

Complete Guide to Competency Definition – Competency Statements that work



Contents

What is a Competency?.....	3	Precision of statement	13
Knowledge	4	Use of adjectives and adverbs.....	14
Skills	4	Using compound statements to promote specificity	14
Competency Framework Purpose.....	5	Order effects	15
Structuring a competency	6	Statements for proficiency levels	15
Essential elements	6	How will we measure competence?	16
Heading and description	6	Measuring Knowledge	16
When to use subheadings	6	Measuring skills	17
Competency Statements – avoiding bias	7	Measuring Application	17
Four Critical questions.....	7	Review and update statements.....	18
1. Validation of meaning.....	8		
2. Assumptions	8		
3. Measuring Concept of Interest.....	9		
4. Accurate interpretation of the data	10		
How Statement characteristics affect responses	11		
Negative v positive statements.....	11		
Emotional Triggers	12		
Wording Intensity	12		
Syntax	13		

What is a Competency?

When considering deploying a competency framework it is essential to be clear on what you mean by a competency.

There are many definitions of competency, and many confuse competency with several other concepts. For example, a competency is not;

- × An ability
- × An attitude
- × A personality trait
- × Competence
- × Performance
- × A Training Course

Having an ability, a positive attitude and or a particular personality trait does not mean a person will be successful on the job.

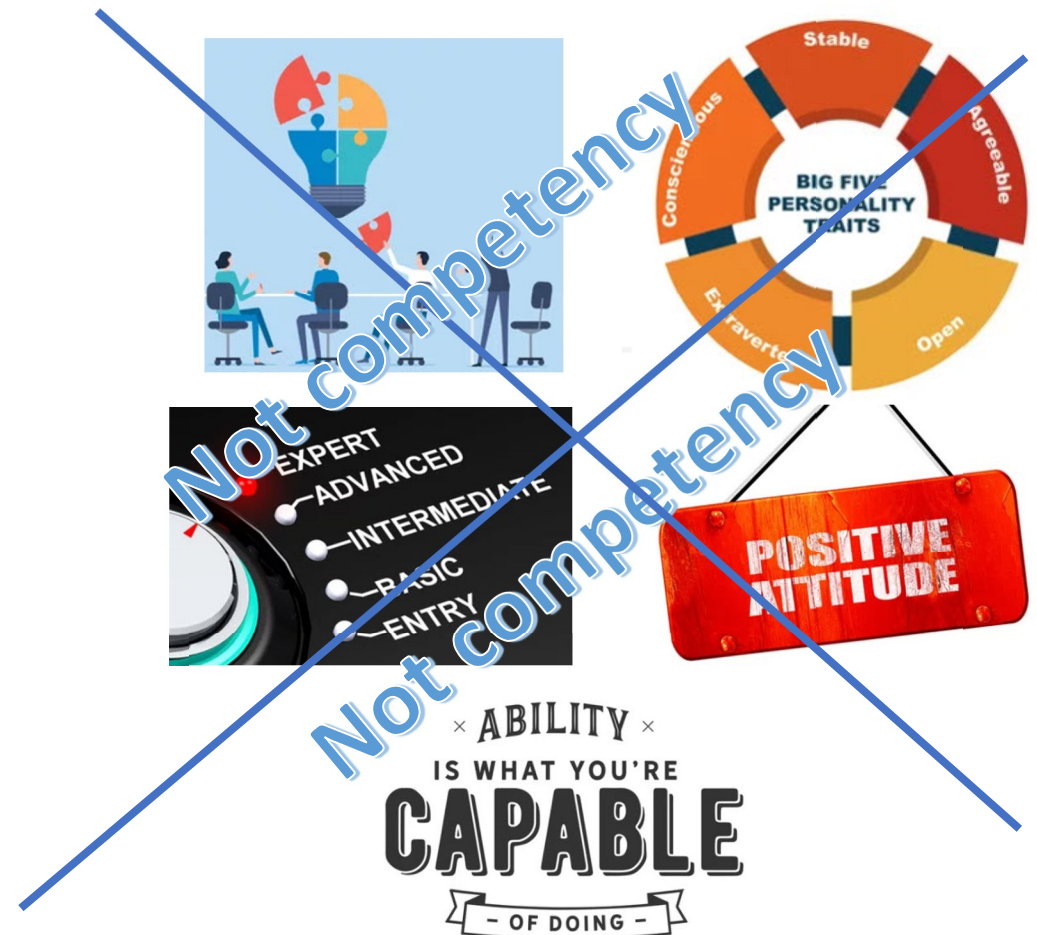
Competence is a measure of competency – a degree of proficiency.

