CHAPTER (17)

CONTEXT, COMPETENCE AND COMPETENCIES

THE OBJECTIVES OF THIS CHAPTER ARE TO:

1 INTRODUCE KEY ASPECTS OF THE NATIONAL TRAINING FRAMEWORK

2 REVIEW THE COMPETENCE MOVEMENT AND THE SHIFT FROM KNOWLEDGE TO SKILLS

3 IDENTIFY THE CHARACTERISTICS OF NVQS AND ANALYSE THEIR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

4 IDENTIFY THE CHARACTERISTICS OF BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCIES AND ANALYSE THEIR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The words competence, competency and competencies pervade much of the HRM literature, and it is argued that they provide a sound basis for the integration of HRM activities. The terms however are often used confusingly, so we will start with some definitions. The word 'competence' (plural 'competences') relates to the ability to carry out a specific task, and it is this interpretation of competence that forms the foundation for National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which could be described as job standards. The concept is therefore output, or performance based. In contrast the word 'competency' and its plural 'competencies' refer to behaviour (*see*, for example, Whiddett and Hollyforde 1999, p. 5) rather than task achievement, and there is general agreement that this concept is based on the work of Boyatzis (1982). There is a third definition, with which we are not concerned in this chapter, and that is the core competence of the organisation, which relates to the foundation for competitive advantage.

NATIONAL TRAINING FRAMEWORK

We referred in the last chapter to government initiatives intended to encourage the extent and nature of employer training and development in order to narrow the skills gap, and improve British industrial performance. NVQs are a key plank in this and there is therefore a political momentum behind the competency movement over and above considerations of education and training. It has been heavily promoted by the Training and Enterprise Directorate, latterly, and now by the Learning and Skills Council and the Department for Education and Employment. In this section we briefly review three government initiatives which have particular relevance for NVQs, before turning directly to competence and NVQs.

Investors in People (IiP)

As government initiatives go IiP has had a long-lasting impact since being introduced in 1991, but the more recent version is less prescriptive and has more emphasis on outcomes rather than the process by which the business achieves IiP recognition. There are four principles: commitment, planning, action and evaluation, and there are 12 criteria in total set against the four principles. Organisations go through a range of internal processes in order to meet the standard and provide evidence to be assessed by IiP UK, which may or may not result in accreditation. The intent of these processes is to ensure that the appropriate training and development policies and procedures exist to meet business goals, and more generally to promote a culture where this linkage is a key part of the way the organisation operates. The initial targets set for the number of employers seeking and achieving the IiP recognised status are proving to have been very ambitious, but Ruth Spellman, the Chief Executive of Investors in People UK, reports that by April 2002 25,000 organisations met the standard which represents a quarter of the UK workforce (Spellman 2002). She notes that if additional organisations that have already registered their commitment to IiP achieve the standard, this will rise to over one-third of the working population.

A commitment to IiP requires significant time and effort, particularly in relation to the processes involved in development. The benefits from gaining recognition of IiP status have been debated. Some studies have found an increase in commitment to HR development, a belief in the value of the process and perceived performance

gains (*see*, for example, Alberga *et al*. 1997); other studies have found significant benefits, although organisations themselves found it difficult to identify these (Down and Smith 1998). There is a tendency in the IiP process to focus on formal qualifications, such as NVQs, and for the significance of informal development to be neglected (*see*, for example, Ram 2000). Some studies show that organisations struggle with the bureaucracy of the approach, and Ram also found considerable evidence that the standard is sought for its 'stamp of approval' rather than because of a genuine commitment to improving training and Down and Smith also argue convincingly that it is those organisations that have most to gain from pursuing the standard that are least likely to attempt to do this. In a study of a hospital trust Grugulis and Bevitt (2002) found that most of the soft HR initiatives employed had existed before accreditation. Hammond (2001) reports research carried out by Hoque, who found that a substantial minority of accredited workplaces did not adopt best practice. Although he also found that training is generally better in accredited organisations, they were still characterised by a lack of training opportunities and a deep cynicism.

