Competency Management and Training Plans in Learning Management Systems (LMSs)

By Dave Boggs, CEO of SyberWorks, Inc.

In our series about the business aspects of training management, the first article looked at things to consider when creating a learning management system (LMS) hierarchy for your company or organization. This second article examines the use of competency management and job-role hierarchies, as an organization strives to develop training plans with their LMS.

What are competencies? What is competency management?

Competencies are personal capabilities that are demonstrated through measurable knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes, which can contribute to enhanced employee performance and, ultimately, to the individual's and organization's success. In a learning management system, competency management is the system's ability to connect various competencies/skill sets, job roles, and learning events, to build employee training plans and monitor each individual's learning progress.

How does competency management help your organization to develop training plans?

Competency management hierarchies let you define employee job roles that are specific, complete, and consistent across the affected organization. This allows you to certify that employees possess required skills or competencies, and that they qualify for their job roles. It also gives users clear, specific, easily followed paths to advancement. At any time, users can see what they still need to progress, request or access training that improves their skills, and stay on a clear training track centered on company needs. The company also benefits in improved employee retention.

Defined training plans also show employees how they can improve and gain new job skills. In this way, training becomes important to the employee, easily accessible, and necessary. This certification is also a path to promotion. If all necessary training is completed for a job role, the employee can print a certificate, and offer physical proof that they have completed all requirements for the role.

Many industries must also meet federal, or other, requirements (such as government regulations) that force them to require corresponding employee certifications. Employees must meet related competencies, and execute tasks and responsibilities in ways that support the company's mandated performance. Tracking and managing the employee-certification process is critical to the success of these types of organizations.

Where does a training manager begin, given such laudable (but broad) business goals?

A good starting point is a survey. What job roles do people possess? How are these roles defined? What is common among the roles? What skills or competencies support each role? What learning events (courses, meetings, demonstrations, on-the-job training, etc.) support and build these competencies? How does a new hire begin their training? This may seem daunting, but defining existing job roles is worthwhile, and brings many insights into the company's needs for competent performance. The data from such surveys also helps to build measurable ways to determine when employees attain needed skills, and conversely, may identify training needs that are not yet met.

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Usually, a common set of competencies runs throughout most organizations, which comes from the human resources department. Most HR organizations require an orientation, which may include courses and handouts about time clocks, harassment, benefits, and other important company-wide topics. On top of these, most organizations have sales personnel that require both technical and sales training. And specific application roles, be they cooks, cleaners, or airplane mechanics, will need to attain both HR-required competencies and their own job-specific competencies. Food-service organizations, for example, may define food-related competencies for every job role, as well as non-food competencies for hosts, servers and maintenance/repair personnel.

How do you link learning events to certification requirements?

Learning events allow employees to gain competencies, and need to be defined, along with related recertification dates. It would be useless to have job roles that did not periodically require updating, as the business needs for these roles change. You may not want to specify recertification dates at first, but you will later need to identify and inform employees, who possess certain job roles, that they must meet new needs and requirements. Thinking through these tasks requires determination of business needs, so the training department must work with all other departments that require competent personnel, to gain insights into their important job roles, competencies, and learning events.

It's not surprising that some organizations have no idea what "makes the job" in their business. Surveying successful, competent employees is usually the best way to analyze such situations. Communicating those results, and comparing them with the department head's own ideas, may give you a great starting point. Good luck!

About the Author:

Dave Boggs is the founder and CEO of SyberWorks, Inc. (http://www.syberworks.com). He has been involved with computer-based and web-based training for more than twelve years. Before founding SyberWorks, Dave was the VP of Sales and Business Development for Relational Courseware. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Physics from Union College in Schenectady, NY, and an MBA from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, in Evanston, IL.

Dave also writes two blogs in the e-Learning space. The first blog, the Boggs e-Learning Chronicle (http://www.boggse-learningchronicle.typepad.com/) covers news, trends, and observations about the e-Learning and web-based-training industries. His second blog, the Online Training Content Journal (http://www.boggse-learningchronicle.typepad.com/the_online_training_conte/) discusses best practices, techniques, and trends in online training development and e-Learning instructional design.

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