

Competence frameworks — their purpose in the workplace

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An integral part of the reforms introduced under Agenda for Change is a competence framework for all staff — namely the Knowledge and Skills Framework. This article, the first of two on the subject, explains how competency frameworks operate



Competence frameworks should form a key part of the discussion during the annual development review

Competence has for many years been a keyword in the language of human resources. Various definitions of competence are used, but the general consensus is that competency or competencies are the behaviours or skills that employees must have, develop or acquire to achieve a specified level of performance. A competence framework is a structured mechanism for outlining competencies and for linking individual performance to organisational performance. The theory is that the better an individual performs, the better an organisation performs. As part of Agenda for Change, a competency framework (the Knowledge and Skills Framework [KSF]) is being introduced to cover almost all NHS staff.

One of the best known competency frameworks, national vocational qualifications (NVQs), are widely used by employers as a mechanism for systematically identifying the skills, knowledge and competence that is required for certain jobs. The NVQ framework also specifies levels of achievement. The introduction of NVQs shifted the academic focus from qualifications based on formal learning to an approach that was based more on experiential learning. The

NVQ system also introduced the notion of accrediting learning or experience rather than requiring an examination certificate as proof of competence.

During the 1980s, a working group set up to review vocational qualifications recommended the introduction of NVQs to address weaknesses in the existing system of vocational qualifications. The working group proposed a system of NVQs which would be a statement of competence clearly relevant to work and intended to facilitate entry into, or progression in, employment, further education and training and incorporating the assessment of:

- Skills to specified standards
- Relevant knowledge and understanding
- The ability to use skills and to apply knowledge and understanding to relevant tasks

Nowadays, employers use various types of competence framework, which run along similar lines to the NVQ system. The language may differ from framework to framework but the principles remain the same. Some frameworks are composed of performance criteria, others of learning outcomes and assessment criteria. The principles, however, are the same — that the knowledge, skills or competence required of individuals are set out in concise measurable

statements. These statements are often grouped into levels of achievement so that the different levels of competence can be determined. For example, within the KSF there are four levels.

Competency frameworks also vary in structure. Core frameworks are general and intended to be accessible to all levels of employees. These frameworks may, like the KSF, have a supplementary set of competencies to acknowledge the specific requirements of certain levels of jobs within an organisation, for example management level jobs.

A menu style framework is broader than the core framework and allows individuals to select from a range of competencies. The menu style framework has to be large and detailed to reflect the whole range of competencies that exist within an organisation.

One of the main benefits of using a competence framework is greater transparency of job objectives. When used properly, competency frameworks also promote shared ownership of an employee's learning and development, in that employers and employees are both seen as stakeholders or partners in the process of personal and professional development. Training therefore becomes something that is owned by the employee rather than being "done to him or her" by a manager.

Employees can use a competence framework to measure their own performance

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against a set of agreed competencies. Managers, too, can and will use competency frameworks to assess the performance of employees. However, competency frameworks are designed to be used as a shared tool by both managers and their staff, so that both share an understanding of what level of performance is required for a job to be performed competently.

Used properly, competency frameworks also give employees a sense of direction in that they do not have to play a guessing game in trying to work out what level of performance is expected of them. Competence frameworks should also link clearly to an organisation's overall objectives and employees should be able to see how their good performance at work leads to the good performance of their organisation.

In spite of the benefits of a competency framework, not all organisations subscribe to them. Some organisations believe that competency frameworks are too unwieldy to be useful and that if an individual values learning and development, they will do so in spite of, and not because of, a competency framework. However, competency frameworks do more than just provide a focus for learning and development. They also standardise the recruitment and appraisal systems which means that every employee or potential employee is measured and judged against the same set of standards.

The key uses of competency frameworks can be summarised as follows:

- Training and development — as a means of developing staff, improving their performance, identifying training needs and gaps and promoting learning
- Career development — to assess an individual's potential for taking on increased responsibilities and different roles within an organisation
- Recruitment and selection — for choosing the right people for the right jobs
- Change management — for restructuring within an organisation
- Grading or pay structures — identifying grades, levels and pay levels of jobs
- Regular appraisals or performance reviews

— Training and development

Within the NHS, the key focus of the KSF is the application, and not necessarily the possession, of knowledge and skills. Unlike some frameworks that focus on personality attributes or qualities such as courage or humour, the KSF concentrates on the link between an individual's skills and knowledge and the needs and demands of work within the NHS.

Before the existence of competency frameworks, training needs were met by managers identifying a course that appeared

to be relevant to an employee. However, a competency framework can do more than that in that it might identify a development rather than a training need. For example, it could be that an employee needs more opportunity at work to practise skills or more practise at applying skills within a particular context. The other advantage of the competency framework over just sending an employee on a course is that it creates an opportunity for a regular review of performance against benchmarks and then for a joint discussion with an employee about how to plan for development.

Competency frameworks contribute to career development because they allow for the recognition of strengths in relation to competencies. For example, an employee may be able to provide evidence of meeting criteria for leadership. This can then be used as the basis for creating opportunities for that employee to develop their leadership skills further. The competency framework also allows employees to gain a better understanding of the competencies that are required for higher level posts within an organisation and allows them to set career objectives. Employees can also identify gaps in their knowledge, understanding or skills and identify relevant training and development opportunities to fill those gaps.

