

Are your competencies relevant?

What are competencies?

Competencies are the knowledge, skills and attitudes that a person brings to a task to produce superior results.

Where do association management competencies come from and who uses them?

In 1997 the Canadian Society of Association Executives (CSAE) developed Association Management Competency Standards. These standards were updated in 2001 and another review is currently under way. The competencies serve as a basis for the development of curriculum for the Certified Association Executive Program and the CAE professional designation. Most of CSAE's ongoing professional development and resource centre support services are linked to these competencies.

The CAE® Competency Standards have six core domains which cover 44 sub-domains. The core domains are:

- Leadership
- Association Structure and Environment
- Direction and Strategy
- Membership and Services
- Support Operations
- Programs and Services

A summary of the CAE® Competency Standards can be found at www.csae.com by searching for CAE Program Competencies.

CSAE provides a self-assessment tool to help association managers identify areas for ongoing development. The tool supports development of a career management plan and can be used to benchmark personal development and set plans for building a competency profile. This tool can help you see how you measure up and is available by searching for "Self Evaluation Tool" at www.csae.com.

Employers and search consultants use competencies to develop job descriptions and career advertisements as part of the recruitment and selection process. Employers are also starting to use the Association Management Competency Standards in concert with their performance management and appraisal activities.

The competencies cover many areas. Yet, employers are expecting senior association managers to be able to demonstrate most of the competencies on short notice. In reality, one would rarely be able to demonstrate a significant competence in all levels at a given time, as the nature of the strategy and tasks one deals with is usually much narrower as a result of organizational priorities. Another way of looking at it is that an organization with exceptional growth would require different competencies than an organization retrenching activity.

Differences in competency deployment are affected by various change drivers, some of which are:

- External conditions, changed consumer behaviour, regulatory conditions or new entrants to the sector or marketplace;
- New volunteer leaders or personnel in senior leadership positions;
- Mergers and acquisitions;
- New technologies and innovations;
- Fractures within the organization;
- Governance and structural changes;
- Moving the organization from tinkering to transformational change.

Drivers and other factors will influence an organization's strategic direction. This in turn will influence the business plan. Based on business plan activities, the extent of new competencies required and those not needed can be determined. A key planning implementation step often overlooked is determining the competencies available and measuring to determine the competency gap.

If the strategy calls for substantial performance in membership growth and market penetration of product and services, competencies in research, assessment/analysis, marketing and sales would be required. If these competencies are not available, options available are to hire, outsource or upgrade and train existing staff.

As associations realize they need to develop and practice the characteristics of a high performance association, they recognize the need to enhance competencies at the volunteer and staff level. This, of course, means a shift to either draw upon your other competencies or develop competencies as required. Failure to provide the necessary competencies may lead to poor performance and whatever consequences that brings.

Career success can be restricted by not knowing what competencies one needs to develop, or when to shift emphasis on competencies. Managers that understand the value and competitive edge continuous learning will provide in their careers will try to reduce the competency gap. It is the responsibility of the association manager to meet the current and anticipated demands of their employing organization.

Competencies required by an association manager are increasing and constantly shifting due to changing association challenges and opportunities as well as technological improvements and other drivers.

How good are you? How good do they think you are?

If you use the assessment tool and find you have gaps, a next step is to first understand your current needs and then your future needs based on a desired position. The self-assessment to competency standards is a key part of career management planning. Career management planning allows you to get an accurate assessment of your current skills and knowledge and allows you to plan for your future career requirements.

By planning your career, you are in a process of identifying all possible development activities which will help close the gap between the knowledge and skills you possess and the knowledge and skills you need. You are, in effect, taking control of your own career development, instead of letting your career path to be shaped by accident, fate or other peoples' decisions. Ultimately, effective career management planning with a focus on competencies will enable you to achieve increased work satisfaction and success when you achieve a good fit between your interest, knowledge, skills and values, and the work challenges you face. More importantly it will help you build and shift competencies as required.

In trying to eliminate the competency gap you may need a passport to help provide guidance and support your career management plan. For your journey you can treat the competencies and the listing of learning opportunities as the map, and your career management plan and development needs as your passport that gets stamped as you accomplish planned developments.

It should be noted that management competencies are only part of the equation for association success. Board competencies are also critical and need to be understood. Board recruitment and development should reflect organizational strategy and required competencies. A listing of board responsibilities and required competencies as well as a process to determine if your board possesses the competencies it needs to govern with excellence can be found in, "Best Practices and Tools for Not-For-Profit Boards", a CSAE publication.

Students in the CAE Program are required to complete a career management plan. They often report that this is one of the most difficult assignments they have ever had to complete. While the process of taking a serious look at ones career can be daunting, it can also be extremely rewarding. I often get emails from former students indicating that the plan has given them a focus and has resulted in many accomplishments and successes. Perhaps if you're looking for increased success, you too will take the time to determine if your competencies are still relevant.

Competency Self Assessment Steps

Step 1 - Identify where you fit with the competency standards.

Determine the scope of independent action achieved for each competency, carefully read through the competency standards and note experiences that fit in whole or in part.

Step 2 - Document capabilities (rationale) to support your personal competency profile.

Indicate how the competencies have been demonstrated; e.g. What kind of projects or activities did you participate in or manage? These examples will assist you to identify how well you have mastered the competencies and where you fit on the profile.

Step 3 - Identify your professional development needs.

Identify specific development actions that might be planned in consideration of your career development priorities and what scope for independent action is desired. This includes noting areas where you have not had sufficient experience.

Step 4 - Discuss personal competency profile with mentor or performance appraisers.

Meet with your mentor or others to review the factors that contributed to the formation of your personal competency profile. Progress points for the future should be set and professional development opportunities discussed based on organizational needs. This provides the basis for planning and achievement during the year.

Step 5 - Pursue goals.

After the discussion, write down points and begin pursuing the plan.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE.

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