IMPROVING EMPLOYEE COMPETENCIES
Have you ever noticed how a custom-made suit can make anyone look like a million bucks? And how a badly-fitted one can make even the best of us look dowdy? The key is expert tailoring. But while custom-fitted clothing can really pack a wallop, so can training that “fits like a glove!” Training that’s poorly suited to learners’ needs falls flat. Competency-based training, in contrast, leverages existing skills, provides custom training for learners on the job and comes far closer to alignment with corporate goals.

As businesses strive to increase competitiveness in the new world economy, management can’t afford to waste their budget on one-size-fits-all packages. What’s needed is training that zeros in on employee roles, areas of expertise and functional competencies. In this article, you’ll learn how to rethink ill-fitted approaches and create training that’s neatly tailored for today’s market: competency-based training, or CBT. Think of it as a superbly tailored suit for your learners to make them—and you—look great!
Rediscovering Competency-Based Training (CBT)

You’ve probably heard of CBT, but what exactly is it? Let’s start with some history. The beginnings of CBT can be traced to K-12 learning based on practical experience first advocated by American philosopher and educator John Dewey. In the article Reap What You Know, author Craig Cochran explains that CBT is based on skills and competencies. It sounds like a simple approach, and it is.

According to Cochran, these are the definitions:

**Skill** – A task or group of tasks performed to a specific level of competency or proficiency. Some skills are knowledge- and attitude-based, while others are related to performing a physical task.

**Competency** – A skill performed to a specific standard under specific conditions.

Cochran relates the resurgence of CBT to the quality management standards of ISO (International Organization for Standardization) 9001:2000. He goes on to define this training genre as the “demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills” and notes that ISO 9001:2000 establishes that “competence is the practical application of four variables: education, training, skills and experience,” even though the relative mix of these variables changes based on the specific task being analyzed. An accountant, for example, relies more on education and knowledge and less on skills and experience; an electronics assembly-line worker requires specific skills and experience more than education and knowledge. Both mixtures of the four variables add to the final customized training ‘recipe’ and shape the resulting CBT.
How Competency-Based Training Can Work for You

So how can CBT work for your company? It depends. To apply this training approach effectively—and create effective, tailored training—you must first define what CBT means to you. And while every company has its own definition, the primary building blocks are pretty much the same: skills and competencies. According to a training strategy paper for the healthcare industry developed by Rick Sullivan, PhD, these guidelines apply to all CBT—regardless of the related industry:

- Competencies are carefully selected.
- Supporting theory is integrated with skill practice.
- Essential knowledge is learned to support the performance of skills.
- Detailed training materials are keyed to the competencies and are designed to support the acquisition of knowledge and skills.
- Methods of instruction involve the premise that participants can master the required knowledge/skill with sufficient time and appropriate training.
- Flexible training approaches are essential components.
- A variety of support materials are used.
- Satisfactory completion of training is based on achievement of all specified competencies.
Identifying Your Competencies

In addition to incorporating Sullivan’s guidelines, your competencies must be realistic, demonstrable and forward-looking. The best way to develop a workable list of competencies is to relate all employee skills to a series of business processes instead of individual job roles.

To do this, consider creating a workflow model for the essential tasks in your organization. Remember that employees in the same department may require different competencies based on their job duties—even when they have the same job title. In a production line environment, for example, workers may have dramatically different competencies based on their position in the line.

Creating Your Own CBT Model

Once you define your competencies, you can develop your own CBT with a customized approach. Modeling can shorten the path to developing your overall training design because it maximizes ease of understanding and makes it relatively painless to play with ideas on paper before committing to a final structure.
The pyramid-style model here shows training needs in layers, with functional competencies at the bottom, areas of expertise in the middle and roles at the top. This model is well suited to mapping out the development path for training and making sure all coursework is relevant to learners.

But here’s the catch: developing a model takes some work. For a truly useful design, make sure that overall business processes are taken into account and engage all stakeholders—management as well as representatives from every business area. Conduct group meetings with key departmental leads to determine current and future employee roles and responsibilities, management input based on job descriptions and overall needs and questionnaires for employees to define perceived training gaps. Once you understand employees’ levels of expertise, build in professional development learning tracks for employees who will be climbing the corporate ladder.