— Development reviews

A key part of the implementation process for the KSF and for most competency frameworks is the development review. It should be seen as a cyclical process of continuous improvement. Within the NHS, the development review is intended to be a partnership between an employee and the reviewer. The review process consists of:

- A review of individual progress against the KSF post outline
- Identification of development needs or opportunities and how these will be achieved
- A written personal development plan (PDP) which will include a date for a progress review meeting
- An evaluation of the learning undertaken and how it has been applied to work

The purpose of the review is to monitor an employee's development in relation to:

- The duties and responsibilities of their post
- The application of knowledge and skills
- The development needs of the individual

For new employees, the review process begins when they start in the post. For existing employees, it commences once the KSF

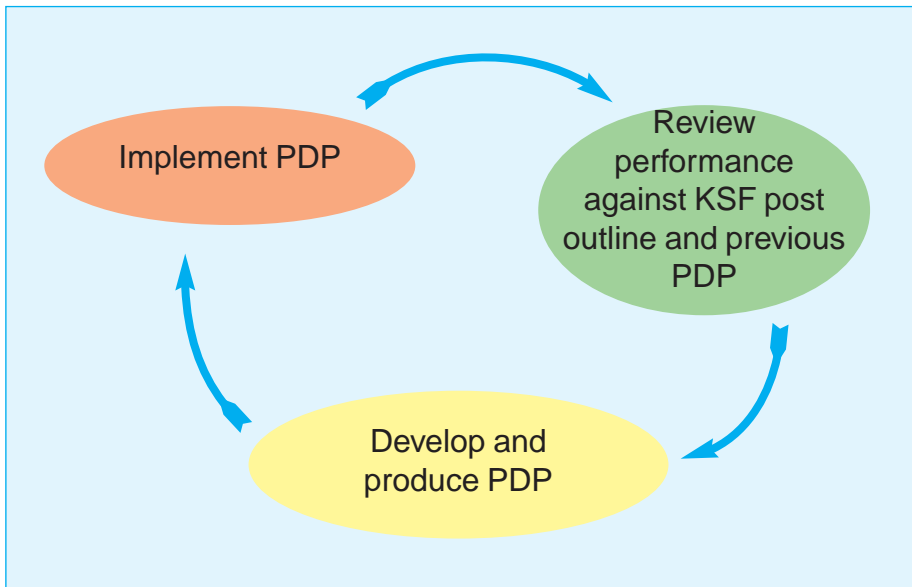


Figure 1. The cyclical development review process

post outline has been developed for their job. If the development review is to be meaningful, it has to be seen as a process rather than a one-off activity that has to be done because “management says so”.

If used and treated as a process rather than an event, the development review will lead to both personal and professional development of employees (see Figure 1). The reviewer should therefore take an active interest in an employee’s progress before and after the formal review meeting, where a review of competencies takes place.

Before the formal review meeting, the employee needs to be fully conversant with the NHS KSF core dimensions and specific dimensions relevant to their post. A thorough induction into the review process will enable employees to be aware of how the review will promote their development.

To get the best out of the process, employees should continually review their work against the specifications of the framework that apply to their post. This could also include obtaining feedback and comments from others as well as keeping a record of how specifically they are meeting the benchmarks identified in the KSF post outline.

The kind of questions an employee should be thinking about as part of the review process and particularly for the review meeting are as follows:

- How well do I think I have done and am doing in meeting the criteria for my post?
- What can I produce as evidence of my development and achievements?
- What action points from my previous review (if already held) have I put into effect?
- What key action points do I want to agree with my manager for the next review period?

- What problems have I encountered in carrying out my work and what ideas do I have for resolving the problems?
- What guidance and support do I need from my manager or from others?
- What do I consider to be my key strengths and key areas for development?
- Could better use be made of my skills and abilities?
- What further experience or development would I like?

— Gathering evidence

The portfolio is the method used by many academic students and NVQ candidates to collect evidence of their learning achievements. For any competency framework, the portfolio, which is a collection of materials or information, is a useful way of storing and presenting evidence. Evidence gathered should be cross referenced to competencies. A single piece of evidence could be used to address more than one competence. For example, a presentation to a group may provide evidence of both communication skills and research into a particular topic.

Although portfolios are useful, evidence need not be kept in one place. The important thing is to be able to link evidence to competencies, wherever that evidence may be located. For example evidence of competence may be found where it is “naturally located”, eg, in the filing cabinet, desk or dispensary. Sources of evidence can include:

- Direct observation of work by an assessor or reviewer, eg, giving a presentation, communicating with patients
- Photographic, audio, video or other electronic recording of other activity related to the competencies for a particular post

- Previous achievements, eg, certificates, records of achievement
- Questions and answers — knowledge could be assessed through questioning to assess knowledge and understanding or to authenticate the validity of other evidence
- Witness statements — written statements by someone who has witnessed a competence being demonstrated
- Records of work such as minutes of meetings showing an individual’s contribution
- Assignments, essays, reflective learning diaries in which an individual demonstrates their knowledge and understanding

— Personal development plans

The main output from the review process is the personal development plan (PDP) which is a work action plan. The best PDPs are working documents which set out goals which may be long or short term. These goals are then regularly monitored by both the managers and the individuals concerned.

Goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (which is often abbreviated to SMART). A good PDP enables employees to see “where they are going” in terms of their personal and professional development and should provide a framework for achievement and evaluating goals. Within the NHS KSF system, the PDP should

- Focus on the knowledge and skills that an individual needs to apply in their post
- Identify the learning and development needed to enable an individual to develop and apply their knowledge and skills
- Prioritise the learning and development that needs to take place

— Conclusion

Although competency frameworks may look useful on paper, they are only as good as the people that use them. Managers and staff need to be firmly committed to using the frameworks as a working tool for training and development and not just a document that is wheeled out once a year for a review meeting. The second article in this feature will review the KSF in more detail and look at the points that are specifically relevant to hospital pharmacists.

— Further reading

1. Whiddett S, Hollyforde S. A practical guide to competencies: how to enhance individual and organisational performance. London: Chartered Institute of Personal Development; 2003.