Sector Skills Councils (SSCs)

SCCs have taken over from the old National Training Organisations (NTOs) and they are generally amalgamations of the olds NTOs covering a wider range of sectors and drawing in more employers. The SSCs have to apply to be licensed by the Sector Skills Development Agency (SSDA) before they can operate, and 15 had been licensed by the end of 2003, covering over half the UK workforce, and it is estimated that by the end of 2004 85 per cent of the workforce should be covered by SSCs (*see* Merrick 2003). Like the old NTOs, SSCs are empowered to set occupational standards (on which NVQs are based); promote training which will help to reduce skills shortages; and lobby on behalf of employers.

Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs)

As a result of the 1999 White Paper *Learning to Succeed* the LSCs have replaced the old Training and Education Councils (TECs). They are responsible for planning and funding all post-16 education and training, except for the university sector. The LSC has produced a national workforce development strategy in response to three key objectives (*see* Sanderson 2002): to stimulate demand from employers and individuals for education and training; to improve the responsiveness and flexibility of providers better to meet business needs; and to provide better labour market intelligence. However, evidence suggests that employers are not able clearly to differentiate LSCs from TECs (CIPD 2003). The same survey reports that most employers contact LSCs about qualifications, such as NVQs.

THE CONTEXT OF THE COMPETENCE MOVEMENT

There has always been a tension in education and training between what the trainee knows and what the trainee can do after the training is complete. Knowledge has an ancient history of being highly desirable and jealously guarded: look at the trouble the serpent got Eve into in the Garden of Eden. Our literature and our folklore are

full of the value of knowledge, including the best-known aphorism in this area, that expressed by Francis Bacon four hundred years ago, that knowledge itself is power. This connection to power and influence is why access to knowledge is often surrounded by elaborate ritual requirements to ensure that possession of the knowledge remains valuable and rare.

In every country of the world education has been developed, with all its mystique and influence, to communicate knowledge and to develop understanding. In developing countries it is usually the first priority of economic growth. For all people the search for better understanding is a human quality that is self-perpetuating once the appetite has first been stimulated.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Many people love studying, but in some places it seems to have become a public nuisance. In a shopping mall on Orchard Road in Singapore a café proprietor concerned about the popularity of the establishment with students has a large notice: 'NO STUDYING IN THE CAFE.'

The search for knowledge also develops a prestige for certain types of knowledge and for the institutions that trade in that knowledge. In Britain and France the areas with the greatest prestige have been those that are closest to the arts and pondering the human condition: English, history, classical civilisation and language, philosophy and theology, followed by those allied to elite professions, such as medicine and the law. Science took longer to achieve a similar prestige and it is still physics and chemistry that are valued ahead of engineering. Knowledge rather than practical skills carries status, and the educational institutions with the highest prestige are those universities with the strongest representation in these areas.

This preference for knowledge has carried through into the labour market. We still pay more to people who manipulate words than to those who manipulate materials. Reading the news on television pays much more than making the world's most advanced aircraft or electronic equipment. Writing computer programs for arcade games pays much more than making the equipment on which the games run. It has become very difficult to recruit able students to study physics at university, and it is a bitter frustration for their teachers that many of them will move, on graduation, to merchant banking or accountancy.

Elsewhere it is different. The inevitable comparison is with Germany and Japan, countries where the practical skills of engineering, for instance, carry much greater prestige. This comparison has increasingly led policy makers and those in education to seek ways to shift the emphasis in education away from esoteric knowledge towards practical, vocational skills. This has proved remarkably difficult, as education is a large vested interest in any advanced society and change is resisted, however inevitable it may be. In the last sixty years there have been the moves to set up technical schools in the late 1940s, which failed almost completely. We have had technological universities, many of which became universities much like any other. We had degrees in technology that were designated as BSc, to show that they were not

real degrees at all. We had the industrial training boards in the 1960s, rapidly followed by polytechnics in the 1970s, but the training boards were abolished and the polytechnics developed degrees in social sciences more rapidly than in vocational science and engineering.

By the early 1980s government policy achieved an unprecedented degree of centralised control of schooling through the national curriculum and of higher education through controlling student numbers and having differential fee regimes. Central to this control has been a heightened emphasis on practical vocational skills: what the student is able to do that is vocationally useful when the training is complete. The end result should be that the student is competent to do something that is useful. Furthermore, the education and training agenda has been placed under greater employer influence than previously. It is difficult to see that this has produced the desired results.

ACTIVITY 17.1

Think of your own schooling. Single out three things you learned at school that have subsequently been useful to you in your working life. Then single out the three topics or subjects which you found most interesting to study. What changes would you make if you could have your time over again?