Performance is about outcomes, results.

Competency is a pre-requisite for performance, It's not the same

A common approach in competency management is to deem a person competent after they have completed training.

Unfortunately, research into “training transfer” reveals that in many cases – perhaps more than 70% - what is learnt in training does not get used on the job.



There continues to be much confusion over the competency concept. When the concept in use is not clear, implementation will fail.

At Centranum we define competency as job relevant knowledge and skill and their appropriate application in the workplace.



Knowledge is often referred to as “knowing what” and skills are “knowing how”.

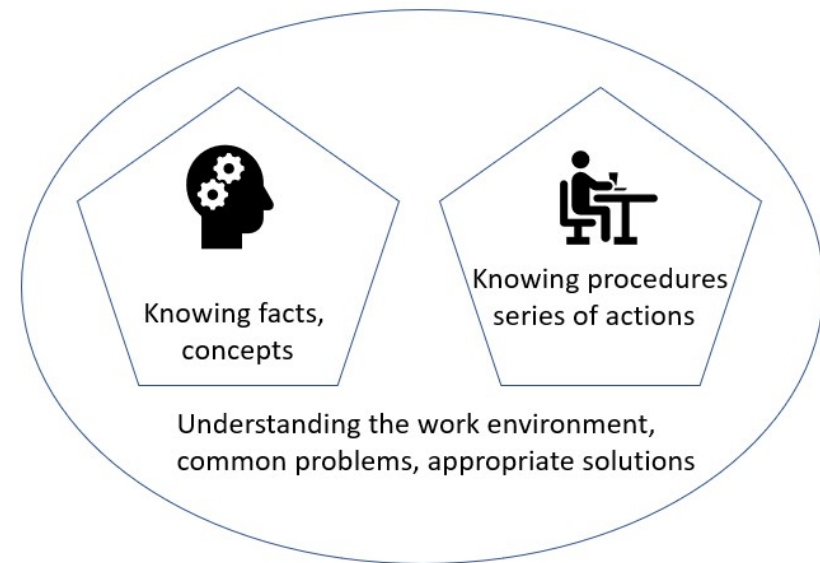
Application means using knowledge and skills correctly in the work context – “knowing when”.

This is a science-based approach from Psychology.

Knowledge

Cognitive psychology distinguishes knowledge into three domains;

1. conceptual knowledge – of concepts, principles, and facts
2. procedural knowledge – of a series of actions and manipulations to accomplish a task
3. situational knowledge - of the environment in which action is required, the problems that arise.



Skills

Skills are the actions we complete in the workplace, a task-list for the role.

Competency Framework Purpose

How you define competencies will to some extent depend on the purpose of your framework or competency model.

Some frameworks have a high-level purpose – to integrate HR processes and align them with the organization’s purpose and direction.

Usually this approach starts with a ‘Core Competency’ or ‘Behavioural Competency’ framework which serves primarily to communicate organizational performance expectations.

This framework signals the key priorities in how we work with external parties especially customers, and ‘citizenship’ competencies - the way we work together. It is designed to shape the organization’s culture.

For effective communication a framework with a simple structure is preferable.

The nature of the competencies means they are more broadly defined than a job specific functional competency.

Purposes

Integrate HR processes

- ☐ Align processes with Organisation’s goals, values & culture

Compliance – skills audit

- ☐ Quality Assurance
- ☐ Risk Management
- ☐ Staffing

Performance

- ☐ Job knowledge and skill is the best predictor of job performance

Individual Development

- ☐ Professional Development
- ☐ Career Development
- ☐ Succession Planning

Frameworks that are used for;

- ☐ Quality Assurance
- ☐ Risk Management
- ☐ Specialist staffing
- ☐ Professional development
- ☐ Career & Succession Planning

Can be more complex and competencies are defined in more detail.

