

The Competency Gap: Aligning Education

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In order for learning to have a strategic impact, it must be linked to competencies that help the organization achieve its business goals. Without this link, education is a hit-or-miss proposition because it lacks a business focus. This article will help you, the learning executive, to maintain this focus for all of your training efforts by understanding what competencies and competency frameworks are and how to link them to your organizational goals. The information in this article will also help you identify characteristics within training products that facilitate their linkage so that you can guide your learning staff in either selecting or creating products that are focused on achieving competencies critical to the organization.

Strategic Learning

Broadly speaking, learning falls into two categories: strategic and tactical. Strategic learning starts with the organization's business goals. Increased market share, growth of new vertical markets and new product innovations are examples of the business goals addressed by strategic learning. Tactical learning is a response to a particular performance problem or regulation. Examples of tactical learning goals are decreasing customer complaints, the achievement of targeted competencies for a pre-determined set of criteria such as OSHA and Sarbanes-Oxley regulations or meeting IT certification requirements. Both types of learning are important, but often the day-to-day influence of tactical learning overshadows the critical nature of its strategic counterpart. While both types of learning have a specific set of competencies to be achieved by learners, it is strategic learning

that has as its primary focus those competencies that directly impact the organization's broad strategic goals.

Goals Cascade Throughout

The organization's broad strategic goals are poised for successful execution when the functional business units are involved. Achieving strategic goals includes the identification of the jobs needed as part of a complete framework where skills and competencies are defined and mapped to the job structure within the organization and further mapped at the skill level.

Whether developed internally or purchased commercially, an organization will benefit from a framework that provides consistent and quantifiable objectives and a common language.

A framework is a structured approach for working with jobs, skills, competencies and learning activities consistently across an organization. A framework should clearly identify the necessary competencies defined as a combination of knowledge, ability, behavior and experiences with a consistent structure and rating scale to measure skill levels of individuals within an organization. Jobs should be clearly described with major responsibilities identified. A framework should include the elements outlined in Figure 1.

The Target

Often we train to the squeaky wheel, disconnected from the business strategy. If we sharpen our arrows in anticipation of hitting the target, we need to have a clear line of sight. Once the



criteria for the business strategy has been identified, jobs and skills defined, an inventory of the skills and skill levels on hand should be taken.

Each job within each business unit has a group of skills needed to be successful. These skills are a combination of those that are core to the organization, to the job function and those needed for a particular job. Depending on the job and the level within the organization, the behaviors needed for a particular skill will be different. As such, behaviors for each skill need to be defined to ensure appropriate performance at every level throughout the organization. Training to these desired behaviors is an ongoing process to ensure we continue to hit our target—the organization's strategic goals.

Identifying the Gap: How Wide and How Deep?

The power of the data from a skills inventory cannot be overstated.

Through an organization-wide skills inventory and aggregation of data, the distribution of skills is clearly evident. Does your organization have the “right stuff” to compete? Is your organization at risk in its most critical areas? And what will it take to train and develop the organization to successfully meet business goals in a timely manner? By identifying the areas needed for training and development, the process of appropriating the right training interventions becomes infinitely easier.

What Gets Measured Gets Managed

Managing the gap is an opportunity to meet your organization's strategy head on. Launching a robust, clearly defined training and development initiative along with an ongoing assessment program goes a long way toward the successful execution of the overall business strategy. Training can be aligned within each functional area and job level. Launching such training initiatives necessitates tracking, completion and assessment of a particular training intervention and ensures behavioral changes as well.

CHIEF LEARNING OFFICER E-SEMINAR

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Are you ready to take the strategic alignment of enterprise education to the next level? Once the specific needs of the organization are determined, how can chief learning officers advance their efforts to fill those needs? Armed with a thorough survey of their individual landscapes, learning leaders can devise plans to fill existing gaps with strategically situated education designed to advance both the individual and the organization.

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in practice:

Limited Brands: Aligning Competencies and Learning

Cathy Lawson

Limited Brands Technology Services Inc. (LTS) is a subsidiary of Limited Brands Inc., providing information technology consulting and service to brands including The Limited, Victoria's Secret, Victoria's Secret Direct, Victoria's Secret Beauty, Express, Henri Bendel, Bath and Body Works, White Barn Candle Company and all supporting units of the corporation. More than 700 IT associates are based in Ohio, New York, New Mexico and Hong Kong, and support an enterprise of over 100,000 associates and more than 4,000 stores. LTS was formed in 1999 to centralize IT professionals from across the enterprise in preparation for Y2K and beyond. Facing the challenge of building a strong community from diverse IT groups, LTS began a transition to a consulting model to best align resources within an environment of constant change, while attracting, developing and retaining the best IT talent available in the industry. HR determined that a skills and competency program would allow LTS to understand associate strengths and target key development activities relative to strategic goals.