COMPETENCES AND NVQS

Characteristics and benefits of NVQs

The vehicle for this attempted revolution has been an array of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), which have brought together a wide and unstructured range of previous vocational qualifications. Now vocational qualifications either are completed directly by the NVQ competence route itself, or, if they are of a different nature, will be identified as equivalent to a specific NVQ level. NVQs have been developed for all occupational areas, and within each occupation there are five levels of NVQ with level one relating to basic and routine work and level five relating to the most complex tasks. There are standards for the management occupation at levels three, four and five.

The basic idea of training for competence is that it should be criterion related, directed at developing the ability of trainees to perform specific tasks directly related to the job they are in or for which they are preparing, expressed in terms of performance outcomes and specific indicators. It is a reaction against the confetti-scattering approach to training as being a good thing in its own right, concerned with the general education of people dealing with general matters. The design of the standards themselves is somewhat complex. Each standard is first divided into job roles. For example in the updated (1997) level three management standards, seven job roles are identified, as shown in Table 17.1. This is a development on the four job roles which were in the original standard. The key roles are then subdivided into units of competence, which are then subdivided into elements of competence with attached performance criteria and range statements.

Table 17.1 Level three management standards

Key roles	
22	To manage activities
23	To manage resources
24	To manage people
25	To manage information
26	To manage energy
27	To manage quality
28	To manage projects

In the United Kingdom, competence standards have been developed in line with other aspects of change in education, such as experiential learning, problem-based learning, the national curriculum and GCSEs, as an attempt to develop the ability of learners to *do* rather than to *know*. This introduces greater flexibility into the learning process, so that career aspirants are not restrained by the elitist exclusiveness of either educational institutions or professional associations. The standards are designed so that the vast majority of work can be done 'on the job' with maybe small inputs from educational providers. Where this route is not possible the standards can be completed as part of a 'course'. Wherever they are done the individual's completed portfolio of work has to be assessed by a qualified and accredited assessor.

The principles of competencies leading to national vocational qualifications are:

1 **Open access.** There should be no artificial barriers to training, such as that it is available only to people who are members of a professional body, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development or the Law Society, or those in a particular age group. There are no previous qualifications required in order to embark on the NVQ process.

2 There is a focus on what people can **do**, rather than on the process of learning. Master's-degree students in a university typically cannot graduate in less than 12 months. With competence-based qualifications, you graduate when you can demonstrate competence, however long or short a period it takes you to achieve the standard.

3 **National** vocational qualifications, which are the same wherever the training takes place, so that the control is in the hands of the awarding body rather than the training body, and there is only one strand of qualification for each vocational area: no multiplication of rival qualifications. The overall control is with the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ).

4 The feature of performance **standards** as the basis of assessment; not essays or written-up case studies, but practical demonstrations in working situations, or replicas, of an ability to do the job at a specified standard. Although training schemes are littered with euphoria about excellence, the competence basis has only one standard. The only degree of differentiation between trainees is the length of time taken to complete the qualification.

5   **Flexibility and modularisation.** People must be able to transfer their learning more or less at will between 'providers', so that they are not tied to a single institution or by needless regulations about attendance. Candidates can stop and start their work towards the standard as it suits their personal or work needs, and they can begin on any element of the standard and complete the elements in any order. This means that standards can be worked on in line with business demands.

6   **Accreditation of prior experience and learning.** You can accredit prior learning, no matter how you acquired it. If you have been able to acquire a competence by straightforward experience or practice at home, and if you can reach the performance standard, you can receive the credit for it. If prior experience enables you to demonstrate competence, you can receive credit for that as well.

7   The approach to training is the establishment of a **learning contract** between the provider and the trainee, whereby the initiative lies with the trainee to specify the assistance and facilities that are needed and the provider agrees to provide them. The idea of this is that the learner is active in committing to the learning process.

8   Flexibility in assessment is partly achieved by the **portfolio** principle, as you accumulate evidence of your competence from your regular, day-to-day working and submit it for assessment as appropriate. For further details of how technology can be used to enhance portfolio compilation, *see* case 17.1 on the website.

9   **Continuous development.** Initial qualification is not enough. Updating and competence extension will be needed and failure to do this will lead to loss of qualification.

