

Building Competence Based Capability in Organisations

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1. Introduction

In New Zealand the National Qualifications Framework has been in place for sixteen years. During that time the main focus has been on vocational skills but this has been expanded in the last five years to encompass the school sector. In general industries have now embraced the competence based system and are facing issues of how to quality assure the assessment process in a workplace context. In this presentation I will outline:

- The issues that industries are facing implementing competence based assessment systems into the workplace.
- The issues relating to determining learner's requirements for assessment, and collecting and validating evidence.
- Strategies for implementing quality assured workplace assessment systems.
- Processes for interfacing assessment systems with current workplace processes.

Actual industry examples will be used to illustrate the issues raised in this presentation.

2. Background

When the National Qualifications Framework was first introduced into New Zealand sixteen years ago, its main focus was to develop competence based assessment tools that would enable industries to train and assess their workers to a consistent national standard. Recognition for workplace learning had not been a feature of the education landscape except in the traditional apprenticeship areas such as plumbers, electrician, motor mechanics, etc. The introduction of the National Qualifications Framework enabled industries who had no tradition of formal training to enter the system and develop competence based qualifications that would recognise the knowledge, skills and attributes of their workers. Understandably, initially there was a great deal of scepticism from the education sector about the worth of this type of workplace learning. This attitude still exists in some sectors, notably the university sector and the more traditional elements of the school sector.

In general both industry and the education sector have now embraced the competence based system and are now facing issues relating to implementation rather than philosophy. The main issue for industry is how to implement a competence based training and assessment system into industries that are represented by small to medium enterprises who are often

owner operated with limited resources, with high technical but low managerial skills, with sometimes high staff turnover and who are operating in an unregulated market in most instances. New Zealand is made up of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) with large organisations being the exception. For any nationally recognised competence based training and assessment system to work it has to be able to operate in this market as well as at the large organisational level.

3. Current Position

Most industry sectors in New Zealand have now developed competence based unit standards and qualifications that cover their technical requirements and have tended to incorporate into their qualification packages generic or key skills to cover such areas as communication skills, computing, health and safety, quality assurance, leadership and management, customer service and coaching. These skills, for small to medium enterprises, are often the value added skills which mean that in a competitive market a customer may choose their enterprise over a competitor whose customer service skills are not as competent, for example.

In hindsight however, New Zealand industries have found that the development of the unit standards and qualifications were the easy part. The more difficult part of the process was how to put the training and assessment systems in place. Traditionally, when people attended training in a training institution they assumed that for their training dollar they were getting a system that was underpinned by a quality assurance system that ensured that all learners would be trained and assessed in a similar fashion. In most cases this assumption was correct because training institutions are in the education business and have to ensure they maintain standards in order to attract customers. However, this assumption does not hold true in the workplace. Organisations are set up to produce products and/or services and to make a profit as their main focus. Workplace training is an additional function that is undertaken to ensure that workers have the right set of skills required to carry out the organisation's core functions. Training, especially in small to medium enterprises, is often carried out in an informal way by people who have technical skills that meet the organisation's requirements but not in a managerial or educational sense. The notion that workplace training and assessment needs to be quality assured in the same way that their technical organisational requirements are quality assured, is often not understood.

This is where the role of the Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) in New Zealand plays an important part. Industry Training Organisations were set up to assist their constituent industries to implement competence based training and assessment systems into the workplace. Over the last couple of years their function has been increased to cover the area of industry leadership. This role requires Industry Training Organisations to work closely with the industries within their sectors to determine what their training requirements are, and will be in the future, and how they can be implemented into the workplace. While this is a proactive approach to workplace learning, it raises

issues about how and where learning and assessment should take place, especially in relationship to obtaining quality outcomes.

4. Issues

Most industries in New Zealand have a workforce that is made up of experienced workers and people entering into the workforce for the first time. For industries with no history of formal qualifications both of these target audiences have to be accommodated under a competence based training and assessment system. Industry sectors have had to face this challenge by developing suites of qualifications that cater to all of these target audiences. However, the implementation of systems to train and/or assess these target audiences is quite different.

Experienced workers need to be accommodated differently to new workers. The experienced worker does not want to have to relearn skills and knowledge they already know. They do however need to be assessed to determine that their skills and knowledge are at the agreed national standard and have access to any training required to fill any gaps that may appear through the assessment process. A new person, on the other hand, will need to have training in how to acquire and perform the skills and knowledge required to competently perform the tasks required of them. Every organisation will have a varying mix of these target audiences depending upon the demographics of the industry, the state of the economy and labour market, import and/or export conditions and requirements and the availability of skilled workers. Because of these factors, organisations implementing competence based training and assessment systems need to have a level of expertise or be able to tap into a level of expertise that will enable them to be confident that the systems they put in place can produce a quality assured product.

