude and cognition originate from innate abilities and therefore cannot be learned; they can only be developed (Klink et al. 2000). A related perspective here is the notion that competencies do not relate to capacities, but instead to the willingness and ability of the employee to use his/her capacities in specific situations (Spencer 1983).

(2) Competencies as Characteristics of Organisations

An alternative perspective is to conceptualise competencies as characteristics of organisations. This perspective takes as a starting point the view that human competencies are one of the resources available to organisations. The origins of this notion of competencies can be attributed to the work of Prahalad & Hamel (1990) who analysed the competitiveness of organisations and attributed it to the possession of core competencies. They postulated that organisations can possess unique clusters of factors that allow the firm to be competitive and human capital is one of those factors. Resource-based perspectives on the firm utilise the notion of competencies in this fashion. The resource-based view conceptualises the organisation as a collection of competencies and draws attention to issues of learning, including knowledge accumulation and experience. Cappelli & Singh (1992) argue that competent employees potentially create competitive advantage where such competencies are firm-specific and are difficult to imitate.

The issue of how firm-specific the human resource competencies are is a controversial point. Boon & Van Klink (2001) argue that many organisations possess very fixed and rather global listings of competencies and do not engage in efforts to produce a set of firm-specific descriptions or take proactive steps to develop these competencies. They argue that while it is appropriate to conceptualise competencies in this way, at the level of practice, it is problematic to implement because it is very difficult to find the appropriate level of context specificity in the description of competencies. They either come as lists with very broadly defined competencies or they are so detailed and reductive as to be of limited pragmatic value.

A further consideration here is whether competency frameworks should be based on current organisational priorities or should be future oriented and derived from an organisation’s vision statement. Such a dualistic choice is dependent on whether one views competencies as a tool enabling organisational change through direct communication with employees or whether one believes that competencies should be used as a behavioural modelling mechanism to deal with
current organisational problems and difficulties. Those who are labelled "inventors" would advocate a focus on future competencies.

Some commentators consider it to be an inappropriate conceptual stretch of the concept of competency to regard it as a characteristic of the organisation. One problem that immediately arises is the variation in terminology used. Selznick (1957) uses the term "distinctive competence." Teece (1990) talks about "dynamic capabilities." Prahalad & Hamel (1990) suggest the term "core competencies" and Kamoche (1996) suggests "human resource competencies." These definitions range from narrow specific descriptions to very broad ones that in some ways can be viewed as tautological; capabilities are defined in terms of competence, and competence is then defined in terms of capability (Nanda, 1996). The empirical support for core competencies at the organisational level significantly lags behind the theoretical development. The notion is solid at the macro-theoretical level but stands relatively unsupported by micro-theoretical models and empirical research. The theory would suggest that work-based learning activities represent a vital, if not pivotal, component of organisational success and strategy, however, there is no systematic evidence of a transformation of workplace learning activities by organisations on both sides of the Atlantic as a result of resource-based perspectives. (Hamel & Prahalad, 1993; Beleherman et al., 1994; Prager, 1999).

(3) Competency as a Mode of Discourse Between Education and the Labour Market

This perspective argues that competencies represent a tool to improve communication in education and the labour market. It conceptualises competencies as a framing device – a mode of discourse and it in no way attempts to specify the content of what competencies consist of. This perspective is commonly advocated in Continental Europe and to a certain extent in the U.K. Schlusmans et al. (1999) suggest that the need for such a discourse arises from two sets of developments. The first relates to the changing nature of the labour market with its emphasis on flexibility, employability, the potential for obsolescence of knowledge and skills and the emergence of knowledge as a production factor. These changes in the requirements of the labour market have in turn influenced views on how people are educated and trained in educational institutions. The view prevails that the educational sector is now expected to be a partner in the creation of knowledge and the development of human resources who are flexible and capable of working within innovative environments. Another development within this perspective of competencies is the perceived requirement for education to move away from more traditional pedagogical perspectives and utilise learning strategies and create contexts where students can learn cognitive and work related skills in realistic learning environments (Brown et al., 1989; Resnick, 1987; Lave & Wagner, 1991; Seniors 1990). It is clear that multiple conceptualisations of the function of competency exist each perspective highlight some significant differences in emphasis about the function of competencies.

THE CONTENT OF COMPETENCY & COMPETENCE

The lack of a precise or widely accepted definition of competency in the literature is considered problematic (Jubb & Robotham, 1997; Gorsline, 1996; Nordhaug & Gronhaug, 1994). The terms "competence" and "competency" are attributed multiple meanings depending on the context and the perspective advocated. It appears that our understanding of these terms depends on the scope (individual / organisational), aim (improving performance / gaining market power), range of HR instruments utilised (selection / pay / training / staff appraisal / career development), and the structure of the HR function (centralised / decentralised) within the organisation (Hondeghem & Vandermeulen, 2000). Such divergence in meaning presents difficulties when one makes comparisons across industry. It becomes difficult to theorise on the value of specific competencies to organisations because of definitional difficulties.
British & American Perspectives