10 The standards to be achieved are determined by designated **lead bodies**, which are large committees of practitioners, or professional bodies, so that vocational standards are decided by those in charge of the workplace instead of by those in charge of the classroom.

11 **Assessment.** Written examinations are not regarded as being always the most appropriate means of assessing competence. Assessment of whether or not the learner has attained the appropriate standard must be by a **qualified assessor**, who becomes qualified by demonstrating competence according to two units of the scheme produced by the Training and Development Lead Body. Assessment may be partly by portfolio (*see* 8 above), but has to be **work based**. Originally it was to be in the workplace, but that proved impracticable to implement in every case.

12 **General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs)** are school or college based and take the place of BTec and similar qualifications.

The general intention is that NVQs should run alongside traditional academic qualifications at undergraduate level.

The standards have strong support from some quarters as we have already stated, but there have been fewer reports of the benefits of pursuing the standards. Winterton and Winterton (1999) report that organisations adopting the management standards have been able to identify gaps in competence, identify competence development targets, develop a coherent structure for training and development and identify clearer criteria for human resource planning and career progression. In

our own studies, again in relation to the management standards, it was found that participants developed self-confidence in their managerial role, became better organised and were motivated to focus on improvement (Hall and Holman 1996). Most critically, we found that following the standards was a rite of passage for those who were new to the managerial world (Holman and Hall 1996).

Problematic aspects of NVQs

NVQs have had a rough ride since the concept was first introduced, coming under some heavy criticism and not being extensively taken up. The most common reservations about NVQs are:

1 **Assessment.** The emphasis has been shifted away from learning towards assessment. The assessment process is itself somewhat laborious. Research by the Institute of Manpower Studies (1994) found that the most common problem about introducing NVQs was finding the time to organise the assessments. The study found that 5 per cent of employers were using NVQs and half of them reported this difficulty. In our own studies (Hall and Holman 1996) we found that candidates were heavily engaged in a 'paper chase' to gather evidence of their competence, and this seemed to take over from the importance of the learning process and what was being learned.

2 **Bureaucracy.** NVQs have developed an entire vocabulary to bring the concept into action, and this causes difficulties (*see*, for example, Priddley and Williams 2000). One of the key terms is 'range indicators' and at a meeting of 50 HR practitioners, no one could produce a definition that the rest of the group could accept. Also the assessment process specifies a number of different standards of performance that have to be demonstrated and assessed. Each of these has to be described succinctly and the performance measured.

3 **The generality of the standards.** Those employers who take up NVQs are likely to modify them for their own use. In a three-year research project at UMIST over twenty employer schemes for the management standards were examined, and each one was tailored to the needs of the particular business. This is for two reasons: (a) the national standards are seen as being too general, and (b) employers are concerned to train for their own needs rather than for national needs of skilled human resources. This begins to undermine the concept of a *national* qualification.

4 **The quality of the standards.** It is very difficult to ensure a satisfactory quality of assessment, where so much depends on a large number of individual assessors. The initial emphatic opposition to written examination has lessened, especially as NVQs are contemplated for some of the well-established professions, such as medicine and the law.

5 In relation to the management standards in particular there is a criticism that the standards are **reductionist**. In other words, because the standards try to spell out the detail of what management entails, the complexity of management gets lost as it is difficult to specify this in the structure and language of the standards.

6 A related criticism is that the **functional** approach (*see*, for example, Stewart and Hamblin 1992), used to identify what management is (that is, through specifying management activities), is a narrow and partial approach.

7   The early management standards were also criticised for being an **incomplete** representation of management, and yet in our research we found that those following the pre-1997 standard had not recognised any omissions, for example ethics and politics.

8   **Lack of attention to learning and cognitive processes** has also been identified (for example by Holman and Thorpe 1993), as the emphasis is on doing rather than thinking and understanding.

9   It has also been argued that following the standards rubber-stamps the level of competence already achieved, rather than stimulating further development.

10 **The training agenda.** Within a large vested interest such as British higher education, there is obviously some resistance to the idea that educators are not competent to set the training agenda.

