



# Creating a competency framework

Worker competency is a key component to OHS management systems yet little is being done around implementation or assessment

The goal of a fully implemented occupational health and safety management system (OHSMS) is to create a process for safe work such that all workers go home after every shift with their fingers, toes and lives intact. Companies continue to invest heavily into their OHSMS and yet the normalized worker fatality rate is not going down. What is it we are doing wrong? The inputs to the system we are focusing on are not resulting in the outputs we want.

For the last decade, the focus has been on OHSMS development which has resulted in improved workplace communication and better work planning. Formal auditing of OHSMS is now commonplace. Many companies describe their systems as being certified. If this was all that was required, we would have seen a long and steady decline in the fatality rates in the workplace in Canada — but that hasn't happened. The new focus needs to be on competency. Competency requires formal integration of education and training.

The word "competent" and term "competency assessment" are being used more frequently, and sometimes loosely, within the context of OHSMS. For example, the word competent appears over 100 times in the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Code, 2009, and yet little is really being done to formally develop competency profiles, implement competencies or assess worker competency.

The hiring and placement of a so-called "competent worker" requires more than just having an employee work within the framework of the organization's OHSMS. In the case of a serious workplace incident, a due diligence defense will be required. Proving worker competence will be required and it will require more than offering the worker's resumé and copies of "tickets" of attendance at organization-sponsored or industry-sponsored courses. It will be required that the organization proves that everything "reasonably practicable" was done to ensure a worker's competence. If the organization is unable to do so, it may be charged and held liable under applicable OHS law, including potential criminal prosecution.

The Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act defines a "competent person" as someone who is qualified because of knowledge, training and experience to organize the work and its performance, is familiar with the act and the regulations that apply to the work, and has knowledge of any potential or actual danger to health or safety in the workplace. By this definition, a competent worker must have the appropriate knowledge, skills and attributes; and the worker must be able to perform her duties successfully. By this definition, training is only a small part of competency.

The design of work methods requires that the knowledge, skills and attributes the worker must have are formally identified. The starting point is the development of a job description and competency profile. All positions identified on the organizational chart must be included. The competency profile needs to describe what a worker needs to know and what a worker needs to be able to do. Typically, the competency profile includes elements such as:



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- industry-wide competencies such as safety legislation, safety awareness, quality control and continuous improvement
- industry-specific competencies such as drilling and completions, infrastructure construction and pipelining
- occupational-specific competencies such as crane operation, plant operation, or Class 1 driver's license
- job-specific competencies such as cutting wood with a chainsaw, lubricating equipment and general house keeping
- task-specific competencies such as starting a chainsaw, changing a bit on a drill, checking vessel pressure.

The legislative definition also requires evaluating a worker's competency. This would include an assessment of knowledge, skills and attributes, as well as a successful demonstration on the job. Competency can be gained through a variety of methods such as formal education, classroom training, on-the-job training and experience. To objectively assess whether employees are competent at their jobs, observe them in their working environments and allow them to demonstrate their competence against the predefined competency framework consisting of a set of measurable competencies. The assessment needs to consider all pathways to learning so that competent workers can be identified and incompetent workers are offered remedial assistance.

A complete and effective competency framework needs to be linked to the goals of the organization. By having a defined set of competencies for each role in the organization, it shows workers the kind of behaviours the organization values, and which it requires to help it achieve its objectives. Within the OHS context, not only does it ensure employees perform their work in a healthy and

safe manner, but they will also be more confident, effective and efficient in performing their work and achieving their objectives.

The competency framework is not only useful for meeting regulatory requirements and proving due diligence, but also for measuring current competency levels and identifying the areas individuals need to focus on. It can help in making informed decisions about recruitment, retention and succession strategies. And, by identifying the specific behaviours and skills needed for each role, it enables organizations to more effectively budget and plan for the training and development really needed.

The process of creating a competency framework can be a daunting task. To ensure a successful outcome, involve people carrying out the roles to evaluate real jobs and describe real behaviours. Describe what you need employees to know and what they need to be able to do. Establish a list of the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for success. Training is part of the process but true competency requires more. Establishing a competency framework will increase the level of understanding and linkage between individual roles and organizational performance — making the extra effort well worthwhile.

*Glyn Jones is a partner at EHS Partnerships in Calgary, an environmental health and safety support, consulting, training and project management firm. He also provides program design and instructional support to the University of New Brunswick's OHS certificate and diploma programs. He can be reached at [gjones@ehsp.ca](mailto:gjones@ehsp.ca).*



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**Norm Keith, B.A., J.D., LL.M., CRSP**  
Partner  
+1 416 868 7824  
[nkeith@fasken.com](mailto:nkeith@fasken.com)



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