The literature reveals differences in the conceptualisation of competencies between the US and the UK. Table one presents a conceptualisation of the differences.
Table One: Differences in Definition of Competencies: British versus the American Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis for Difference</th>
<th>British Approach</th>
<th>American Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong></td>
<td>Assessment &amp; certification of Employees</td>
<td>Development of competencies to enhance performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
<td>Focus on job/individual characteristics &amp; skill accumulation</td>
<td>Focus on individual behaviour &amp; attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Procedure to Develop</strong></td>
<td>Produce performance standards for job functions &amp; professions</td>
<td>Produce descriptions of excellent behaviour &amp; attributes to define standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of Organisational Context</strong></td>
<td>Context is not as significant as professional area &amp; specific job functions</td>
<td>Context defines the behaviours and traits required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conceptualisation of Work/Individual</strong></td>
<td>The characteristics of the work are the point of departure</td>
<td>Greater emphasis on the individual rather than specific tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodological Approach</strong></td>
<td>More multi-method and quantitative</td>
<td>Rationalistic &amp; positivistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scope</strong></td>
<td>Competencies are specific to professions &amp; job functions</td>
<td>Competencies are specific to organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Measurement</strong></td>
<td>Documentation of evidence of work activities &amp; experiences denotes evidence of competency</td>
<td>Quantitative measurement &amp; identification of a correlation between possession of attributes and work performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role of Assessor</strong></td>
<td>Formally assessed by external assessor to determine level</td>
<td>Assessment of performance by job supervisors &amp; job incumbent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perspective of Learning Advocated</strong></td>
<td>Constructivistic perspective of learning</td>
<td>Cognitive perspective of learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In its most general sense, the US perceives competence to be related to the individual and whether they possess the skills and knowledge to perform a specific job or role. The UK approach is arguably broader and the perception of competencies is one not only related to the attributes of job-holders, but also reference to a range of guidelines and personal effectiveness issues required to get a job done.

Within the British approach, competencies viewed as standards for job functions and professions, whereas in the American approach, the behaviour of excellent performers is considered the basis for the development of tests of relevant competencies. Generally, both British and American perspectives view competencies to be related to characteristics of individuals. The European perspective on competencies is analogous to that adopted in the U.K. Orstenk (1997) and Oliveara-Rees (1994) suggest for example, that in Germany, competencies are conceptualised in terms of the capacity of individuals to perform within a function or a profession and the focus is therefore on the qualification or certification they receive. Qualifications are viewed as denoting an official certification of knowledge, skill and attitude.

Both U.K. and American approaches differ fundamentally in their pedagogical perspective and assumptions about the learning process. The American approach places emphasis on a
cognitive perspective of learning, whereas the British and certainly the European variant place emphasis on a constructivistic view of learning. Both approaches offer alternative explanations of the context of competencies, their interaction with work and their measurement. Cognitive approaches place a lot of emphasis on objective measurement whereas constructivist approaches give emphasis to the subjective and motivational dimensions of competency.

Worker, Work & Multidimensional Approaches

Table two presents some definitions of competency commonly found in the literature. These definitions reflect three particular approaches to its definition: worker-oriented, work-oriented and multidimensional approaches.
Table 1: Some Common Definitions of Competency found in the Literature

**Worker-Oriented Definitions**

1. The behavioural characteristics of an individual that are causally related to effective and/or superior performance in a job. This means that there is evidence that indicates that possession of the characteristic precedes and leads to effective and/or superior performance on the job. (Boyatzis, 1982)

2. An underlying characteristic of an individual that is casually related to criterion referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation (Spencer & Spencer 1993)

3. A high performance or H-competency is a relatively stable set of behaviours which produces superior workgroup performance in more complex organisational environments. (Schroder, 1989)

**Work-Oriented Definitions**

4. Occupational competence (is) ... the ability to perform the activities within an occupation or function to the level of performance expected in employment. (Management Charter Initiative 1990)

5. The ability to perform the activities within an occupation (Nordhaug & Gronhaug, 1994)

6. An action, behaviour or outcome which the person should be able to demonstrate (Training Standards Agency, 2000)

**Multidimensional Definitions**

7. The ability to apply knowledge, understanding, practical and thinking skills to achieve effective performance to the standards required in employment. This includes solving problems and being sufficiently flexible to meet changing demands (NCVQ, 1997)

8. The skills, knowledge and understanding, qualities and attributes, sets of values beliefs and attitudes which lead to effective managerial performance in a given context, situation or role. (Woodall & Winstanley, 1998)


We will now comment on a number of significant contributions within each field.

In his earlier work, Boyatzis (1982) defined competency as "an underlying characteristic of a person, which results in effective and/or superior performance in a job." From this he developed the notion that there exists different levels of competencies, ranging from a "threshold level" to a "superior performance level." He generally subscribes to a worker-oriented approach. Spencer & Spencer (1993) provide another worker-oriented definition. The notion of causation differentiates both definitions. Spencer & Spencer require a higher standard of causation; they advocate that a link be established between a particular competency and
superior performance. Their work has as its ultimate aim, the measurement of individual characteristics and movement towards an index of key behaviours and skills.