> There seems to be a drift towards a training agenda in management education, such that students are technically equipped to take up a task but intellectually incapable of addressing the ideas that have shaped the creation of that task. (Berry 1990)

One quite damning piece of research has been produced by Peter Robinson of the London School of Economics. He demonstrates that the actual take-up of NVQs is very low and has not been associated with an increase in the training available to individuals:

> Between 1991 and 1995 the only net growth in the number of all vocational qualifications awarded was at level 1 and especially level 2. There was no growth at all in the number of awards at level 3, and a slight fall in the number of awards at levels 4 and 5. (Robinson 1996, p. 4)

Since they were introduced in 1987 there have been over 4 million NVQ/SVQ (Scottish Vocational Qualifications) awards made. However, in 2001/2 there was a 5 per cent drop in the number of all vocational qualifications awarded: 408,000 were awarded in this period compared with 428,000 in 200/1 (DfEE 2003). This drop is a continuing trend, with, for example 442,000 awards in 1998/9 (DfEE 2000). Awards of traditional vocational qualifications continue to outstrip NVQs, especially at higher levels. There were 474,000 vocational awards (or 499,000 if awards made outside the national framework are included) in 2001/2. However, these awards also appear to be falling at present.

NVQs are heavily concentrated in skilled trades occupations (23 per cent of awards in 2001/2), personal and protective services (20 per cent), and clerical and secretarial (18 per cent). The only other area where they have made an impact is in management and administration (DfEE 2000).

The initial failure of NVQs to take off stimulated a high-level review of the whole process; for example the management standards were redesigned in 1997 to make them more flexible, easy to understand and up to date (Whittaker 1998).

ACTIVITY 17.2

Interview at least three people who have followed the NVQ standards. They may be employees of your organisation, but this is not essential, so friends and family can be included. Ask your interviewees:

1 What were the most positive aspects of following the standards, and why?

2 What were the problematic aspects of following the standards, and why?

3 How might these negative aspects be overcome?

BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCIES

Characteristics of behavioural competencies

The key piece of research on competencies is by Richard Boyatzis, who carried out a large-scale intensive study of 2,000 managers, holding 41 different jobs in 12 organisations. He defines a competency as: 'an underlying characteristic of a person which results in effective and/or superior performance in a job' (Boyatzis 1982, p. 21).

Competency may be a trait, which is a characteristic or quality that a person has, such as efficacy, which is the trait of believing you are in control of your future and fate. When you encounter a problem, you then take an initiative to resolve the problem, rather than wait for someone else to do it.

Competency may be a motive, which is a drive or thought related to a particular goal, such as achievement, which is a need to improve and compete against a standard of excellence.

Competency may be a skill, which is the ability to demonstrate a sequence of behaviour that is functionally related to attaining a performance goal. Being able to tune and diagnose faults in a car engine is a skill, because it requires the ability to identify a sequence of actions, which will accomplish a specific objective. It also involves being able to identify potential obstacles and sources of help in overcoming them. The skill can be applied to a range of different situations. The ability to change the sparking plugs is an ability only to perform that action.

Competency may be a person's self-image, which is the understanding we have of ourselves and an assessment of where we stand in the context of values held by others in our environment. For example: 'I am creative and innovative. I am expressive and I care about others.' In a job requiring routine work and self-discipline, that might modify to: 'I am creative and innovative. I am too expressive. I care about others and lack a degree of self-discipline.'

Competency may be a person's social role, which is a perception of the social norms and behaviours that are acceptable and the behaviours that the person then adopts in order to fit in. It may be a body of knowledge.

If these are the elements of competency, some of them can be developed, some can be modified and some can be measured, but not all.

Boyatzis makes a further distinction of the threshold competency, which is: 'A person's generic knowledge, motive, trait, self-image, social role, or skill which is essential to performing a job, but is not causally related to superior job performance', such

Threshold competencies	
Use of unilateral power	Using forms of influence to obtain compliance.
Accurate self-assessment	Having a realistic or grounded view of oneself, seeing personal strengths and weaknesses and knowing one's limitations.
Positive regard	Having a basic belief in others; that people are good; being optimistic and causing others to feel valued.
Spontaneity	Being able to express oneself freely or easily, sometimes making quick or snap decisions.
Logical thought	Placing events in causal sequence; being orderly and systematic.
Specialised knowledge	Having usable facts, theories, frameworks or models.
Developing others	Helping others to do their jobs, adopting the role of coach and using feedback skills in facilitating self-development of others.

