Implementing Competency-Based Training

Definition of Competency

Competency is the underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance on the job.

The concept of competency focuses on workplace expectations rather than on the actual learning process. It refers to skills and knowledge that can be transferred and applied to new situations and environments.

A competency model describes the particular combination of knowledge; skills and characteristics needed to effectively perform a role in an organization and is used as a human resource tool for selection, training and development, appraisal, and succession planning. It should include both innate and acquired abilities. It is essentially a pyramid built on the foundation of inherent talents and incorporating the types of skills and knowledge that can be acquired through learning, effort and experience. At the top of the pyramid is a specific set of behaviours that are the manifestation of all the innate and acquired abilities.

Competency models are a means of ensuring that an organization’s investment in her people supports the achievement of strategic goals. They can be used to:

- Clarify job and work expectations
- Hire the best available people
- Maximize return on investment
- Enhance feedback
- Align behaviour with organizational strategies and values
- Adapt to change
Overview of CBT

Competency-Based Training is a systematic approach aimed at improving the teaching/learning process. By definition, Competency-Based Training refers to a system whereby tasks or competencies are identified to define the content of training. Competency-Based Training may also be known as "Performance-Based Training", "Criterion-Referenced Training", "Mastery Learning", or "Instructional Systems Design". Regardless of the label, the training process is essentially the same.

Competency-based training (CBT) is concerned with what a person can do as a result of training rather than time spent in training. It focuses on the skills and knowledge an individual has, rather than on how they attained them. CBT gives individuals, businesses and industries greater choice and diversity in what, where and how they learn. Whether training is undertaken in a classroom, workshop, in the workplace or a combination of any or all of these, it can result in a qualification which is recognizable, portable and consistent across the organization. What an individual already knows is also taken into account, irrespective of how the knowledge and skills were gained. A CBT system is primarily concerned with ensuring workers are equipped with the skills needed by the industry.

Essential concepts that must be understood and implemented for Competency-Based Training to be successful include:

- Competency-Based Training identifies what employees must know and do to successfully perform on the job and assists them in acquiring these skills.
- Competency-Based Training is success-oriented. An underlying philosophy of this approach holds that almost anyone, given quality instruction and sufficient time, can master almost any task. The question then changes from "How many learners mastered each task?" to "How long did it take every learner to master every task?"
- Each instructional unit of Competency-Based Training should contain specific objectives and standards for successful performance. Learners must demonstrate that all skills and knowledge have been mastered.
- Learning materials used in this process should identify, verify, and publish in advance of instruction the tasks (competencies) the learner is to learn and perform, the criteria by which the learner will be evaluated, and the conditions under which evaluation will occur.
- Since individuals learn at varying rates, some of the training activities are learner-oriented and self-paced. An integral part of this instruction is feedback throughout the learning process with opportunities for learners to correct their performance as they proceed.
- Competencies should be gained in small, learnable steps until the learner becomes competent in the total concept. The learner is provided with enough time (within reason) to master one task before moving on to the next.
- Competency-Based Training requires accountability from learners. This means accountability for learning knowledge, for applying knowledge learned in the work setting, and for demonstrating the ability to perform specific tasks to a desired level.
Key Features of A CBT Approach

The key features of this approach are that

- It is based directly on the skills and abilities required to do a job;
- Takes account of learners' existing level of competency, irrespective of how it was acquired;
- Allows learners to enter and exit training programs at various stages;
- Suits the learner’s pace and style of learning;
- Allows training to take place in a variety of settings including workplaces, simulated work environments, and training rooms;
- Allows learners to be assessed when they are ready; and
- Provides learners with a record of the competencies they have achieved.

Advantages and Limitations of CBT

Training and development systems have always sought to address the skills and knowledge required for successful job performance. However, they do not always target the competencies that are most relevant or have the greatest impact. Frequently, training and development efforts are driven by an immediate business need or problem or sometimes by the latest fad. Using a competency model as the basis of a training and development system helps to avoid a short-term perspective of or following fads and ensures that the system focuses on the right things rather than the latest things. The following are the advantages of CBT at the workplace:

- Participants will achieve competencies required in the performance of their jobs.
- Participants build confidence as they succeed in mastering specific competencies.
- Participants receive a transcript or list of the competencies they have achieved.
- Training time is used more efficiently and effectively as the trainer is a facilitator of learning as opposed to a provider of information.
- More training time is devoted to evaluating each participant’s ability to perform essential job skills.

While there are a number of advantages of competency-based training, there also are some potential limitations. Prior to implementing CBT, it is important to consider these limitations:

- Unless the CBT trainers are well-trained and qualified, there is a tendency to “teach as we were taught” and the CBT trainers may quickly slip back into the role of the traditional teacher.
- A CBT course is only as effective as the process used to identify the competencies. When little or no attention is given to identification of the essential job skills, then the resulting training course is likely to be ineffective.
- A course may be classified as competency-based, but unless specific CBT materials and training approaches (e.g., learning guides, checklists and coaching) are designed to be used as part of a CBT approach, it is unlikely that the resulting course will be truly competency-based.
Benefits to the Organization

- CBT provides the opportunity for employees to apply their knowledge and skills at the workplace to show evidence of learning from previous training.
- It keeps people and the organization focused on the skills, knowledge and characteristics that affect performance, thus increasing the return on training investment.
- Provides a framework for ongoing coaching and feedback, ensuring continuous improvement.

Curriculum

In CBT, the curriculum is organized around the Competency Model. Consequently, participants learn the ‘content’ that is required to improve their job performance. The following diagram depicts a typical CBT curriculum.
CBT Process

A CBT system is made up of a series of linked processes including:

- The development of competency standards, based on industry and enterprise standards;
- Curriculum development;
- Accreditation (if applicable);
- Training delivery;
- Assessment; and
- Certification.

Achievement of the competency by meeting the relevant standards, irrespective of how they have been acquired, results in a credential, or statement of attainment.