The worker-orientated definitions are generally associated with the US approach and US academics. Dales & Iles (1992) summarise the outcomes of the US approach as follows: "The competencies generated have been primarily behavioural, specifying the skills or qualities that a person will use to do a job. They are often generic, trying to describe as succinctly as possible the behaviours that high performers may display, though in different proportions according to level, function or context."

The conceptualisations of Boyatzis and Spencer & Spencer of competency are predominantly input-based and worker-oriented and focus on person related variables that individuals bring to a job. Another perspective argues that competency notions should be output-based or work-oriented and considers the outputs associated with effective performance (Martin & Staines, 1994). The Management Charter Initiative definition, for example takes work as its point of departure and focuses on occupational areas or activities. However, such lists of activities do not of themselves indicate the attributes required to accomplish such activities effectively. European researchers generally advocate a work-oriented approach. Nordhaug & Gronhaug (1994) who work within an output perspective define competency as "the ability to perform the activities within an occupation." Tolley (1987) also advocates a work-oriented approach and suggests that organisations are increasingly looking for indicators of achievement such as adaptability, flexibility and enterprise. Stuart & Lindsay (1997) concludes that the UK approach is more heavily focused on the organisation and performance requirements of job positions, rather than on the job holders themselves. Within such a model, the underlying characteristics, identified by Boyatzis and his American colleagues are already assumed to exist.

Multi-dimensional definitions tend to draw on the best of both approaches; an indicative example is to be found in the work of Woodall & Winstanley (1998). Veres et al. (1990) adopted a multidimensional perspective to assess the ideal competencies of police. Their description consisted of 46 personal attributes and they were expressed in the form of statements of knowledge, skills and attitudes that corresponded to 23 police attributes. The work activities and the personal attributes were then quantified in percentage terms as they related to police work. Woodruffe (1991) more or less accepts that problems of definition exist and that different models may lead to an alternative definition.

Despite the plurality of definitional approaches and the use of competency approaches in educational and entrepreneurial arenas, Boon & Van der Klink (2001) suggest that the vagueness surrounding competencies seems not to hinder discourse on the topic. On the contrary, they posit that the strength of the concept lies in its complexity, serving to embrace educational and labour organisations, internal and external organisational experts and management and employee interests at the same time.

The Observable & Non-Observable Elements of Competency

Some commentators question the value of speaking of competence in a plural sense. Indeed, it has been suggested that competence is a molar concept similar to the concept of intelligence. Both concepts imply that they are composed of a complex of important interrelated elements. It follows that to speak of competencies as sub-parts of pieces that combine to make up the total is illogical in the same fashion that one may call “intelligences” as pieces of intelligence. There is some agreement however that there are observable and more non-observable elements of competence may be. Birdir & Pearson (2000) suggest that these components consist of skills, judgments, attitudes, values, entry skills, knowledge, ability and capacity.
The iceberg model can be used to illustrate the observable and more non-observable elements of competency. Knowledge and skills form the tip – at the bottom of the iceberg, the less visible elements of competencies exist and these control surface behaviours. These attributes include social role, self-image, traits and motives. In this model, social role and self-image exist at a conscious level whereas a person’s traits and motives lie further below the surface and closer to the core. If one adopts such a conceptualisation of competency, it has important implications for workplace learning. The top level of knowledge and skill is generally easier to train for while those attributes at the lower level are more difficult to develop. It is also arguable that the more complex the role, i.e. managerial, the more likely it is that effective performance is driven by characteristics at the lower levels of the iceberg. Derouen & Kleiner divide competence into technical, human and conceptual components. They further divide the technical component into professional and managerial elements and expand the conceptual category to include mental competence, which consists of the ability to identify and solve problems, to memorise and create for example. The three competency components need to be operated using mental skill. The first three competency components are termed intangible recessive skills, while the latter is a tangible skill.

An individual’s work performance is influenced by professional, managerial, people and mental components, but also by work values and attitudes. A person’s attitude is influenced by his values, while these values are in turn, influenced by mental state. Therefore, competence as a holistic concept consists of technical, management, people, attitude, value and mental skill components. They argue that mental skill components are the foundation of all the other components. The intangible elements of mental skills and values influence the tangible elements of attitude, professional, people and management components. This categorisation has major implications for workplace learning activities. Some competencies are easier to develop and transfer to the work context, whereas others take longer periods to develop and transfer. They suggest that professional and managerial components are difficult to develop and require a significant investment of time and financial resources. Other components such as work values and attitudes, people and mental skills are easier to transfer assuming that they are in the appropriate configuration to meet the requirements of the job, role or profession. Webster (2000) suggests that competence should be conceptualised as “the quality or state of being functionally adequate or of having sufficient knowledge, judgement, skill or strength for a particular duty. This perspective on competence emphasises particular knowledge and specific tasks. Krogh & Roos (1995) reinforce this view and suggest that one may only speak about competence where a particular fit or agreement between the knowledge and task exist. This would lead to the conclusion that competence is perceived as both knowledge-specific and task-specific and evolves through an interplay between both execution and knowledge acquisition.