Table 17.2

The seven threshold competencies identified by Richard Boyatzis

Source: R. Boyatzis (1982) *The Competent Manager*. New York: John Wiley.

as being able to speak the native tongue of one's subordinates. Table 17.2 summarises these elements.

Competencies are required for superior performance and are grouped in clusters, shown in Table 17.3. The goal and action management cluster relates to the requirement to make things happen towards a goal or consistent with a plan. The leadership cluster relates to activating people by communicating goals, plans and rationale and stimulating interest and involvement. The human resource management cluster relates to managing the coordination of groups of people working together towards the organisation's goals. The focus on others cluster relates to maturity and taking a balanced view of events and people. The directing subordinates cluster relates to providing subordinates with information on performance, interpreting what the information means to the subordinates, and placing positive or negative values on the interpretation.

The Boyatzis framework is set out at some length because of its influence. It is the basis of the work carried out by many consultants in the training field. It has, however, suffered criticism. Academics were sceptical about the methods of investigation, and practitioners found the framework too complex to translate into action. Boyatzis may be slipping into history, but his work remains an invaluable point of reference because of the way it demonstrates the scale and complexity of the management job. Subsequently tailor-made competency frameworks have come thick and fast from the training and development specialists (*see*, for example, Brewis 1996), and most large companies have produced such a framework. Most frameworks have clusters of competencies, like the Boyatzis model, and within each of the competencies within the cluster a list of behavioural indicators is usually attached. *See* Figure 17.1 for an example. Website case 17.2 concentrates on Goleman's emotional intelligence competencies which we discussed in Chapter 14 on leadership.

Advantages of behavioural competencies

Behavioural competencies are often seen as a way of expressing what is valued by the organisation as well as what characteristics have been seen to result in superior
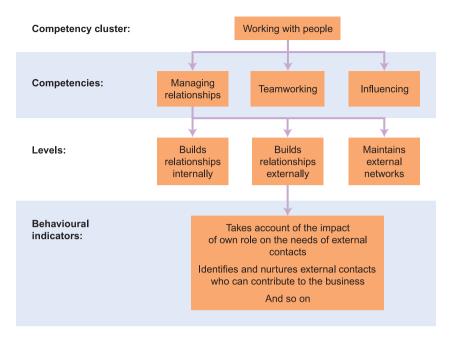
Management competency clusters	
The goal and action management cluster	*Concern with impact*: Being concerned with symbols of power to have impact on others, concerned about status and reputation. *Diagnostic use of concepts*: Identifying and recognising patterns from an assortment of information, by bringing a concept to the situation and attempting to interpret events through that concept. *Efficiency orientation*: Being concerned to do something better. *Proactivity*: Having a disposition towards taking action to achieve something.
The leadership cluster	*Conceptualisation*: Developing a concept that describes a pattern or structure perceived in a set of facts: the concept emerges from the information. *Self-confidence*: Having decisiveness or presence; knowing what you are doing and feeling you are doing it well. *Use of oral presentations*: Making effective verbal presentations in situations ranging from one to one to several hundred people (plus threshold competency of logical thought).
The human resource management cluster	*Use of socialised power*: Using forms of influence to build alliances, networks, coalitions and teams. *Managing group process*: Stimulating others to work effectively in group settings (plus threshold competencies of accurate self-assessment and positive regard).
The focus on others cluster	*Perceptual objectivity*: Being able to be relatively objective, avoiding bias or prejudice. *Self-control*: Being able to inhibit personal needs or desires in service of organisational needs. *Stamina and adaptability*: Being able to sustain long hours of work and have the flexibility and orientation to adapt to changes in life and the organisational environment.
The directing subordinates cluster	*Threshold competencies* of developing others, spontaneity and use of unilateral power.

Table 17.3
The five clusters of management competencies by Richard Boyatzis (1982)

Source: R. Boyatzis (1982) *The Competent Manager*. New York: John Wiley.

performance. In addition they are seen to provide a critical mechanism for the integration of human resource practices which is considered essential to a strategic approach to HR. Thus, once a competency framework has been researched and designed it can be used in recruitment, selection, training, performance management and reward. In this way employees are given consistent messages about what is valued and what is expected of them. However, in practice this link is often weak; for example Abraham and his colleagues (2001) found organisations willing to identify a set of managerial competencies that described a successful manager, but did not place a corresponding emphasis on including these competencies in their performance appraisal. A further advantage of competency frameworks is that, as they can be expressed as behaviours, they are more easily measurable, and thus can be used explicitly in all HR processes. This means, for example, that in a development centre, assessors can be trained in how to observe a long list of behaviours. In the centre itself each assessor can then check the behaviours of the candidates under observation to record how many times that particular behaviour is displayed.