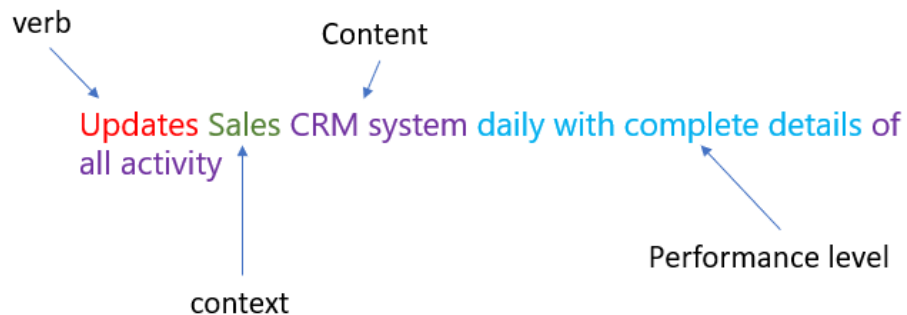
Structuring a competency

Essential elements

Whatever the type of competency its definition must include four elements;

1. The context – when, how and/or where the competency is used.
2. A verb – relating to cognition or actions - for example *'Understands', 'Describes', 'Carries Out'*
3. The content – what the cognition or action is about – for example a procedure.
4. An expected level of performance – i.e., *'completely', 'correctly', 'accurately', 'safely'*.

They could all be embodied in the statement itself



Heading and description

The heading of the competency can be short so long as it also has a description that sets out its context.

When to use subheadings

Subheadings are useful when the competency is a broad topic. They are a means to narrow the definition and context.

For example, a broad competency like Teamwork may have subheadings like Collaboration, Sharing Information, Supporting Others.

A technical competency such as Information Security may have subheadings like;

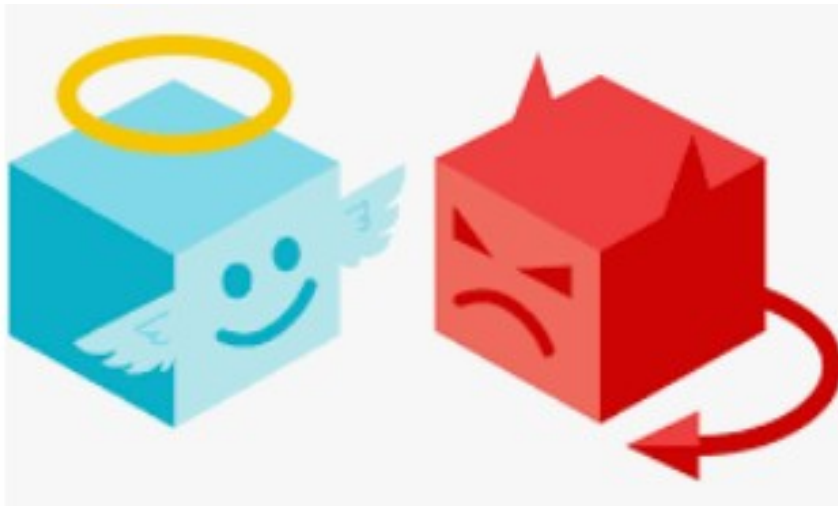
- Application security
- Infrastructure security
- Cloud security
- Incident response.
- Vulnerability management.
- Disaster recovery

Competency Statements – avoiding bias

There are many problems of bias in measuring competency.

Sources of bias include

- the way we remember events
- the influence of prior assessments we made
- selective perception
- the tendency to confirm existing opinions
- emotional factors such as how we get on with the person being assessed.
- The halo effect



The tendency of some raters to be more critical – and others to be more 'lenient' overall.

Finally, the format of the assessment influences the outcome.

We must therefore make sure that the format – the competency definitions we use do not cause avoidable bias or inaccuracy.

Competencies are not objects – they are abstract concepts.

For each there are many many factors that could form a competency statement.

It is important to validate that your statements embody

- what is important to your organisation and
- are a fundamental requirement of the competency.

Competencies are an expression of expectations, the knowledge and skills you expect to see demonstrated. Frame them in your organisation's language and refer to your specific environment.

Four Critical questions

Competency statements (indicators/standards/behaviours) must be able to answer these questions appropriately.

1. Will respondents agree on the meaning of a term?
2. Does the item make implicit assumptions about respondents?
3. Does each statement measure the concept of interest?
4. Will you be able to accurately interpret the data?

When developing competency frameworks, it is good practice to involve a working group of stakeholders. Their goal is to answer these questions as well as ensure that the framework (s) are aligned with organization priorities.

1. Validation of meaning

If the statement is broad in scope assessors may interpret it differently. For example:

“Displays passion for the cause, and sparks that same passion in others”

What is ‘passion’?



Different assessors will interpret passion differently. Some may interpret it on a personality basis – some based on actions they observe.

