




CONCLUSION: IS COMPETENCY MANAGEMENT A PASSING FAD?

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Is competency management a passing fad; is it a catch-all term to cover diverse national patterns of development or a symptom of wider changes within bureaucracies? As the papers published here suggest, it is more likely to be a passing fad in Europe than the USA. Competency management addresses rather different agendas in different countries and while it does not embrace as diverse a collection of activities as 'new public management', there is substantial range in the issues it does address. European experience suggests competency is more likely to be ephemeral and concerned with repackaging rather than bringing something substantially new to personnel management in the upper reaches of civil services. Without taking too rosy a view of US experience, there may be a stronger case for arguing that contemporary competency management approaches there have brought something new to a longer standing debate in public and private management.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of looking, in these articles, at competency frameworks in comparative perspective was to gain a better understanding of the concept as well as to answer key questions about its character. The introduction set out three key scenarios about competency management: (a) that it is a passing fad; (b) that there is a 'difference theory' that makes 'competency' a catch-all term to cover a diverse array of distinctive national practices; and (c) that it reflects 'sameness' since it is a symptom or consequence of wider changes taking place in governmental bureaucracies. We approach our conclusions concerning these three scenarios by developing four main strands of comparison based on the discussions outlined in the foregoing papers.

We start by asking whether competencies add anything new to debates about administrative change – whether they just represent a new-fangled term for something that is long familiar in administrative science or whether they are part of a fresh way of approaching a key problem. The second strand of our comparison looks at how far competency frameworks fit the model of many other prime candidates for 'fad' status: an attempted import from the private sector. The third strand looks at the immediate reasons for introducing competency management. This strand has a direct bearing on the second key scenario mentioned above (competency seen as a catch-all

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term) since it helps us understand whether competencies is a common term applied to diverse arrangements and introduced under different circumstances to achieve different kinds of objectives. The fourth strand of comparison assesses the degree to which competency management is rooted in wider political agendas which are likely to prevent them from fading away from the administrative agenda – from ‘evaporating’, as Rose (1977) termed the form of demise of ‘management by objectives’. The fourth strand has a direct bearing both on the first and third of our scenarios.

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT COMPETENCY APPROACHES?

At the very heart of the current concern with competency lies something that cannot be dismissed as a fad: the notion that the skills and abilities of top civil servants are important. The idea that officials should be placed in the jobs for which they have an aptitude and/or qualification is unlikely ever to become a matter for indifference. Patricia Ingraham and Heather Getha-Taylor’s exposition of the development of competency in the US federal civil service locates contemporary ‘competence’ within a longer tradition of the development of ‘merit’ appointment and its assessment through examination. Thus, as with other bureaucratic feel-good words such as ‘evidence-based’ policy making, or ‘joined-up’ government, competency connects closely with an issue that will not go away because we can hardly imagine being in a position either of having too much of it or of valuing its opposite, incompetence.

Nevertheless, although it connects closely with a core issue which defines the character of all modern bureaucracies, the novel English-language use of the term ‘competencies’, as well as its widespread use in a variety of organizational settings, would need to have added something new and enduring to the stock of core issues if it is not to be classed as a passing fad.

What could it claim to have offered that is new? Although it is closely related to the more diverse goal of merit, competency ‘management’ is supposed to be more than yet another expression of this goal. Modern competency ideas go further than setting out the broad expectations of education and experience that should make a person eligible for a post at a particular grade in a civil service. Leaving aside jobs for which some form of technical qualification is required (actuaries or veterinarians, for example), traditional notions of merit have tended to be made on the basis of a variety, depending on the country involved, of generalized criteria. These include seniority – the principle that length of service determined eligibility for promotion was a long-established feature of European bureaucracies – education, experience and peer evaluation of qualities and performance in a particular job. Competency management in the context of senior public positions aims at offering a different kind of definition of the qualities of the people who should occupy a particular position. It moves away, on the one hand, from the narrow and unique definition of requirements for an individual job in a job specification, and, on the other hand, the use of broad educational, career,

background and character traits, and moves towards a focus on defining behavioural attributes. It is this behavioural conception of competency, rather than the three other notions of competency discussed in the introduction, that seems to have the most plausible claim to substantive newness.

Apart from a claim to substantive newness in that sense, competency management uses new-sounding ways of defining the qualities needed for a senior position. In addition to competencies based around the venerable notion of leadership ability, honesty and integrity, qualities included in frameworks are often described using cutting edge terminology such as change management, risk assessment, environmental awareness and 'whole life success'.