Figure 17.1 Typical content of a competency framework (Source: This material is adapted from *The Competencies Handbook* by S. Whiddett and S. Hollyforde (1999), p. 14, with the permission of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, CIPD House, Camp Road, London, SW19 4UX.)

Problematic aspects of behavioural competencies

Criticisms of the approach have been focused around the complex process required to research the appropriate competencies for the organisation, and perhaps more importantly, the fact that such competencies, due to the research process itself, will be inevitably backward looking rather than future oriented. Antonacopoulou and FitzGerald (1996), for example, found that competency work focused on what managers do now rather than what is needed to perform effectively in the future. Hayes *et al.* (2000) also note that a competency framework may not include every aspect that is critical to superior performance, and also that while one set of competencies may result in high performance this does not necessarily mean that such performance may not be achieved via a different set of competencies. Whiddett and Kandola (2000) similarly argue that processes *solely* based on competencies are flawed and that a wider perspective needs to be taken. Without the wider perspective the scope for encouraging and using diversity may be diminished. In terms of performance management they also highlight that changes in behaviour may be due to factors other than competencies, and this, of course, has implications for development. A similar perspective is taken by Brittain and Ryder (1999) who suggest that organisations need to take into account the fact that a person's behaviour is not necessarily consistent, and may be affected by the environment and the situation. Salaman and Taylor (2002) suggest that there are five inherent weaknesses where organisations limit themselves to a behavioural competency approach for managers including: marginalisation of the cultural, social and organisational context, the fact that such frameworks emphasise a narrow set of behaviours and attitudes with a lack of emphasis on the long-term processes of management development, and that competencies are founded on the questionable assumption that managers behave rationally and are achievement driven.

SUMMARY PROPOSITIONS

17.1 Investors in People, Sector Skills Councils and Learning and Skills Councils are aspects of the national training framework which encourage the competence movement and NVQs.

17.2 Competence (plural: competences) is concerned with job standards and output, whereas competency (plural: competencies) refers to behaviour, that is, input.

17.3 The most recent attempt to strengthen vocational training has been the development of competence-based (or competency-based) qualifications, which are directed at developing the ability of trainees to perform specific tasks directly related to the work they are doing or which they are preparing to do. The main vehicle for learning to achieve competence is the array of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

17.4 Ever since they were initially proposed, NVQs have been continually criticised, mainly because of queries about assessment, bureaucracy, generality and the quality of the standards.

17.5 Behavioural competencies are applauded as an integrative mechanism for HR processes. Problems with behavioural competencies are that they are backward, not forward looking, and are limiting and misleading if they are used alone.

GENERAL DISCUSSION TOPICS

1 The Boyatzis approach to competency-based management training has been criticised as being too complicated. To what extent do you agree and why?

2 In 1996 a review of NVQs included the following comment:

> A widely-held view was that NVQs/SVQs worked best when they were focused on the workplace and that they were less suitable for those preparing to enter employment . . . for unemployed people or those in employment seeking new job opportunities, there was difficulty in accessing workplace assessment.

How could that difficulty be overcome?

3 What are the differences between skill, competence and competency?

FURTHER READING

Harrison, R. (2002) *Learning and Development*. London: CIPD
Chapter 2, 'National Policy and framework', is an excellent overview of the government's vision for national vocational education and training, and its implementation. The chapter explains the development of the current approach and also addresses emerging concerns.

Smith, A., Boocock, G., Loan-Clarke, J. and Whittaker, J. (2001) 'IIP and SMEs: awareness, benefits and barriers', *Personnel Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 62–85

The bureaucracy that has to be dealt with to achieve IiP status and the time that needs to be devoted to this has been viewed as a barrier for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and this article considers the significance of IiP to the SME sector. A quantitative and qualitative study was undertaken which addressed the levels of awareness, interest in and commitment to IiP; triggers for IiP commitment; inhibitors to IiP and the benefits of IiP.

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