Recent educational research in the area of competence based learning and assessment has adopted a concept of competence which defines competence as the ability to meet demands or carry out a task successfully and consists of both cognitive and non-cognitive dimensions. The research regards competencies as only being observable in actual actions taken by individuals in particular situations. Using this concept, a set of competencies would be made up of capability (underpinning knowledge and skills) and competence (application of that knowledge and skills in specific contexts or situations).

For workplace learning this raises a problem. Workplaces are very good at the competence part (application of skills and knowledge in specific contexts or situations), and in the most part would have no difficulty in assessing whether their workers are meeting a national standard or not. However, providing a quality product in the area of teaching or training capability (underpinning knowledge and skills) is more problematic. To produce a quality assured national standard in this area requires teachers and/or trainers who have an understanding of good educational and assessment practices. For experienced workers who just require to be assessed, assessing

capability is well within the bounds of a workplace assessor. Question banks, case studies, scenarios and professional conversation can be used for this purpose. However, for new workers the level of skill required to obtain a quality result can be quite high. The same research shows that learning is only transferred from one situation to another by applying capability or underpinning knowledge and skills not competence. If the underpinning knowledge and skills are not acquired properly then workers will have great difficulty applying these to specific situations as competent performance. These factors all heighten the requirement for workplace learning to meet the level required to ensure a national standard has been met and for systems to be in place to ensure these standards are quality assured.

5. Implementation Strategies

In order to assist the implementation of quality training and assessment systems into organisations, it is important to take the approach that not every organisation will have the infrastructure to successfully manage this process. There is a move in New Zealand for Industry Training Organisations, as part of their leadership role, to start working with individual organisations within their industry sectors to build their capacity to carry out this role. This concept includes providing support for the learner, workplace assessor and/or verifier and the employer in their role as on-job trainer.

In the ideal world, this would require outlining a set of criteria employers wishing to participate in workplace training and assessment would need to meet. These criteria would need to cover:

- The employer's ability to provide the opportunities for the learner to participate in the appropriate types of work that would give the learner the range of experience needed to meet the requirements of the nationally set standards.
- A mentor that could assist the learner through the learning process.
- Access to appropriate learning and/or reference material.
- Time and the opportunity to complete the training either on or off job.
- Experienced workplace assessors and/or verifiers to enable the learner to be assessed.

With small organisations especially, it may be necessary to provide a range of support mechanisms. These could include:

- Supporting the employer in their role as a workplace trainer with mentoring and/or training.
- Providing networking support and advice for workplace assessors and/or verifiers.
- Providing support material in the form of reference materials, training modules and/or assessment guides.
- Brokering any off-job training that may be required.
- Providing direct support and guidance to learners.

For the Standard Setting Bodies (Industry Training Organisations), there is a great deal of merit in being able to quality assure the process by having influence over the delivery and assessment materials. In New Zealand Industry Training Organisations, as Standard Setting Bodies, have the right to moderate (quality assure) completed assessments to ensure the national standard is being maintained. This however, is a bit like shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. It would be preferable to quality assure the process at the front end before the product is used and sample the end process (the assessment) to ensure the standard is being maintained.

Another strategy to ensure that quality training is taking place, is to benchmark any existing training carried out by an organisation against the national standards for that sector. Often resistance to implementing competence based training and assessment processes is focused around the belief that organisations will have to stop doing what they are currently doing and set up something new. This is not necessarily the case. Larger organisations often use training packages they have either developed themselves or programmes prepared for them which specifically meet the requirements of their organisation. To require them to either cease using them or to adapt them to meet a set of national standards is unrealistic. However, if they are able to have their current training benchmarked against the national standards and any gaps identified then the assessment tools can be developed and/or contextualised to meet any short falls outlined in the benchmarking process. The assessment process may require learners to collect additional evidence in order to meet the national standard but this can often be generated by the application of workplace performance (competence) rather than additional underpinning knowledge and skills (capability).

Where the New Zealand experience has found the largest gaps in workplace training is in the area of generic or key skills. Traditionally industry appears comfortable to train and assess technical skills but not so comfortable to train and assess generic or key skills. This has often been left in the hands of the training institutions. Unfortunately this has often not been successful from the industries perspective as the context for the training has been generalised and theoretical not specific and practical. While learners can gain the underpinning knowledge and skills in this way they seem to have difficulty linking this to practical application when back in the workplace. Industries are solving this problem by either commissioning training institutions to provide contextualised training linking generic skills to technical skills e.g. how to communicate with customers in a restaurant, or by providing e-learning in these areas that is specific to the industry.