Precisely how this path between job specification and generalized norms is established certainly varies in different forms of competency management. The competency approach starts to look less like a coherent approach to management, with established sets of concepts and procedures, than a label for a variety of different types of types of qualities and forms of measurement. If there is an overall element of novelty in contemporary ideas of competency, it lies in the focus of these ideas on behavioural traits.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Despite the uncertainty described above and despite the notion that issues connected with merit will remain a persistent priority for reform, the competency approach in all four European countries examined shows classic faddish signs. These include imitating a private sector innovation that is perceived to be more advanced than anything native to the public sector; making use of language to repackage older traditions (e.g. Britain and Germany) or borrowing it to pursue older agendas for change that are not directly related to competencies (e.g. Belgium and The Netherlands). Indeed, in all four cases it seems that such use of language produces changes in the 'terminology' used to recruit, train, promote and reward, rather than in the 'substance'.

If we look, however, at the 1990s in the United States, a different picture seems to emerge. According to Ingraham and Getha-Taylor, as well as other observers, contemporary 'competency' approaches are strongly influenced by private sector models. The 1979 framework, however, was not an exercise in 'catching up' with the private sector (see also Hood and Lodge 2004, p. 321). Earlier versions of competency approaches appear to have affected the federal government at least at the same time, if not before, the private sector via the 1923 Classification Act. Moreover, Ingraham and Getha-Taylor show how language that was closely related to what we would now term competency, changes in the terminology used to train, promote and reward, rather than in the substance of how things are done, informed changes in federal personnel policy since then – especially from the New Deal onwards.

Moreover, it is much easier to see a long-term concern in the US with competency approaches in management thinking in the private and public

sector which make it difficult to regard contemporary competency management as either an imported or invented fad. We can outline some of the precursors. The origins of modern human resource management in the early twentieth century reflected both social reform objectives as well as the reining in of the power of foremen to hire labour. As Jacoby (2003, pp. 150–1) argues:

the strands that would compose the personnel management movement came together on the eve of America's entry into the First World War. Efficiency, administrative specialization, uplift, and vocational guidance all fed into a growing recognition that America's large and mid-sized companies needed to pay more attention to how they managed their employees. There was a belief that professionalization of personnel management – hiring specialized, educated employees – would humanize industry and bring a more enlightened approach.

We can add to this amalgam the growing use of psychological testing as a recruitment tool after World War Two, the more general use of psychology as a management tool in the wake of the 'human relations' approach associated with Elton Mayo, and the concern with behaviour as competency in the 1970s as a response to costly litigation over racial bias in traditional assessment methods.

DO COMPETENCY APPROACHES ADDRESS THE SAME KINDS OF GOALS?

In Belgium and The Netherlands the use of competency management appears to be associated with wider objectives: innovation and reform of the whole higher administrative system. In addition, in each of these countries the thrust of competency management has been to seek to address long-standing criticisms of the top civil service. In The Netherlands, Van der Meer and Toonen point to a radical set of proposed changes – generally in their early stages – which seek to create a more mobile senior civil service and reverse the traditional problems of fragmentation in the Dutch administrative system. As they point out, it is too early to say how far competency management has in fact produced change in this direction. The signs are not exceptionally promising: 'absence of tangible results combined with complaints about the added paper work', they record, have led to a degree of scepticism about what it can achieve. In Belgium, where the initiatives are likewise at an early stage and their effectiveness equally hard to judge, the key objective behind the scheme is somewhat different: that is, to address the traditional failure of the administration to attract and retain highly educated staff. Consequently, many of the competency schemes Brans and Hondeghe describe relate closely to changes in remuneration. In the Belgian federal service, competency-based evaluations of officials in post was used to help 'legitimize the substantial pay rise for the people at the top'. Whether competency management is able to help remedy long-standing public service problems in these two countries is uncertain.

In two cases, the United Kingdom and Germany, the evidence is strong that competency has not succeeded in forging a particularly new way of looking at what is needed for leadership positions within civil services. As the Anglo-German comparison shows: 'beneath the hype, the changes they made to competency frameworks tended to reinforce established ideas about competency'. The types of qualities expected of senior officials, then, seem little changed from the traditional 'all rounder' identified by the Fulton Committee 36 years ago (Fulton 1968). In Germany, while it is possible to argue that *Kompetenz*, a frequently used term before the onset of competency management movements, has always had prominence in the conception of bureaucracy, the result remains similar to the UK. In other words, we see the addition of: 'new-fangled competency ideas as an afterthought onto their established competency frameworks that stresses technical and subject expertise' to quote the authors. In Britain and Germany, traditional generalized norms about the qualities that senior public officials should possess have not been transformed by the language of competency.

COMPETENCY MANAGEMENT AS PART OF A WIDER POLITICAL AGENDA

Another distinctive feature of the US competency approach, marking it out from all four European models, is the link with ethnic equality. Ingraham and Getha-Taylor point to the abandonment of the Professional and Administrative Career Entrance Exam (PACE) written examination in large part due to criticisms that it produced predominantly white recruits. In the United States, 'legal defensibility' in recruitment procedures appears to be an important driving force behind competency management. This is certainly the case in the private sector where key cases such as *Griggs v. Duke Power Company* (1971) sought to apply Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act on equal employment opportunities by judicial specification of the forms of recruitment test that are permissible. Legal defensibility is also an important part of the sales propositions of global human resource companies – an example being personnel consultants Development Dimensions International's claim that has: 'Britain moving towards need for legal defensibility of selection systems' (BusinessNewsXtra.com, 26 April 2002). Legal defensibility, however, would have to develop a greater salience in the UK before it is likely to become a powerful feature shaping administrative reform.