In late 1999, LTS launched a skill competency project called "TechTrak"—a combination of a learning management system (LMS), a skills model and a separate online learning system. However, the project wasn't as successful as we had hoped, due to a lack of strategic integration of skill and competency management components and training. One missing piece was a link between skills and competencies to specific jobs, teams and targeted learning resources. LTS had no learning strategy. Associates and managers became frustrated that there was no link to reported skill gaps and available training. The result was a lack of buy-in to the project with relatively low usage of the tools.

Reflecting on the lessons learned from TechTrak, we found that we needed to go beyond the pieces of competency management and look at the entire whole to:

- Think strategically by defining our learning strategy and linking the strategy to career paths, jobs, skills and training.
- Gain buy-in through partnership by reaching out to functional teams to assist with job and skill analysis and by forming an online learning review team to conduct extensive hands-on reviews of vendor proposals, including content, flow, ease-of-use, reporting and customization tools.
- Fully integrate skills development, gap analysis and online learning within a single LMS development Web portal.

As a result of this hindsight, LTS relaunched the skill development program under the brand name of "LTSCareerU," which now includes full integration between the LMS tool, skills and competency model and enhanced online learning. This integrated system:

- Provides tools and a process for managing and tracking an integrated inventory of jobs, skills, learning resources and people (SumTotal Systems' Aspen).
- Identifies industry-benchmarked competencies and skills needed to achieve critical business goals (ITG Information Technology Competency Model).
- Integrates modular learning resources (Thomson NETg) that tie directly to skill gaps—associates and managers can now see a skill gap and immediately launch an appropriate learning resource via the LMS.

Managers and associates have a complete view of individual progress, assessment and completion. HR, LTS technical experts and our NETg colleagues have partnered to map more than 900 courses to key skills and competencies within the system. This was facilitated by NETg's Learning Object structure. Each learning object has a specific and measurable objective associated with it. Although this mapping was accomplished by hand at the initial implementation, plans are underway to make use of an automated mapping tool.

LTS added customized business skills to the skill dictionary, as well as an additional proficiency level to the ITG model to demonstrate that training in a skill doesn't necessarily equate directly to an increase in that skill on the job. Great progress has been made in tying LTSCareerU to our regular cascade of associate development planning, resulting in a 92 percent completion of skill inventories. LTS has developed several key competencies, including a project management competency targeting key skills in a blended learning approach. The initial success of this competency recently allowed 11 technical resources to transition to full-time project management positions.

As we move forward in our transformation, however, the question rises, what else can LTSCareerU do? We are starting to use data from skill inventories to help us forecast additional development activities, competencies and recruiting needs—taking this system beyond the normal standards of LMS, skill and learning resource integration.

In order to sustain LTSCareerU, it is essential that it move outside the scope of HR into functional team ownership. Therefore, this year LTSCareerU will transition to a team that is responsible for work initiation and resource allocation. HR will take a consulting role to ensure that key linkages exist between jobs, competencies and learning resources. This partnership will allow LTS to build on the foundation of LTSCareerU through ongoing mapping of key skills and competencies and their link to modular learning resources and development activities.

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Mapping to Learning

If the strategic purpose of your training effort is ultimately to link it to the competencies that your organization needs to achieve its business goals, it is important for your training staff to employ some simple guidelines that ensure mapability. In this context, "mapability" is the ease with which one can define the relationships between the competencies that have been identified as important to your organization and the objectives of the learning. In the purchasing of generic learning programs or tailored training, or in the creation of custom company-specific training, it is essential to look for and create structures that facilitate mapability. The major elements of mapable training are modularity, clarity of objectives and assessment capability.

Modularity

Most training comes in the structural format of the course. It is the format with which we are most familiar, and that format contains a major assumption—that everything in this course will meet all of your learners' needs (i.e., the competency needs of your organization). In generic training, this is the one-size-fits-all assumption. Because it is generic by definition, most off-the-shelf training cannot meet all of the specific competency requirements of its clients. Consequently, mapability is impaired if the structural format of the course is the only option. On the other hand, if the training is modular and the course is just an optional structure, then the learning can be reconstituted into other structures that may facilitate mapping. For example, if a course is made up of independent objects or modules that teach competencies that are not important to the organization, these objects can be eliminated since they are self-contained modules that are not bound to a course structure. Modular courses are easier to tailor.

