



Core Competencies

A SPEC Kit compiled by

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October 2002

Series Editor: Lee Anne George

SPEC Kits are published by the

Association of Research Libraries
OFFICE OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SERVICES
21 Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 800
Washington, D.C. 20036-1118
(202) 296-2296 Fax (202) 872-0884
<<http://www.arl.org/olms/infosvcs.html>>
<pubs@arl.org>

ISSN 0160 3582

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SURVEY



Executive Summary

Introduction

This survey was designed to investigate the status of core competencies in research libraries. In particular, to examine whether research libraries are defining or adopting core competencies and, if so, how they are integrated into the overall performance management system.

For the purpose of this study, core competencies were defined as the skills, knowledge, abilities, and attributes that employees across an organization are expected to have to contribute successfully within a particular organizational context. They are much broader than the task-oriented skills in traditional job descriptions and relate to the organization's goals and objectives. Survey respondents were asked to consider sets of skills, knowledge, abilities, and attributes in place in their organizations that may not be called core competencies but are, in fact, very similar.

This survey was distributed to the 124 ARL member libraries in June 2002. Sixty-five (52%) responded to the survey. Of these, slightly more than one-quarter indicated that they have core competencies in place for library employees. These 17 libraries are widely scattered across North America and are—with the exception of two large libraries—solidly mid-size. In this group of 17, the ratio of state-supported institutions to private is 14:1, which was unexpected since the ratio in the membership is roughly 2:1.

While one of these respondents adopted core competencies as early as 1960 and one will implement their list in 2003, the trend clearly gained momentum in the mid- to late-1990s and experienced a relative explosion at the turn of the millennium. During this time, much activity was taking place at the national level related to

competencies: several programs and pre-conferences were offered at American Library Association (ALA) meetings; the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) was developing research librarian competencies; and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) was working on information literacy competency standards.

Half of the libraries that don't have core competencies or related systems in use at this time indicated that they have considered developing such a list. Half of these are actively involved in development projects. Others report having "understood" lists of competencies or standard expectations for "soft skills" such as communication, teamwork, etc., which appear in every job description. Several respondents report that discussions are taking place in their libraries and/or that groups within their libraries are investigating competency development. For these libraries, areas of particular emphasis and/or interest are technical competencies, leadership competencies, and managerial competencies. Some respondents indicated they are waiting to incorporate core competencies into a larger effort such as library-wide planning, library reorganization, and campus-wide performance management efforts (i.e., broadband compensation system, etc.). Understandably, the task is not one that libraries are taking lightly. Developing core competencies is a time-consuming effort. For 60% of this survey's respondents the effort took from six months to over a year.

Developing Core Competencies

For almost half of the 17 libraries that have core competencies in place (8, or 47%), library administration was the driving factor behind

creating and using competencies. At a small number of libraries, the effort was the result either of recommendations by a library committee, a mandate from a parent institution, a combination of mandates by the institution and library, or input from library focus groups. At others, core competencies developed over time due to the needs of the library.

Almost half of the respondents (8, or 47%) indicated that their library created its own list of core competencies. Thirty-five percent blended some existing competencies into their own set, while 18% adopted an existing set of competencies such as those developed by national or regional library associations. (See the Selected Resources section of this publication for examples.)

In the majority of cases (14, or 82%), competency lists were developed by a library committee or team. Library staff from all levels served on these committees, with the exception of student employees. Librarians were present on every team. Both other professional or administrative staff and support staff were involved in 69% of the teams. Student employees were not on any team. In several cases, the team worked in conjunction with library administration or the parent institution. At two institutions, this effort was the sole responsibility of library administration or the parent institution.

Regardless of how they were developed, core competencies are widely viewed as a tool for clarifying common goals for all employees (88%). They are also valuable for identifying current employees' skill gaps (76%), developing training programs for library staff (76%), recruiting qualified staff (59%), rewarding staff achievements (47%), and retaining current staff (41%). Various components of performance management (i.e., evaluating performance, merit pay decisions, skill development, development of succession plans, development of individual career plans) were also mentioned by respondents as other uses of core competencies.

Implementing Core Competencies

At four of the responding institutions, core competencies apply to all staff. At four others, they

apply to all regular staff but not student employees. They apply to various pairs of staff categories (i.e., librarians and other professionals, librarians and support staff, other professionals and support staff) at six libraries and to either librarians or other professionals only at three. Two respondents indicated that competencies were developed with the entire staff in mind, including librarians, though at the present time application is most fully developed in non-librarian groups. Whether this is related to the librarians' faculty status is not clear. Interestingly, the majority of the libraries that are currently in the planning stage are developing core competencies that will apply to staff library-wide.