Related Resources:

- **Competence Based Business Development – Organizational Competencies as Basis for Successful Companies**, by Bernhard Schmiedinger, Klaus Valentin and Elisabeth Stephan
- **Core Competency Analysis**, by John F Dix and H. Lee “Buck” Mathews
- **How to Map Competencies to e-Learning**, presented by Mark Shaw and Kevin Moore at the eLearning Guild 2007 Annual Gathering
Another popular model relates to organizational structure and related competencies. With core employees at the bottom and managers and executives at the top, each level in the organizational structure model depicts specific job roles, competencies and related training programs.

This model illustrates the many types of skill building that take place as employees advance from lower-level roles to executive team roles. It may be more complex than the pyramid model, but it offers deeper insight as to how employees develop their skills as they progress to the upper ranks of the business.

**Organizational Structure Competency Model**

- **Executives**
  - Vision
  - Strategic Thinking

- **Managers**
  - Technology Management
  - Financial Management
  - HR Management

- **Supervisors**
  - Conflict Management
  - Teambuilding
  - Accountability
  - Creativity / Innovation

- **All Employees**
  - Diversity
  - Quality Service
  - Interpersonal Skills
  - Integrity / Honesty
  - Communication

**More Related Resources:**

- **The Competency-Based Approach to Training**, by Rick Sullivan, PhD, JHPIEGO Corporation

- [http://www.careeronestop.org/CompetencyModel](http://www.careeronestop.org/CompetencyModel) – The Competency Model Clearinghouse’s approach to competency training for individuals in specific professions.

Of course, there are many variations on modeling themes. Feel free to create your own model—one that specifically fits your business. Get your ideas on paper to highlight potential flaws in your current training programs and discover any training gaps.

**Defining Processes, Tasks and Steps**

After you build your competency model, it’s time to target individual competencies, processes and skills. Since CBT is all about the individualized nature of your business, get a feel for your unique learner needs before initiating this approach.

According to Conrad Gottfredson, PhD, *Rapid Task Analysis* (RTA) is the best way to help characterize the processes, tasks and steps for any CBT program.

In his article, *Rapid Task Analysis—The Key to Developing Competency-based e-Learning*, Gottfredson defines RTA as a “systematic process for identifying job competencies up front, in the design phase.” He feels that ignoring this important phase can result in “courseware that won’t deliver much strategic value and will only provide a limited return on instruction (ROI).”
One of the highlights of his strategy is an easy method for extracting job-critical information from SMEs. He proposes that SMEs must first be taught the meaning of tasks, steps and processes. He defines these three areas as:

- **Steps** – Discrete actions that do not stand alone in their ability to achieve a practical outcome

- **Tasks** – A discrete set of steps that together achieve a specific outcome

- **Processes** – A set of tasks that can be orchestrated together to achieve a broader outcome

Gottfredson believes that once SMEs are trained to recognize the difference between tasks, steps and processes, you’ll have an effective task analysis. What should you watch out for? Tasks that are misidentified as steps (since tasks never consist of just one step) are the biggest hitch.

**Gottfredson’s Approach to Recognizing Tasks, Steps and Processes**

- **Process 1**
  - **Task 1**
    - Step 1
    - Step 2
    - Step 3
  - **Task 2**
    - Step 1
    - Step 2
    - Step 3
    - Step 4
    - Step 5
Once tasks, steps and processes are clearly identified, group the tasks and finalize the results of your RTA. An easy way to visualize how your courseware will map to these items is illustrated below.

Notice that the overall competency or skill becomes the course, the process becomes the lesson and the tasks and subtasks develop into the course topics. By carefully following these guidelines you’ll have a detailed roadmap for successful CBT and, ultimately, successful learners.
Steps to Implement Competency-based Training: The following chart displays steps to implement a competency-based training system, according to ISO 9001: 2000. Below each step are instructional design tasks you may already perform that can address each step.

1. Determine required competency for each job or function.
   - Education
   - Training
   - Skills
   - Experience
   **ID Task:** Perform a task and needs analysis.

2. Compare individuals to the competency standard.
   **ID Task:** Perform a skill gap analysis.

3a. Take action to close competency gaps.
   **ID Task:** Design and develop training solutions that address the desired learning objectives.

3b. Train on relevance and importance of activities.
   **ID Task:** Implement the training solutions.

4. Evaluate the effectiveness of training.
   **ID Task:** Collect training program evaluation data, including assessment scores and course evaluations and develop a program evaluation report.

5. Maintain records.
Your Training—Dressed for Success!

Good CBT takes time, a company-wide effort and (probably) some extra caffeine-charged days at the computer. But it’s well worth the work. In the end, your training will be dressed for success and ready for any season. If you would like to know how to customize your own competency-based training program, contact us. At Michaels & Associates—we help you supersize learner potential.

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