Let's say that 80 percent of a given generic course meets your organization's competency needs, but 20 percent does not. In a course-only structure, you either have to create a new stand-alone custom course that includes the missing 20 percent or just accept the fact that you are going to hit only 80 percent of your competency needs. However, if the learning is modular, all you have to do is create custom modules for the 20 percent and integrate them into the existing

80 percent. The result is a training program that meets 100 percent of your competency needs and has the look and feel of a custom program. Vendors that offer modular components also offer tools or services to assist your organization in building the 20 percent. Of modularity, Bruce Mills, learning consultant of Honeywell, said, “When I recommend training for my organization, one of the key components is the modular nature of the offering. I want learning objects (topics) that can be offered in conjunction with an entire course or moved, adapted and molded into other structures that fit the needs of the individual learner and the job they are tasked to perform within the organization.”

Clarity of Objectives

If building-block modularity is the model for other structures beyond the course, and they are necessary for effective mapability, then well-stated objectives are the labels for these blocks or objects that further enhance the mapping process. Where a competency is a specific statement of an important piece of knowledge, skill or attitude for the organization, an objective is a statement that ensures that the specific knowledge, skill or attitude will be delivered in the training. Training that does not contain specific and clear objectives for its modules or objects cannot be linked to competencies. In his book “Preparing Instructional Objectives” (2nd edition), Dr. Robert Mager describes a good instructional objective as “a statement that describes the intended criterion-based result of instruction. This end result must be specific and measurable in order to determine if the desired criterion has been met.”

In other words, a well-stated objective must be clear about what the learner is going to be able to do, under what conditions it is to be done and how well the learner must perform under these conditions (i.e., a measurable criterion). With this kind of data, the process of linking training to specific competencies is greatly facilitated. Of this quality, Colleen Fuhs, manager – Project Office/IS Education for Northwest Airlines, said, “The identification of key job competencies is only half of the picture. Without clearly stated objectives, there is no way to tie the training to competency achievement. You could engage in a ‘pray and spray’ strategy, hoping that you hit most of the competencies, but in the end, it is wasteful of people’s time and you are left with no clear set of objectives against which you can base an evaluation.”

Assessment Capability

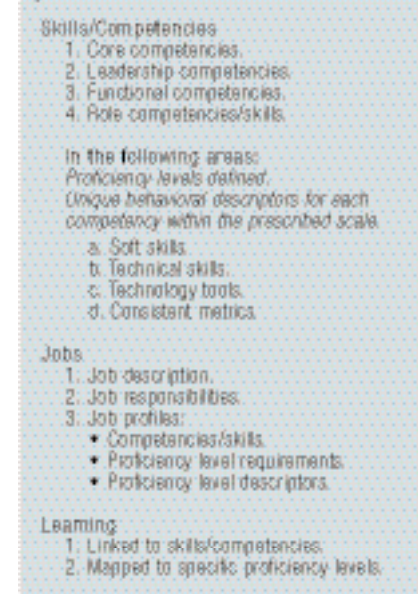
Good training not only has to be mapable, but it also has to be assessable. If the training is modular, the objectives associated with each module are clearly stated and the linking of competencies to the goals of the training is facilitated, then how do you know if the learn-

er has achieved the stated objectives and has gained the stated competency? This is an assessment question. The answer to this question lies in the existence of a capability within the training to assess the instructional objectives at the modular or learning object level. If the competency is linked to a module of instruction and that instruction has a clearly stated objective but there is no way to determine if the objective has been met, then the linkage is moot. The importance of this ability to assess is critical if you are going to be able to demonstrate job impact due to the training intervention. Of this quality, Janna Sondenaa, learning manager of PacifiCorp, said, “It is critical to my senior management that I am not only able to make the link between our training and our strategic business goals, but I also have to prove that this link did something to the learner that will advance the business goals of PacifiCorp. I can’t do that if I can’t tie the training back to well-stated objectives and the assessment items needed to demonstrate that the learners have achieved the objectives.”

Conclusion

Business strategy and learning go hand-in-hand, and their alignment should be an ongoing, repeatable process. As the strategy changes to meet the needs of the business, the training executive needs to guide the commensurate high-level changes to the organization’s training initiatives. With this guidance, training can become a strategic tool if its strategic use is understood against the backdrop of the organization’s ever-changing business environment and that understanding is translated into planning and execution. That planning must include the identification of the business goals of the organization, the framework of competencies associated with their achievement, gaps in those competencies and the existence of structural components within the proposed training that facilitate the mapping to the competency gap. These structural components include modularity, clarity of objectives and assessment capability. These are the key structures to look for in generic training or within company-specific training. A knowledge of these concepts, structures and their ultimate relationship to the business goals of the organization will provide the training executive with a powerful set of guidelines to keep the focus of any strategic training effort on the needs of the organization—ensuring the successful achievement of its business goals.■

Figure 1:



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