

The Pros and Cons of Six Different Competency Models



by Kerry Williams on behalf of Avilar | Aug 15, 2018



Can't decide which competency model to use? Making decisions is not always easy. An inordinate amount of time deciding between equally attractive options can drain you of your time and energy, which is why we often follow certain best practices to speed up the process. In fact, we do it so often, we may not even realize we're following these patterns.

For example, an easy way to avoid making simple, everyday decisions like what to eat for breakfast can be avoided by creating a habit, such as eating the same thing each morning. That works for predictable and routine decisions, but not so well for more complex decisions.

Another technique is to use "if/then" thinking. Yet another is to weigh the pros and cons. When it comes to a competency model and deciding how to incorporate competencies into your employee performance management process, you will need to consider how these competencies will be **defined**, **assessed**, and **rated**. For this, there are a variety of models that can be used, each bringing its own unique benefits and disadvantages for you to evaluate.

Here are the pros and cons of 6 different competency models to help you make an informed decision when it comes to deciding what's best for your organization.

Related Article: 7 Powerful Reasons to Use Competencies

According to Training Industry, a **competency model is a framework** for defining the skill and knowledge requirements of a job. It's a collection of competencies that jointly define successful job performance.

Depending on an organization's size, a competency model can be used to create a competency management program. Prior to implementing the program, the pros and cons of each of these competency models should be carefully considered.

1) Externally-Developed Models

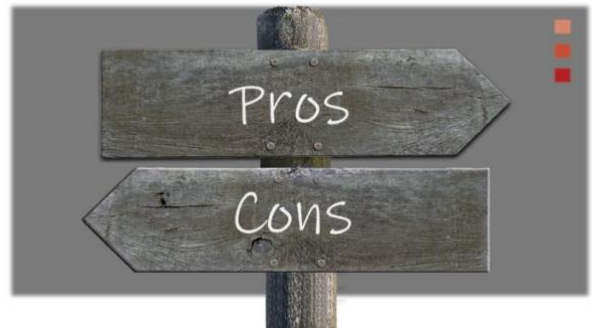
The numerous competency models available online and through consultants, professional organizations, and government entities are an excellent starting point for organizations building a competency management program from scratch. The **templates typically need to be customized and validated** in order to be of value to the organization. Obtaining input from Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) here will be invaluable.

PROS

- Provides a quick start to the process
- Can expedite model creation
- Input from SMEs is often based on best practices
- Lends an overview to the numerous competencies to consider, which may not be apparent otherwise

CONS

- Templates may not be an ideal fit for certain organizations
- Requires customization



2) Behavioral Event Interviews

One of the best ways to obtain information about what people do in their job and how they go about their work is through Behavioral Event Interviews (BEI). By asking **questions which require an open or descriptive response**, insights can be gathered beyond a simple yes-or-no, true-or-false type of response.

PROS

- Provides a more objective set of facts for decision-making than other interviewing methods
- Gathers information from employees about their actual behavior during past experiences, which can demonstrate various competencies needed in the current role and other roles
- Often uncovers new competencies which can be more widely implemented in the organization
- Results in a collection of highly specific descriptions that can be used when applying the model (e.g., selection tools, training design, skills inventories)
- Significantly reduces bias
- Reduces reliance on experts' assumptions about actual competence

CONS

- Can be time-consuming to implement
- Interviewers must be trained
- The questioning techniques must be standardized across all interviewers
- Less critical competencies may be overlooked or missed
- Is impractical for widespread use in large organizations

3) Expert Panel Discussions

This method consists of convening **groups of experts** who know a job role particularly well and who excel at it. Through objective questioning and facilitation, discussions can yield insights into the competencies that are at the heart of success for a particular role.

Panel participants can include supervisors for the position, SMEs who perform the role in the organization as well as those from outside the organization, and other individuals who perform in that role at a superior level.



PROS

- Are a quick and efficient method for collecting data
- Have the effect of creating buy-in with key individuals for using competency management in the organization

CONS

- Occasionally brings out “folklore” competencies in addition to true performance differentiators
- Panel members may overlook – and therefore not discuss – competencies that are unfamiliar to them

Related Article: 7 Tips for Optimizing the Competency Management Process

4) Workforce Surveys

Surveying large numbers of employees helps expedite the collection of competency information in a relatively short amount of time. Surveys can be administered to employees at every level, or targeted to specific employees at the manager, supervisor, or employee levels.

However, care should be taken to effectively create an objective and comprehensively designed survey. In order for the results to be meaningful and usable, the questions asked must have both **reliability and validity**. Surveys with leading questions will ultimately produce predictable insights that are of little use to the organization.

PROS

- Are a fast, affordable method for collecting detailed information from large numbers of employees and/or large quantities of job roles
- Can educate employees at all levels about what the competency management program entails
- Has the effect of creating buy-in with employees at all levels about using competency management in the organization
- Collects highly valid and reliable data when designed correctly

CONS

- If not specifically listed in the questionnaire, important competencies can be missed
- If administered via pen-and-paper (instead of online), employees may have to waste time sorting through numerous competencies that are not applicable to their jobs

5) Job Task Analysis

Job Task Analysis is primarily used to develop job descriptions and perform compensation analysis; however, it also can be a beneficial activity for analyzing highly-specialized positions and focused **roles that demand high-level skill sets or expertise**, for example, scientific researchers or mechanical concept designers.

In addition to Expert Panel Discussions and Workforce Surveys, creators of the competency management program can evaluate certain employees' time records or calendars, conduct one-on-one interviews, or directly observe the employees in these specialized roles.

PROS

- Produces comprehensive and detailed job descriptions
- Validates or expands upon data collected via other methods, especially if observation is used
- Helps to collect data on routine or repetitive jobs

CONS

- The focus is on job tasks instead of on the competencies needed by the employee performing the job
- May result in too much detail
- Does not delineate between important tasks and routine or administrative activities
- Can be expensive and inefficient to implement, since critical incidents are rare and may be difficult to capture when observation is taking place

6) Organizational Documents Review

The review of existing documents in an organization can provide unique insights to competency information. Department heads who create best practices or task guidelines, provide a view to the inner workings of how a team is expected to perform.

Reviews of documents such as formal job descriptions, individual and departmental **performance appraisals**, and training curricula that pair learning objectives with competencies can be particularly insightful.

PROS

- Are a relatively fast and affordable method
- Results in valuable information that has been collected and considered from multiple points of view

CONS

- Can be based on outdated information and/or erroneous assumptions
- Leaves no room for the latest best practices, ideas, processes, or competencies
- Provides no opportunities for employee buy-in or ownership of the competency management program at the departmental level

Whichever model you choose, input should always be sought from **SMEs and high performers** in each functional area, and departmental coordinators can be utilized to expedite development and validation of a competency model.

Related Article: How to Choose the Right Competency Model

In Summary

As the backbone to performance management, competency models can help organizations gain alignment on what defines success for individuals, teams, departments, and the company as a whole. While they may require a considerable time and resource commitment to implement effectively, they provide huge returns to companies wanting to improve their workforce management programs.

If you are looking to improve your workforce performance, download our white paper – “Energizing Performance Through Competency Management.” Or contact us for a consultation.