In a more technical competency - Negotiation Competency for

procurement staff - one statement of the competency standard/performance criteria is;

“Ensures thorough analysis of benchmarking information”

The validation process for the competency model must include checks of what the stakeholders understand by *‘benchmarking information’* and *‘thorough analysis’*. If there is no common understanding, the indicator needs to be made more specific.

Lack of agreement on meaning is much more likely in core and leadership competencies where terms are much broader.

For example - *“Is versatile”* is a popular statement often used by itself. It has a range of meanings if you check the dictionary;

- able to do many kinds of things
- able to adjust to new conditions
- open to change
- adaptable
- resourceful
- accomplished
- multifaceted

The competency statement should include further clarification.

2. Assumptions

It is easy to include statements that make implicit assumptions about assessors or assessees.

For assessors the most common assumption is that they can make an evidence-based assessment.



It is important to ensure that all competency statements – sometimes termed performance criteria - describe observable actions.

As a corollary to this the observable actions must be tasks that are actually done – otherwise assessments will result in a high proportion of ‘not applicable’

This is why you must involve competency ‘subject matter experts’ in competency definition. – Operational staff from each area.

A statement with implicit assumption
‘Efficiently handles all customer complaints’

The assumption is that efficient is ‘good’, that quality standards have been met. But efficient could easily be interpreted as rapid throughput – which may not mean happy customers.

3. Measuring Concept of Interest

Most competency models have a competency heading, or subheading, with a series of competency statements. The statements must all be measures of the concept for the competency model to be valid.

First ensure you are using well validated concepts with research-based definitions.

For example, the commonly used competency [Critical Thinking](#) comes from the concept of the same name which has 6 core skills. Each with its own sub skills.

TABLE 3	
SKILL	SUB-SKILLS
1. Interpretation	Categorization Decoding Significance Clarifying Meaning
2. Analysis	Examining Ideas Identifying Arguments Analyzing Arguments
3. Evaluation	Assessing Claims Assessing Arguments
4. Inference	Querying Evidence Conjecturing Alternatives Drawing Conclusions
5. Explanation	Stating Results Justifying Procedures Presenting Arguments
6. Self-Regulation	Self-examination Self-correction

The output of a research project among Cognitive Psychologists to determine a common definition.

In this case you could prepare competency statements at the skills level or at the sub skills level.

The higher the level of the statements the broader and the more open to subjective evaluation they will be.

4. Accurate interpretation of the data

It is often forgotten that the quality of data analysis is directly dependent on the quality of the data.



Data quality is in turn directly dependent on the quality of competency statements.

How to avoid GIGO - garbage in, garbage out? This depends on what you want to get from your competency management initiative.

As we saw earlier, key purposes are;

- Integration and alignment of HR processes
- Performance Improvement
- Quality assurance and risk management
- Skills mapping for staffing
- Individual Development
- Succession Planning

Integrating HR processes and aligning people management processes to mission, values and culture is a communications exercise.



This purpose typically uses higher level concepts such as Customer Focus and Teamwork. Higher level concepts are prone to GIGO because their competency statements are too broad.

Performance Improvement and Individual Development involve both 'hard' (task based) and 'soft' or citizenship skills.

Soft skills are also typically described with higher level concepts, but to avoid GIGO should be described at the sub skill levels and be particular to the work context.

When competency management is used for compliance and skills audit purposes information needs are much more about hard, task specific sub skills. Competency statements must be demonstrably relevant to the demands of the job and the level of definition very specific.

Here sources such as standard operating procedures and protocols and equipment operation instructions should be used.

How Statement characteristics affect responses

Competency statements should convey relevant job behaviours to the assessor. The problem is to avoid varying interpretations.

Negative v positive statements

Most competency evaluations use only neutral or positively worded statements.

But, there is a general tendency for assessors to agree (more than disagree) with any competency statement – regardless of its content. This is a phenomenon called acquiescence bias.

It is more common in less educated assessors.

Introducing some negative statements is a way to counteract this – to get assessors to slow down and pay more attention to the

content. Rather than providing responses that reflect their general thinking about the person.

Negative statements are not all equal in their impact. Those that are positive competency statements turned negative

For example, the positive teamwork behaviour

“Shares ideas and information with the team”

can be mirrored in the negative as

“Does not share ideas and information with the team”



Some research shows that the use of mirrored negatively worded statements may measure a different concept than intended. A statement couched in the negative may be interpreted differently than one that has a positive frame. They are not considered the exact opposite of the positive statement.

The research also shows that the use of mirrored negatively worded statements can be confusing and adversely affects the consistency of responses.

