Beyond competence: shifting perspectives of capability

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Competencies have tended to leave me somewhat uneasy. This is partly due to the attempt to nail down what makes exceptional performers and articulate it simply; partly the further oversimplification that comes when complex behaviours are reduced to a five point scale; and a whole lot about the UK focus on competence articulated through behaviours to the exclusion of other ways of describing broader capability.

Using competencies to drive key HR processes has some clear disadvantages. Competency-based appraisal can be intensely dispiriting, with an emphasis on evidencing every marking on the scale, and a focus on what isn't so good. This often drives out attention to what is working well and the end result is an appraisal lacking in energy and engagement. Competency-based recruitment tends to strongly favour those who can show they have done the job before rather than giving a chance to someone who might make the most contribution. This has severely disadvantaged young people in their search for work but has also made organisations more siloed as individuals struggle to make transitions into new areas or roles.

Further, the focus on competencies seems to reduce the capability of people to the most mundane expression of rote learning; take as an example how someone demonstrates their ability to care for customers through fulfilling a wide range of NVQ criteria (see reference at the end of this section) including:

■ identify the differences between an internal customer and an external customer

■ list their organisation's services or products

■ describe the connection between customer expectations and customer satisfaction in customer service

■ describe why organisation procedures are important to good customer service.

In such a fragmented way of measuring what good looks like, how is the contribution of any underlying theoretical understanding recognised? How do we value the kinds of knowledge that help us act in different, unique and complex

situations? If we measure competence in this reductionist way, doesn't that fundamentally affect what we teach and what we learn? So we teach outcomes, rather than the more fundamental fluid understandings that might help someone develop empathy with customers. The potential result is that individuals struggle to develop mastery and to make the links between problems, facts, issues, situations. Each sits in an isolated knowledge bubble with the effect that we de-skill people rather than up-skill them.

Competencies have also been criticised for being too Taylorist, ie for promoting a 'one best way' to undertake a task; for being overly focused on individuals and ignorant of social influences; and for being curiously devoid of context. Competencies have also been accused of underplaying technical skills, sometimes because concerns over the rapid pace of change has led to an emphasis on what endures rather than that which is likely to be displaced.

The common response in the face of such change has been a growing interest in generic skills or competencies as one way of recognising what can be transferred from job to job, ie the stuff that isn't firm specific. The World Bank (2007) for example suggested people need new generic competencies for the knowledge economy, eg cognitive problem-solving skills; self-learning and self-knowledge; social skills such as team working; negotiation; confidence; and motivation for work. OECD (2010a) suggests a similar set, which include basic skills and digital age literacy; academic skills; technical skills; and soft skills (appropriate emotions and behaviours; multicultural awareness and understanding; receptiveness etc.). However, the illusion of transferability has been criticised as misplaced as several supposedly generic skills are highly subject and context dependent; for example the communication skills relevant for an electrician, a nurse, a hairdresser and a car mechanic are very different in character (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011). Some generic skills are either so context dependent they are not actually transferable or they are so general they lose relevance to the workplace.

There is a potential further danger that an emphasis on generic skills pays too little attention to technical skills or knowledge and it is arguable that organisations' competency frameworks have sometimes also fallen into this trap. Whilst it has been suggested that rapid skills obsolescence has led to a de-professionalisation in many areas, others have argued that professional knowledge remains critical for the development of professional competence (Pahl and Rauner, 2009).

Some of these difficulties may be due to our consideration of what competencies are. It would appear that competencies have been thought of quite differently in different contexts. Heffernan and Flood (2000) for example, point out that the US approach typified by Boyatzis, Ulrich and others, defines competency as the underlying attributes of a person. The UK on the other hand, sees competency as a set of performances and standards. And whilst competences have been quite tightly conceived and applied in the UK, the German vocational training system has a

looser, more holistic approach. Clarke and Winch, 2006 (in Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011) describe a German threefold system:

1. **Factual competence:** The disposition to use expert knowledge to solve problems appropriately by using the right methods.

2. **Personal competence:** The disposition to be clear about, review and assess opportunities to develop, to fulfil potential and form life plans. Personal qualities such as autonomy, critical faculties, self-confidence reliability etc.

3. **Social competence:** The ability to create social relationships, communicate and engage with others, to develop social responsibility.

Competence in Germany is further integrated into an occupation which has a body of knowledge and practical skills.

The result is that, in the UK at least, the tendency appears to be a steady march to atomisation, of concentration on the parts rather than the whole, or to exaggerate a well-known idiom: an inability to see the tree for the leaves! As we have construed competence relatively narrowly, so we have encouraged reductive rather than holistic processes of learning. It also diminishes a theoretical base for learning as everything is disaggregated rather than emphasising commonalities and connectiveness. If knowledge is disaggregated it is much harder to apply it to novel events because events are complex outcomes, whereas a broader knowledge base becomes part of the lens through which we see the world.

It seems organisations may be coming to some of the same conclusions and considering how they can avoid some of the downsides of competencies. This is perhaps the inevitable backlash to any popular HR approach where its popularity may well be sowing the seeds for its downfall. Almost inevitably, a new approach offers opportunities to respond to the disadvantages obvious in its predecessor, whilst it quietly ushers in new disadvantages all of its own, invisible at first but gradually making themselves known until yet another new approach seeks to overcome them. Sometimes we just come full circle and find ourselves rebottling an older vintage. There are signs now that a sufficient number of organisations are beginning to wonder how else they might specify what they are looking for from their people in a way that is less prescriptive.

Examples of such shifts have been towards behaviours, values or capabilities. The capabilities approach is rooted in the work of Amartya Sen (1985, 1992) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) and is an example of a philosophically quite different perspective. The key difference is that capabilities are about preparing people for broad occupations within vocational streams rather than specific tasks or roles associated with a job. They focus on the ability to exercise complex judgements at work rather than perform defined roles; they depend on a depth of vocational knowledge, and acknowledge and support vocational identities and therefore embrace technical and

theoretical knowledge. There is a lot that is attractive here, as futures become more uncertain preparing people for specific roles and tasks is too limiting. We need innovation, competitiveness and productivity improvements and in a more complex world, these would seem to cry out for holistic rather than atomised conceptions of abilities.

Education and training need to lay the groundwork for higher levels of knowledge and understanding; we need to include skills for sustainability and innovation (Wheelahan and Moodie, 2011), and greater underpinning knowledge and theory. OECD's review of the literature on innovative workplaces (2010b) identified that organisations at the forefront of innovation adopted different kinds of workplace organisation, emphasising autonomy, discretion and learning. These kinds of workplaces are dependent on broader conceptions of competence and capability.

Sen defined social exclusion as capability deprivation – people lack the capabilities they need to exercise human freedom and choice. In organisations we might similarly see the lack of broader capabilities as excluding employees from playing a full role in the performance of their organisation and of fulfilling their personal potential. Narrow definitions of competence, coupled with approaches to training that overly focus on task performance contribute to this, and may unwittingly lead to a workforce which whilst assessed as more competent, is also less able.

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IES Annual HR Directors Provocation: Beyond competencies
25 November 2015, London

Competencies have had a good run in HR terms. However, they are not uncontentious and it may just be that the tide is firmly turning against competencies as the dominant way of describing what we are looking for. Our provocation this year will explore some of the criticisms of competencies in more depth, and hear from practitioners who have moved away from competencies to finding new ways of specifying the attributes their organisations need.

To find out more and book a place visit www.employment-studies.co.uk/network/events

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