COMPETENCY FRAMEWORKS & TYPOLOGIES

There exist some differences in perspective on how competencies should be categorised. Sparrow et al. (1994) suggests that competencies fall into three categories, behavioural, managerial and core competencies. Behavioural competencies are defined as behavioural repertoires which employees bring to and input on the job. The level of analysis used is the person and the job and there is a clear specification that these competencies are what employees need to bring to the role/job to perform to the required level. Managerial competencies tend to be defined as knowledge, skills and attitude and a small number of personal behaviours. The unit of analysis is the organisation and it is assumed that such competencies are generic; are externally transferable and there is an entry threshold standard. This contrasts with the concept of a behavioural competency where the performance criterion is based on characteristics of excellent individual performance.
Core competencies derive from within the realm of strategy and competitive advantage and some would argue that it is stretching it somewhat to call the strategic resources of the organisation as core competencies. The unit of analysis is both an organisational and individual one. While more commonly referred to in an organisational context (Prahalad & Hamel 1990), in explaining organisational competitiveness, the core competency approach is also used to determine the promotional readiness of a manager within an organisation (Langley 2000). In this context, it is argued that it can act as a useful tool in assessing the developmental needs of future managers.

There exist many examples of attempts to devise competency frameworks with application to practice. Boyatzis (1982) made earlier attempts, to specify competency frameworks when he distinguished between "threshold" and "high performance" level competencies. Whereas this approach equated competencies with levels of performance, other approaches sought to classify competencies in terms of different levels of generality and specificity to the organisation. The Kioto people management model, for example (Devisch, 1998) categorises competencies as core, functional and specific competencies.

Devisch (1998) argues that the concept of core competencies refer to the means by which employees adjust to the corporate culture of the organisation. Such competencies are considered non-transferable and differ from one organisation to another. Functional competencies are linked to job roles and the way in which they interact with other roles. They are considered essential to performance and can be both technical and organisational in nature. Specific competencies are defined as the attributes that a person is required to bring to a job, in order to ensure successful performance. These competencies may be transferable if a person accepts a similar job in another organisation but are generally not thought to be transferable to other dissimilar work. Many competency frameworks are static, mechanistic, and seek to prescribe a fixed list of desirable competencies. They generally fail to take account of the need for flexibility and openness to change and underestimate the importance of non-task specific competencies.

Kuijpers (2001) adopts an even broader perspective and proposes a typology of competencies that consists of three levels:

- General working competencies which she defines as competencies required for different working situations and at different time periods
- Learning competencies which consists of a bundle of competencies which facilitate the development of working competencies
- Career related competencies which are defined to manage working and learning competencies within a personal career path

Nordhaug (1998) advocates a more robust classificatory framework of work-related competencies. This framework is different from previous typologies in that it utilises three levels of analysis: task-specific, firm-specific and industry-specific. Nordhaug's contribution to the debate is significant because it considers non-firm or industry specific competencies. He suggests three categories here. He uses the term “meta-competence” to encompass a broad spectrum of knowledge, skills and aptitudes such as analytical capabilities, creativity, knowledge of culture and capacity to tolerate and master uncertainty. His additional categories here include intra-organisational competencies which include knowledge about organisational culture, informal networks, the political dynamics of the organisation and general industry competencies such as knowledge about industry and the ability to analyse the activities of competitors.
Considerable doubt exists as to whether competencies can be truly classified or formulated into typologies. Collin (1989) referring to Sternberg's triarchic theory argues that "underlying successful performance in many real-world tasks is tacit knowledge of a kind that is never explicitly taught and in many instances never even verbalised." Given the intangible nature of many competencies, this is a valid argument. It raises the question as to whether classification is possible or valuable. Linked to this, is the argument that the "whole" may not be capable of division into sub-categories for the purposes of classification. In this context, employees are viewed not simply as practitioners of specific competencies, but as actors sensitive to a wide range of factors, particularly intuitive experience. This reasoning advocates that the study of competencies should take place within a context, which addresses the employee as a whole person.

IDENTIFYING THE EXISTENCE OF COMPETENCY

Competency identification and assessment are controversial issues. Considering criticisms about the validity and the reliability of identification processes (Burgoyne, 1989; Collin, 1989; Jubb & Robotham, 1997) many of the assessment methods are strongly based on positivistic traditions and reflect the scientific principles of quantitative approaches. The methods used related to the definitional perspective advocated. Work-oriented approaches advocate methods such as the job element method whereas worker-oriented approaches advocate personal profiling; multidimensional approaches do not advocate any particular method but instead suggest the use of multiple methods. Some of the methods merit specific comment.

One frequently advocated method is critical incident, where employees of average and high performance are asked to describe critical situations, which have occurred while at work and how they reacted to these situations (New, 1996; Thomson & Mabey, 1994). The learning specialist tries to establish the important factors, which distinguish the high performance of one employee from the average performance of another. This method is problematic (Orpen, 1997). The choice of incident by the employee as well as the employee’s description of their own actions can in many cases be a subjective exercise and this has implications for the usability of the outputs. The evaluation of an employee's performance is subjective in itself and generally in critical situations, it is difficult to predict individual behaviour, whether of high-performing or average performance and consequently the future consistency of behaviour is difficult to predict.