Especially if statements containing double negatives are used.

“Does not show disrespect”

It is preferable therefore that any negative statements you include are **descriptions of an undesirable behaviour**.

There is evidence to show that performance and competence is more effectively improved by reducing undesirable behaviours than by promoting desirable ones.

For example, under a Teamwork competency:

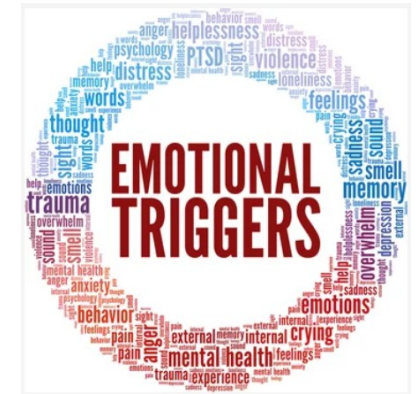
“Keeps information, ideas and expertise to themselves.”

Using a mixture of such statements with the usual positive competency statements can elicit more accurate information on competency development needs.

Emotional Triggers

Statements or words or phrases that may trigger an emotional reaction – which can affect assessments.

This is more likely in competency statements on leadership and soft skills more than those which are task related.



Examples -

‘Challenge’, ‘Difficult Conversations’

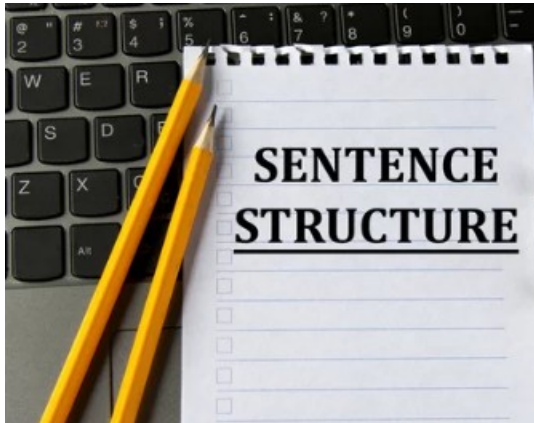
Emotional Triggers may include the rating scale point descriptions

“Below expectation” is more likely to trigger feelings than “Needs Development” and may be avoided by assessors.

Wording Intensity

Keep competency statements as simple as possible. Use simple words and short phrases.

Syntax



Syntax is the structure of sentences. For competency statements Constituents are;

- Subject
- Verb
- Descriptors

Simple syntax (fewer descriptors) is more easily understood.

(Assessee) “Supports team decisions”

Complex syntax is less easily understood

“Focuses more on managing other people to accomplish a task than on personally finishing everything the team does”

Syntax where the statement contains descriptors of two or more behaviours are problematic.

“Is able to fire or deal firmly with loyal but incompetent people without procrastinating”

The assessment will be inaccurate because it is unlikely that the same rating would apply to all 3 behaviours described for managing incompetence;

- Firing
- Dealing firmly
- Procrastinating on such decisions

Precision of statement

1. “Inspires others”
2. “Inspires subordinates”

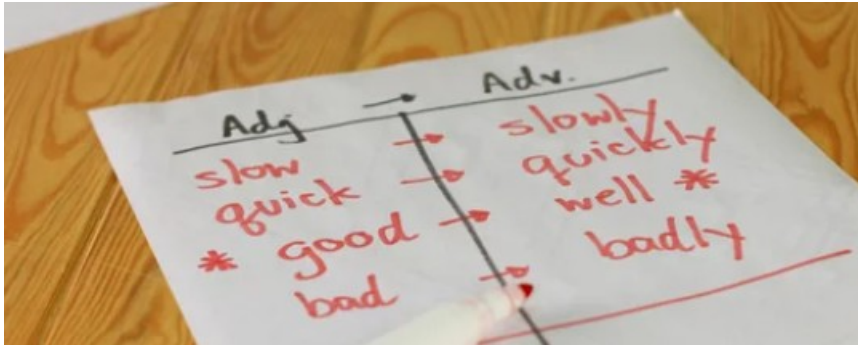
In the first statement assessors must interpret the group of ‘others’. In the second statement the group is defined so no interpretation is needed.

There will be much more variation in assessment of statement 1 because of the variation in interpretation.

The second statement is much more informative than the first one.

After all the purpose of competency frameworks is to help the organisation accurately identify individual development needs.

Use of adjectives and adverbs



Adjectives and adverbs will be interpreted differently by different people – examples - “effectively”, “good” , “difficult” , “creatively”

In this case it is good to add a “so that “ or “so as” to provide the needed specifics.