When core competencies are first introduced to a library, staff are made aware of them through information sessions and other updates. They are subsequently published on staff Web sites and in library handbooks. Where core competencies are part of the annual evaluation, staff are reminded of them during the performance appraisal process. New employees may learn of core competencies through job advertisements and recruiting information, during job interviews, and certainly during post-hiring orientation.

Competency Evaluation and Application

In all but one institution, supervisors are responsible for evaluating whether an employee has attained competency. Thirteen of the seventeen responding libraries also consider the individual's self-evaluation. Four include a peer evaluation component in the final determination. One considers test results in addition to other feedback.

Performance evaluation forms reflect core competencies and competencies development at 58% of the responding libraries. Of these ten libraries, seven evaluate on individual competencies; three evaluate on overall competency development. One institution reports that performance evaluation is weighted one-third goals; one-third knowledge, skills, and abilities; and one-third university values.

There is almost an equal split between libraries that tie salary increases to core competency

attainment and those that don't: nine (53%) answered "yes" to this question and eight (47%) answered "no." For several libraries, salary increases reflect overall performance on the job, which includes attainment/mastery of core competencies. And, even in libraries where salary increases are not officially tied directly to core competencies, it may be difficult to evaluate an employee as doing a satisfactory job if he/she is not meeting core competencies. One library reports that having unionized staff has an impact on the full integration of core competencies into the institution; in this particular library, evaluations cannot be directly based on competency development.

Staff Development and Training

Institutions are using a variety of training methods to help staff attain a sufficient level of competency. The library develops and offers training in-house at 88% of the responding institutions. Seventy-six percent send staff to outside workshops; the parent institution offers training at 58%; and 53% use online training. Some respondents indicated that training software that allows both for defining competencies and testing attainment is helpful, but can be expensive. Several respondents note that coaching (by managers, supervisors, informal peer networks) is a useful method for competency attainment. Standardized training throughout the library, utilizing training checklists, and monitoring and self-monitoring of performance, are helpful techniques for staff and supervisors.

Surprisingly, only five libraries (29%) set a limit on how long staff have to attain competency in the core list of skills. Among these the range varies from three months to two years. In two of these libraries the limit is only for new employees in the provisional period. Apparently, the rest of the libraries consider competency attainment a lifelong pursuit.

Budget and Administration

Four respondents reported that funding for the development and implementation of core competencies came from both the library's and

the parent institution's budgets. One institution explained that the parent institution developed the competencies and the library pays for staff training. The library budget alone funded these efforts at eight institutions. In addition, three libraries pointed out that, since the main cost of the process was staff time, no special budget allocation was made for core competency development. One library used grant funding and at two the institution covered the costs.

Oversight responsibility for core competency efforts in libraries is varied. Many respondents indicated that either "library administration" or someone in an administrative role has overall responsibility, for example, the Dean or Assistant to the Dean. Several libraries explained that staff in supervisory roles—unit heads, supervisors, and department heads—have ongoing responsibility for the process. In other libraries, human resources staff are responsible, for example, Human Resources Specialist, Human Resources Coordinator, Library Personnel Services, Manager of Staff Training and Development, Personnel Librarian. One library reported that the Staff and Organizational Systems team has this responsibility.

Conclusion

David McClellan is often cited as the founder of competency-based methodology. His groundbreaking article, "Testing for Competence Rather than for Intelligence," appeared in *American Psychologist* in 1973. Thirty years later, responses to this SPEC survey indicate that nearly one-third of ARL member libraries have implemented core competencies or related systems, are currently developing them, or have considered them. Nonetheless, no clear consensus exists as to what the competencies should be or to whom they ought to apply. At this point, each institution decides whether competencies are applicable to all staff groups library-wide, are process-specific, or are used for evaluation purposes.

For research libraries that are considering developing core competencies, there are benefits for both library administration and library staff. Core competencies provide:

- A base for developing individual staff training and/or staff development plans
- More consistent and well-articulated performance expectations for library staff
- More consistent performance evaluations (when core competencies are evaluated)
- A better understanding by library staff of the skills, knowledge, abilities, and attributes valued by the organization
- A solid foundation on which to build new compensation/classification systems

While competency development and implementation is not a fast or easy process, as part of a larger performance management system their use can help research libraries to recruit, hire, train, and retain valuable employees. In today's ever-changing and increasingly challenging environment, well-designed and implemented core competencies enable libraries and library staff to best meet the needs of the research library community.