Job function analysis is also commonly used. Pottinger (1987) suggests that it involves the identification of the task functions which are used to infer the knowledge and skills for job performance. It has the potential to identify in an effective manner the essential prerequisite skills and knowledge for a job in addition to the identification of possible training and development issues. It is argued that job function analysis is not very effective at identifying the soft components of the job, such as the measurement of behaviour, attitude, intuition and creativity.

The literature on competency identification is strongly positivistic in orientation. It assumes a causal relationship between underlying characteristics of competence and superior performance. The research evidence however reveals mixed evidence of this relationship. Early work by Boyatzis (1982) for example, found that where a relationship exists, it could at best be described as associational. Parker & Wall (1996) take a more definite position and argue that no systematic relationship exists between the possession of particular competencies and performance outcomes. Recent research reveals a more positive picture of the beneficial role of competencies to individual and group performance improvements. The Competitiveness White Paper (DTI 1995: 116 – 118) for example argues that management performance can be improved through the development of standards and qualifications for management and which
are linked to development and training opportunities. In a comprehensive study of competency-based management development in sixteen organisations, Winterton & Winterton (1996) reported major improvements in individual performance attributable to the effective use of competency frameworks.

The model implemented further complicates the problems of competency measurement. Work-oriented models view competencies as recognisable in terms of job specific outcomes. It follows that the competencies required for a job or role are assessed through an analytical process called functional analysis. It is envisaged that such a top-down process will yield a set of items including the job's key purpose and key roles. Each in turn is broken down into units of competence, which in turn is referred to by elements of competence and performance standards. British organisations use a variation of the work-oriented approach where they try to ascertain the manner in which the components of competence interact. The British system views competence as consisting of three basic components: tasks, task management and the job environment.

Worker-oriented models see measurement concerned with the generation of lists of behaviours or personal attributes that relate to effective role performance. Essentially the problem is that in order to measure something one needs a yardstick. Consequently where alternative models of competence exist, it is difficult to arrive at a universal understanding a notion of competence that is amenable to measurement for the purposes of benchmarking levels of competence across industry sectors.

Table three presents a summary of the literature on a number of competency identification methods.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Researchers</th>
<th>Process</th>
<th>Effectiveness</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct Observation</td>
<td>Boam &amp; Sparrow (1992) Mirabile (1997)</td>
<td>• Employees are asked to perform a number of critical tasks&lt;br&gt;• Observers record the tasks being performed which in turn form the basis of competencies</td>
<td>• Relatively cheap to implement &amp; not time consuming&lt;br&gt;• Provides a clear picture of the observable elements&lt;br&gt;• Not effective observing mental processes&lt;br&gt;• Subject to observer error</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Incident Technique</td>
<td>New (1996) Thomson &amp; Mabey (1994)</td>
<td>• Involves clarifying the differences between average &amp; superior performers&lt;br&gt;• Interviews with the job-holder, supervisor or other relevant person&lt;br&gt;• Participants asked to describe particular job incidents&lt;br&gt;• Process is repeated a number of times&lt;br&gt;• Individuals must describe what behaviours were displayed, who was involved &amp; the outcome</td>
<td>• Ability to capture unusual behaviours&lt;br&gt;• Involves key individuals in the job process&lt;br&gt;• Requires a long data collection process&lt;br&gt;• Requires critical knowledge of the position&lt;br&gt;• Capacity to identify good and bad behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Competency Assessment Method</td>
<td>Spencer &amp; Signe (1993) McClelland (1973)</td>
<td>• A team is formed to identify the skills and knowledge required&lt;br&gt;• Team conducts interviews to identify attributes of outstanding performers&lt;br&gt;• Data is used to develop a competency model&lt;br&gt;• Expert panels validate the model to determine its effectiveness</td>
<td>• Data can be collected in an effective manner&lt;br&gt;• Useful to identify job functions of individual jobs&lt;br&gt;• Tends to focus on job functions and overlook personal attributes&lt;br&gt;• May take some time to generate an outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert Panels</td>
<td>Spencer &amp; Signe (1993) Cockerill &amp; Hunt (1995) Sparrow &amp; Boam (1994)</td>
<td>• Selection of a panel of in-house experts &amp; others who have superior knowledge&lt;br&gt;• Panel observes employees performing tasks and identifies a list of competencies they consider relevant to job&lt;br&gt;• Prioritising of the list to identify the ones that require priority development</td>
<td>• May give the process legitimacy and credibility within the organisation&lt;br&gt;• May have difficulty pulling together a panel of appropriate experts&lt;br&gt;• Suitable to larger organisations&lt;br&gt;• A tendency to miss out on certain competencies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Universal or Context-Specific Competencies

Kakabadse (1991) suggests that superior performance often occur in hard-working collaborative environments. Consequently, an important question in the context of workplace learning is whether the competency bundle which allows individuals to achieve superior performance levels in one organisation, can be replicated when they transfer to other organisations. The answer to this question depends on whether one espouses that competencies are specific to a particular organisation or whether they can be derived from acquired knowledge, skills or attitudes. It raises questions as to what extent, if any, an organisation's culture and external environment moderates the development of competencies (Townley, 1994).