In short, looking at the US, competency approaches are part of a developing tradition in public and private management – they are more likely, then, to be a stage or phase rather than a fad. Leaving aside the possibility (one that can never be dismissed in comparative analyses of this kind) that differences lie in the perspective of the observers rather than in the systems themselves, there is a notable contrast between the conclusions to the papers on Europe and Ingraham and Getha-Taylor's on the US. The European papers

announce, or indicate the possibility of, the demise of competency management as familiar bureaucratic traits reassert themselves – albeit dressed in the language of competencies. Ingraham and Getha-Taylor's paper ends on an upbeat note as far as competencies are concerned: there is an agenda and a series of issues that need to be addressed. These issues include how competencies are identified and how they can be made more relevant to the work that officials actually do. In the US, human resources (HR) policy has long had an importance and salience in its own right. This fact, along with HR policy's relationship to wider administrative reform issues, appears to keep it and issues related to competency management high on the administrative reform agenda. This is in contrast to the situation in Europe where the possibility of 'evaporation' – a gradual loss of interest followed by disappearance – is the more likely scenario.

CONCLUSIONS ON THE THREE INTERPRETATIONS

The passing fad interpretation

In Europe, it seems to be much easier to see competency management as a passing fad. The signs are already there of governments drawing back from a more radical transformation of recruitment, promotion and training. This would require a systematic re-evaluation and replacement of traditional criteria for defining, evaluating and describing qualities required for positions within an administration. It may be that European countries are forced to address competency agendas more systematically in future, and legal defensibility may well trigger further interest in the field. But there are few signs of this issue of defensibility developing on the scale it has developed in the United States and it is noteworthy that the term does not appear in any of the papers covering European countries in this collection.

The 'difference' theory interpretation

Competency management addresses rather different agendas in different countries. It ranges from the rather diffuse 'modernizing' agenda in the UK to the old issue of fragmentation in The Netherlands and the issue of civil rights in the US. It also uses rather different means, with different methodologies to define 'competencies', and comes up with different kinds of specific competencies for the same sorts of administrative leadership jobs. Perhaps 'competency', then, does not embrace as diverse a collection of activities as 'new public management'. Nevertheless, there is substantial range in the issues it does address, both cross-nationally and intra-nationally. It may be that the US competency development programme, using behavioural-specific event interviews and business-based case studies to focus on three core and additional specific competencies, belongs to the same movement as that of a group of UK senior civil servants defining what they think a good

civil servant looks like. If this is the case, then, as a term, competency can incorporate huge variety.

A 'sameness' interpretation

In terms of domestic reform agendas we have already pointed to the diversity of the different goals to which competency approaches have been applied. We cannot, therefore, find a single broader purpose to which competency management is addressed. Even the broader movement of 'imitating the private sector' has to be qualified in the context of the United States (as outlined above). If a broader movement exists, it may be a trend within personnel management itself. Competency frameworks may place HR managers in a stronger position in the organization since they claim a specialism in defining what is required for a particular set of posts. In addition, through the link between competencies and organizational objectives, they can lay stronger claims to involvement in strategic decision making. Proponents of contemporary competency frameworks claim such schemes offer a more rigorous basis for deploying human resources, but behind this claim is a wider process of the professionalization of human resource management in general and in the public sector in particular. Though the overall trend is one of professionalization, however, the profession of personnel management cannot be assumed to be inexorably in the ascendancy. Historically, it has shown both rapid progress as well as reversal. Moreover, HR professionals must compete with other professionals, including lawyers, accountants and economists: their role then is as one of many and cannot be expected to be in the ascendancy all the time.

In practical terms, the competency experience in Europe could represent a missed opportunity. Of the options set out at the beginning of this conclusion, experience in Europe suggests that competency is likely to be ephemeral. It is more concerned with repackaging rather than bringing something substantially new to personnel management in the upper reaches of civil services. In terms of the US experience, Ingraham and Getha-Taylor show that competency management frameworks in the US have not addressed some of the fundamental questions about how people should be matched to jobs. Nevertheless, the USA seems to provide a stronger case for arguing that contemporary competency management approaches have brought something new to a longer standing debate in public and private management. In contrast, Britain and Germany seem to have done little more than go through the motions instead of seriously exploring the rich opportunities for change in defining positions and assessing the attributes expected of those who should fill them. Belgium and The Netherlands on the other hand expressed radical aspirations, but had to make significant compromises to secure support for their respective competency schemes. If the results in these latter two countries turn out to be as modest as our contributors think

they might be, the fate of competency could be the same as that in Britain and Germany: another administrative feel-good word covering less satisfactory realities.

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