All of the strategies outlined above enable both the learning and assessment materials to be quality assured prior to use rather than after the event.

6. Workplace Examples

In this section of the presentation I will outline two examples of industry sectors that have faced a number of the issues outlined above and implemented strategies that have enabled them to provide training and assessment options to their workers that meet nationally set standards.

The first example is from the health care sector. This industry is traditionally made up of small organisations operating over the profit and not for profit sector. Their workers tend to attract low wage rates, work part time, have low levels of literacy, are not well educated, may have English as a second language, often hold down more than one job or have other family commitments, and are usually women in the 40-60 year age bracket. The sector does not have a training culture, is not presently regulated, and won't necessarily reward additional learning with pay incentives. Workers often work in dispersed workplaces, autonomously, with intermittent contact with their supervisors. The objective of setting national competence based standards for this sector was to raise the skill level of the current workforce and to provide a level of confidence to both health consumers and funders that appropriate health care services are being provided. The issues the sector had to face included:

- Time availability for workers to undertake training.
- Cost of training.
- Access to training resources.
- Workforce resistance.

After an initial survey to determine how training was currently being carried out, the industry determined that e-learning was probably the most appropriate method to overcome some of the issues outlined above. While the industry demographic did not initially appear to support this method of learning, in that the target audience was older, female, may have literacy problems and in the lower socioeconomic sector of society, employer's surveys showed that access to some form of computer equipment was feasible for most workers. The information also highlighted that access to computer equipment would need to be factored into the implementation strategy to ensure the process was successful. The need to develop the e-learning modules in easy to follow, non-technical format was also crucial with a print based option for those unable to access the computer based version.

Due to the dispersed nature of the workforce, assessment was also an issue. The sector did not traditionally record a lot of information and the required skill set for these workers incorporated a lot of generic skills as well as technical skills. It was therefore important that a large proportion of the assessment evidence be gathered as part of the e-learning process. This required the e-learning modules to be based on sophisticated scenario based learning that required learners to participate in decision making processes based on workplace reality. Their decisions were then recorded as part of the e-learning process and a report generated upon completion of the module which provided evidence for assessment. On-going assessment of competence

could then be provided by linking into the organisation's existing performance management systems. By making learning and assessment fun, workers are more likely to want to participate in the process. On its own this process would still have a chance of not being successful. The industry has recognised that organisations participating in the process will need support and guidance and mentoring and implementation support is also being provided. This project is still in the pilot stage and it will be interesting to see the participation results once the formal evaluation is completed in 2007.

The second example is from the hospitality sector. The organisation is a large multi-national with a strong training culture whose training programmes are provided by the overseas parent company. This organisation operates from multiple outlets with a strong brand providing fast convenience food to an internationally set standard. It is important that standards are met and maintained in line with the brand image and that all workers are competent and well trained. The issues this organisation had to face were:

- How to ensure that workers' training maintained the level and content set by the parent company while linking to the New Zealand national industry standards.
- How to ensure that the quality of the training was quality assured.

The advantages for this organisation were the existing strong training culture and the requirement that all workers, as part of their conditions of employment, complete the required training. The strategy that this organisation chose was to benchmark their current training and assessment materials to the national standards set by the Standard Setting Body and to be involved in the development of any new unit standard and qualifications developed for their sector. This approach has enabled them to continue using current training programmes but to have the confidence that they have been pre-use moderated by the Standard Setting Body against the national standards. Their workers can now complete the organisation's training and assessment programme and by doing so gain credit for the national standards.

Both of these examples have chosen different strategies for implementing competence based training and assessment systems into their sectors but both resulted in a solution that meets the specific requirements for workers in their sector while enabling national standards to be met.

7. Summary

Competence based training and assessment systems need to be underpinned by a set of criteria for implementation in the workplace to be successful. These need to include:

- Appropriate support systems for learners, employers and assessors.
- Access to learning that is appropriate, timely, cost effective and targeted to the learner.

- Assessment systems that are manageable, fit for purpose and quality assured.
- Communication and management systems that interface with the Standard Setting Body, the organisation, the learner and any training provision that's required.

The training and assessment process is an ever changing landscape that needs to be constantly modified to ensure it is fit for purpose and provides the flexibility required to keep the system dynamic.

References

The following publications and papers were used for the literature search for this paper:

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