

A new look at competence

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Live Topics

Risk-based competence management

Why manage competence?

Employers have a legal 'duty of care' to provide safe systems of work. Hazardous industries face much tighter controls, and a 'Safety Case' or 'Major Accident Prevention Plan' is now required in many sectors.

Duty holders are required to identify key human factors risks, and set out how the risk has been reduced or controlled. Regulators now look very closely at competence management systems to check how they affect risk.

But it's not just about 'insurance'. Research shows that employers with mature systems can quantify real improvements in safety incidents, process shutdowns, equipment failures, uptime, productivity, and significant reduction in training costs.

Isn't it just a black hole?

Why then has the reality so often been disappointing? Poorly designed systems have consumed funds but not led to improvement. Investment has gone into bureaucracy without producing people who can do their job efficiently and safely.

Once employers have invested heavily in a system, they are understandably reluctant to review its effectiveness in case it leads to more cost.

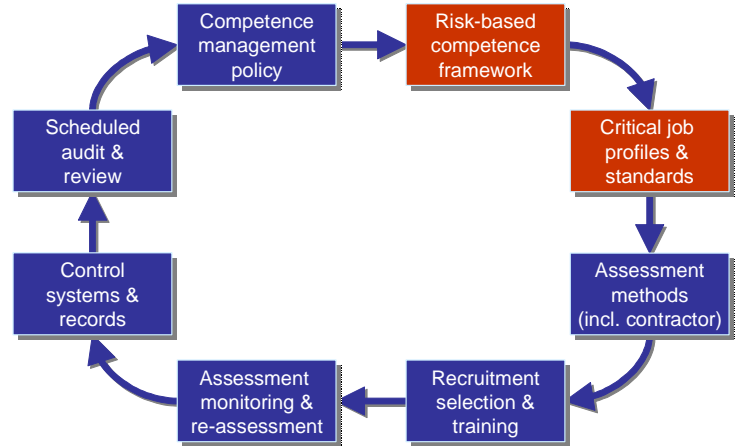
A new look

I worked with a regional group of 16 major employers to benchmark their competence systems.

We developed a robust 8-stage model to summarise key elements and help the employers check for gaps.

We found many examples of good practice in three quarters of the model, but systems creaked at the seams under sheer volume of activity.

The usual reason was that too little attention had been paid to analysing real competence risks and defining critical job profiles.



On-site workshops proved the point. Systems often focused on low-level competence, but missed roles where the risk from competence failure was high. Generic standards were not related to task- or site-specific risks.

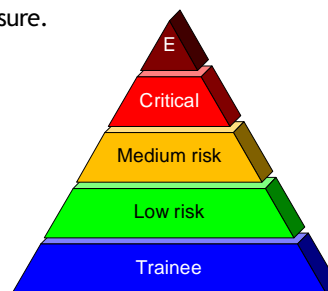
Lack of priority-setting flowed all the way through the system, caused bottlenecks, and discouraged continuing re-assessment.

A risk-based approach

There is an alternative. Competence management systems *can* be valid for the business and reliable in delivery.

The answer is to map critical roles in your organisation and analyse the risk of competence failure, so that you can set priorities within a layered assessment strategy.

High-risk roles may need special treatment or even job re-design. A layered approach helps you take low-risk roles out of the equation, and concentrate effort on areas that add value or minimise exposure.



Action steps

- Map the 'real' organisation
- Define roles crisply
- Link roles to major hazards
- Assess risks of competence failure
- Pinpoint organisational weakness
- Design out high competence risks
- Control residual competence risks by designing robust HR, training, and assessment strategies
- Relate re-assessment to risk
- Produce clear priorities for action.

Getting started

In an ideal world, the process would begin with a high-level review, but a few simple tools can help get started.

With this in mind I developed a program called **RoleTrak™** to take the mystique out of human factors and walk you through the action steps.

Details of this and other thoughts about competence management are on my website: www.rowanhill.com.

Find out more

To find out more about risk-based competence management strategies and how to improve organisational performance in hazardous industries, contact Nicol Webster via the contact form at www.rowanhill.com.