It is arguable in the context of managerial work, with its unpredictable and uncertain character, that a list of core competencies is largely irrelevant and impractical (Hayes et al., 2000; Burgoyne, 1989). Commentators argue that effective management relies to a considerable degree on intuition or "tacit knowledge" that cannot be fully defined (Antonacopoulou & Fitzgerald, 1996; Cappelli & Crocker-Hefter, 1996; Albanese, 1989). Hogg (1994) for example, argues that a context-specific argument is flawed in its assumption that a specific job consists of a number of discrete tasks. An over-reliance on the use of context-specific competencies may lead to a situation, where managerial work is reduced to a series of atomistic tasks. Johnston & Sampson (1993) suggest that skills must be understood as integrated and holistic and it is difficult, if not impossible to separate them into constituent parts for competency classification purposes.

In contrast, to focus on universal competencies assumes that all managers require a similar set to be effective. Raelin et al (1995) argues that such an approach is too prescriptive, embracing some competencies and rejecting others. They advocate that management requires a myriad of competencies, some of which may appear to be contradictory, but are required by the circumstances in which the manager operates.

The concept of experience is a relevant one in the context of competencies but is often ignored. Martin and Staines (1994) for example, argue in the context of small firm management, for the requirement of managers to possess a sound technical knowledge of the industry derived from working a considerable period of time within it. There is strong empirical evidence to suggest, in the managerial context that experience colours the way in which managers approach particular problems and difficulties (Townley, 1994; Ashworth & Sexton, 1990). The value of experience is significantly underestimated in the academic literature written about competencies and would tend to side with a context-specific argument (Brown 1994).

The employability debate raises a number of important questions with respect to the issue of universal versus specific competencies. Feldman (1996) points out that competency development in the form of seeking out opportunities to develop universal competencies enhances an individual’s employability. In an increasingly competitive business environment, with decreasing promotional opportunities, job rotation strategies allow employees to increase their skills, knowledge and experience and increase their marketability in the external labour market (Greenhaus et al. 1994). Indeed DeFillippi et al (1996) convincingly argue that firm and task oriented competencies are changing rapidly, causing a sharp decline in the life-span of many competencies. Competencies that may have been important in the past are becoming outdated by virtue of technological and market changes. Consequently, employees must ensure that they invest in competencies that are in tune with prevailing business and technological trends.

Increasingly, individuals are taking responsibility for their own professional development (Kossek et al. 1998; Metz 1998; Arthur & Rousseau 1996). They must therefore ensure that the
bundle of competencies they acquire makes them uniquely marketable in meeting the high skill requirements of employers. In this regard, the transferability of competencies has attracted much attention. It has been argued that the competencies developed in one job may be helpful, or even essential for successful performance in other jobs (Greenhaus 1994). Employees with highly transferable competencies are not organisationally bound, as their competencies are portable and can be used to good effect in different organisations (Sullivan et al. 1998). In contrast, employees with low transferability of competencies are less employable as they are bound by their present employer’s organisational-specific skills, which may not be effective in other employment (Hirsch et al. 1996). In conclusion, Baker et al. (1996) argues that employees trying to build up transferability of competencies have to try to balance the possible stagnation and boredom of high transferability, against the threat of losing all previously acquired competence if they move to a position for which prior competence has been poor preparation.

People Versus Task-Oriented Competencies

The person versus task dichotomy represents another lively debate. Bergenhenegouwen et al. (1996) argue, in the managerial context, that managers must possess both a range of personal competencies and task competencies to perform effectively. They must also possess the vision to encourage the development of personal and task competencies among subordinates. The argument runs along the lines that such a perspective allows employees to share a common vision of the organisation and permits organisations to link resource requirements to business strategies. However, it is argued that competency models do not specify the balance between these two sets of competencies. This represents a significant drawback because it in turn inhibits the potential of workplace learning to correct any imbalance between the two sets. Currie et al. (1995) posits that competency models fail to provide a weighting system, which would allow organisations to prioritise competencies. Consequently, all competencies carry equal importance. A production manager may be more focused on task-oriented competencies, whereas a sales manager may be more concerned with enhancing person-oriented competencies.

The balance between person- and task-oriented competencies will vary according to the organisational and industry context. Nordhau (1998) suggests that person-centred competencies can be called meta-competencies because they encompass a broad range of personal skills and aptitudes, such as creativity, ability to communicate and to cooperate with others, the capacity to tolerate and master uncertainty and the ability to adjust to change. Van der Wagen (1994) highlights the importance of person-oriented competencies in the service industry, which is heavily dependent on customers and service quality. This led her to suggest that the focus of future research should be on the development of competency frameworks for industry segments.