“Communicates effectively so as to galvanise team into action”.

So here effectively means getting action from the team.

Quantifying adjectives (e.g., usually, always,) are frequently used in competency statements and their rating scales.

It is important to understand that these adjectives mean different things to different people.

When using a frequency rating scale add in a percentage of time description to promote consistency of interpretation

Rarely (less than 25% of time)

Using compound statements to promote specificity

It may be necessary to go beyond a simple phrase to get some specificity – especially in competency statements relating to soft skills and values-based behaviours.

The key is to add context – things to consider (and refer page 6)

The behaviour

- What it is
- when should it be used
- how should it be used
- what - Supports team decisions
- when – in team meetings
- how – by confirming team input

Order effects

When creating competency statements, the order in which they are to be presented is important.

Both for reference and assessment purposes.

If general statements are presented before more specific ones, then the assessment of the more general item will affect the assessment of the more specific ones.

It is better to keep a general competency description separate from the specific behavioural or task criteria.

Task related criteria should be presented in the order that the tasks would be encountered on the job.

The order of competency statements should be considered.

Statements for proficiency levels

It follows from the need for specificity that competency statements will vary by the seniority of the role.



Junior positions will require different tasks and behaviours than leadership roles.

This applies to core and leadership competencies as well as technical ones.

There are two possible approaches to this;

1. Have different frameworks for different proficiency levels so that statements at different proficiency levels are not needed for the same competency.
2. Use a single framework with different competency statements for different proficiency levels.

How will we measure competence?

Many competency frameworks and academic curricula – for example the EEE Computer Society’s Computing Curricula 2020 (CC2020) - describe competencies as encompassing knowledge – know-what, skills – know – how, as well as dispositions – know why.

We define disposition as ‘application’ –the appropriate application of knowledge and skills on the job.

An accurate rating is a function of 3 factors;

- The actual performance of the assessee
- Observation of that performance by the assessor
- Accurate recall of those observations by the assessor

Competency statements should be linked to the method(s) that will be used to validate the competency so that this can be confirmed in the assessment.

Select Validation|

Direct Observation

Verbal Report

Documentation Review

Scenario Based Evaluation

Knowledge Test

Skills Demonstration

Completing training or reviewing Learning Materials does not automatically result in competency.

In fact, most training does not get transferred to the job. Our brains just do not make the association unless the training is on the job.

Measuring Knowledge

Use questions to find knowledge of guidelines, policies, core principles, equipment usage procedures and so on.

These questions can be asked by an assessor, or even an interview panel for senior positions.

For a less labour-intensive approach use Multi Choice Questions.

There is an initial investment in setting up MCQs but thereafter this is a simple approach for entry level and junior positions.

Measuring skills

What is being measured here are actions – so observation is essential.

The observation may be

1. By a colleague on the job over a period of time. Here we depend on recall and communication to the assessor
2. Directly by the assessor over a period of time – recall dependent.
3. It may be observation on the job at a pre-arranged time. This will be more accurate.
4. It can be a skills demonstration – working through a procedure step by step, but not necessarily as part of real work.
5. If documentation is involved a review of completed information is a good way to validate.

Measuring Application

Observational assessment will cover the appropriate application of knowledge and skills in common scenarios of the work environment.

The distinguishing characteristic of experts is that they can solve problems by applying first principles and past experience to unforeseen situations.

The use of scenarios and simulations are good opportunities to assess the application of knowledge and skills in uncommon circumstances.

This can be by questions – what would you do... ? – or by presenting the assessee with a new task in the workplace and observing their response.

Review and update statements

Competency statements need to change as your business environment changes.

Core values are reviewed and updated from time to time. Core and Leadership competency statements need to be continually developed and improved in use. You are not going to get everything right first time.

Occupational competency statements will need to change as products and services evolve and equipment and procedures change.

Centranum provides competency library management tools that facilitate and track changes with minimal administrative time.

The Centranum competency platform supports multiple competency frameworks and proficiency level schemas as well as simple competency framework structures.

It has simple tools for mapping technical competencies to job specific profiles as well as profiles for core competencies and those used in performance management.

All types of competency assessment methods are supported.

We hope you have found this information helpful

Contact us for more information

info@centranum.com

**for information on our competency management platform
go to**

<https://www.centranum.com/competency-management-software>

or

<https://www.centranum.com/clinical-competency-management-software>

or

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