Individual versus Team Competencies

The unit of analysis utilised in the competency literature is the individual; in more recent years the organisational level of analysis is more pronounced in the organisational behaviour literature. Increasingly, the emphasis in the literature and in organisational practice is on the development of teams at all levels within the organisation (Prager, 1999; Taggar, Hachell & Saha, 1999). Strategic decisions are no longer taken by individuals acting alone, but by teams. Kakabadse & Anderson (1993) argues that the prevalence of mergers, the focus on product and service quality and customer care and orientation suggests that teams are now the unit of focus for learning interventions, not individuals. Top-team composition is currently an important issue within the HRM/D literature. Boam & Sparrow (1992) posit that organisations should
consider top teams in terms of a bundle of competencies, rather than seeking out individuals who each fit a desired competency profile. Overmeer (1997) predicts that collections of individuals, who have conflicting norms of performance, may result in the creation of an organisation-based action bias. Havaleshka (1999) posits that organisational success is often contingent on the proper cohesion of top team members and the mix of competencies, which these individuals possess. In agreement, Alderson (1993) identifies six behavioural competencies essential for organisational success:

- Good interpersonal relationships among team members
- Capacity for openness and willingness to discuss issues
- High levels of trust among team members
- Discipline and cohesion in decision-making
- Capacity to discuss and understand both long and short-term issues

While studies reveal that the correct identification and implementation of generic team competencies can lead to more effective organisational outcomes (Winterton & Winterton 1999; Hoerr 1989; Shea & Guzzo 1987), little work to date focuses on the individual competencies that team members should possess and the optimum mix of individual competencies within a team.

**Maximum or Minimum Competency**

Whether competencies constitute a minimum level of performance, which employees are expected to achieve or a maximum level, one which is suited to the realms of top-class employees is contentious (Athey et al, 1999). In his early work, Boyatzis (1982) clearly demarcated these issues, creating a range from "Threshold level" to "Superior performance level." He recognised different levels of competency. Stuart & Lindsay (1997) suggest that the lens of the organisation define the level of competence required by individuals. By using the image of a lens, they recognise that the organisational focus (and thus the focus of the lens) is liable to vary over time as circumstances change. Jubb & Robotham (1997) warn of the risks of using a competency approach in such a fashion. They argue that due to varying levels of competency, the boundaries may be perceived differently by individuals within organisations. They suggest that if organisations use competencies as ideals to strive for, the risk exists that they will ignore competencies which are viewed to be less important. However, it is argued that to be of value, competency models need to encompass the total range of competencies necessary for effective performance.

Comford & Athanasou (1995) suggest that current notions of competence sets levels too low. They highlight that competence-based learning activities do not set high enough goals. They view competence as a mid-way stage of attainment in the skill learning process & argue that the objective of any learning within organisations should be on maximum proficiency and preferably expert levels. Commentators such as Cornelius (1999) take issue with this perspective and advocates the notion that competency is level neutral and all an organisation is required to do is set a level high enough to achieve excellence given the context in which it operates. However, a practical difficulty with such an argument is that any model of competence, which advocates an excellence standard, would allow too few employees to be certified as competent. The setting of competency levels is of particular concern to organisations operating in tight labour markets where any competency frameworks developed must be perceived to have a beneficial impact on both employee development and morale and in addition should align with the organisation’s employee retention strategies.

Given the strong behaviourist background of the competency concept and the focus on modelling employees to meet the standards of so-called “experts”, it is postulated that the use of competencies as an idealised level that employees should strive for is the dominant model
currently used by organisations. In this regard, parallels can be drawn between competency frameworks and mentoring and coaching initiatives, where the main emphasis is on providing psychological and skill-based support to the employee to aid their development and improve performance. While both approaches can work successfully in tandem, training departments are often reluctant to move from centralised to decentralised forms of employee development, with the inevitable loss of power and control.

CONCLUSION

This paper considers issues emerging from the use of competencies as a basis for the provision of work-based learning activities. The competency approach, in essence, suggests that if organisations design learning events to enhance the competencies of employees to perform specific job functions, then they can develop individuals who are competent and do it in a more targeted fashion. Debate exists about what competencies consist of. Some commentators view competencies as bundles of demonstrated knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) and argue that to define competencies in this way, one goes beyond the more traditional KSAs; competencies represent KSAs that are demonstrated in a job context influenced by culture and business context. Competencies are also to be considered as elements of the job that are important for employees to perform effectively if they are to be deemed competent. Some researchers view competencies as clusters of KSAs that make a real difference in the competitive environment. This moves the concept into the realms of resource-based theory and marks a significant shift in thinking that competencies are generally thought of as individual attributes, organisationally-specific and job generic (relevant to all jobs within one organisation), the performance components of which may be either job generic or job specific depending on the competency.

Competency models consider the development of competence not in terms of any set programme of learning: the issue is not whether the employee is trained but whether the employee can do what is required by the role, function, job or profession. How the competency is developed is unimportant. It is argued that competence has no time limits: individuals develop and acquire them at their own pace. Employees are considered to be not yet competent rather than incompetent. Notions of competency are advocated as egalitarian and premised on the view that given the right motivation, circumstances and practice, anyone can develop almost any set of competencies. In a workplace learning context, the notion of competency is based on the job, rather than on common standards of performance achievable in the workplace. Competence is generally considered relevant to the job performed and is viewed as the minimum level of achievement that is necessary to perform that job effectively.

On the surface, notions of competency appear so obviously useful that they cannot be ignored. Consequently, the competence movement has taken hold in a number of countries among them Australia, the USA, the UK, the Scandinavian countries & Israel. Contradictory evidence exists on whether competency models have as yet gained widespread acceptance within organisations. Their use by organisations provokes much discussion within the academic literature and amongst practitioners. Many of the criticisms are pragmatic in nature including the views that competency frameworks are a recipe for under-achievement and that competence is difficult (if not impossible) to define and measure. The non-pragmatic theoretical critique focuses on the discourse engaged in and around the competency movement. Specific criticisms here relate to notions of power relationships within organisations and the assumptions made about the usage of competence, the role of the individual and assumptions about the organisation and the philosophical basis of competencies.

A number of non-pragmatic issues emerge in respect of the use of competencies as a basis for workplace learning. Many of the non-pragmatic issues focus on questions of philosophy,
epistemology and methodology. The way in which competency ideas have been incorporated into workplace learning discourse largely relates to issues of increased international competition and the potential for sustainable competitive advantage. It is arguable that the philosophical and epistemological difficulties are more complex than the technical ones. Technical problems, in particular questions of measurement, assessment and definition undermine the credibility of competencies in a workplace learning context. However, the philosophical bias has resulted in greater attention being devoted to short-term control type learning at the expense of workplace learning in its broader sense.

Arguments are made that competency models promote a conformist culture and give recognition to rather insular learning activities, limit more creative learning activities and ultimately reinforce organisational inequalities. Competency-based learning is considered too specialised to provide evidence of generalisable, cross-functional use and not specialised enough to be of utility to employers in filling specific positions. Competency models are also considered by some to be overly bureaucratic, overly elaborate and of factoring the human agent out of the learning process.

On the epistemological and methodological levels, there is evidence of a bias in the current competency discourse. The literature treats notions of competency as somewhat independent of context and the role of the human agent is not central to many accounts. It is assumed that evidence of competence can be objectively and quantifiably assessed. Many conceptions of competence are not those of the agent or employee but of some other party i.e. the researcher. Limited emphasis has to date focused on employee’s conceptions of competence and how such conceptions may influence notions of workplace learning and in particular the learning process.

Many pragmatic criticisms exist. Chief among them is the lack of a coherent definition. The approaches broadly divide along US & UK lines. The US approach identifies itself with an input, worker-oriented model, whereas the UK model focuses more on an output, worker-oriented model. Some commentators call for a more multidimensional approach. Academics have to date found mixed evidence of links between the use of competency models and specific improvements in employee and/or organisational performance. Such a preoccupation reflects the strong positivistic assumptions that characterise the general discourse on competencies. A view prevails that until there is a satisfactory resolution of the measurement problem, the competency approach will be subject to questions concerning its validity. Others question the futility of a positivist perspective and suggest that skepticism will exist as to whether or not it is entirely possible to condense jobs into a series of clearly defined competencies or attributes. An alternative, interpretivist paradigm argues that the notion of competence and competencies should be studied in a specific context where the interaction issues of worker and work can be fully considered.

Various dimensions of the measurement debate are articulated in the literature: specifically, the lack of a universal model of competence and a universal understanding of the phenomena of competence. Many contributions have sought to present classifications or typologies of competency. Specific measurement and classification issues emerge. One such issue concerns the question of universal or context-specific competencies: specifically, the extent to which competencies are transferable to other organisations. Organisational culture and environmental variables may have a significant impact on the universality of competencies. In seeking to establish a balance between the universal and context-specific debate, some commentators advocate that experience of the industry is essential to superior performance in the management context, and particularly so for more universal competencies such as creativity, risk taking and innovation. A second classification issue focuses on the person-task continuum. The competency literature makes a distinction between person- and task-oriented competencies. It tends to treat both categories equally. Many commentators and practitioners
argue that the significance of person and task competencies is contingent on the prerequisites of the job. This has led some academics to suggest that if competency approaches are to have enhanced utility as a basis for workplace learning, research should focus on the competency requirements of jobs in similar industry sectors.

Competency models clearly have strengths and weaknesses in a workplace learning context. Despite significant investments made by organisations in competency frameworks, they have not always produced the expected outcomes. Much of the debate on competencies takes an objective, rationalistic perspective and tends to describe human competence in an indirect fashion viewing it as a set of employee characteristics and characteristics of the work itself. Their potential can be enhanced by a more considered analysis of the context within which they are applied. They must be embedded not only within the supporting HR systems, but in terms of the wider organisation context, including its culture, the extent to which a competency ethos exists within the organisation and employees must understand how competency enhancement fits into their career development. This latter requirement perhaps requires a shift in the way competencies are defined and place a greater focus on their context dependent nature.
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