What is Competence and Why is it Important?

by Winston Sieck - August 20, 2014

https://www.globalcognition.org/what-is-competence/

Competence means that you have the ability to do something well. You are capable of performing a task or job effectively.

Competence can include the knowledge and skills needed to solve a quadratic equation. Or, it can comprise the much larger and more diverse clusters of skills, or *competencies*, needed to lead a multinational corporation.

The concept of competence is creeping into our lives, pervading our thinking about developing people of all ages - from new babes to weathered professionals. We find it in modern human resources departments in our workplace, and in innovating schools experimenting with competence-based education.

But where is this concern with competence coming from?

Is it the right way forward, or just another buzzword?

In fact, *competence* has been around for some time now. The roots of competence lie in a debate about general intelligence – IQ or *g*.

David McClelland of Harvard wrote a classic paper on the issue: *Testing for Competence Rather than Intelligence*. He published it in the journal *American Psychologist* in 1973. Forty years later, it's still as punchy and pertinent as ever. Let me tell you about my favorite line of his argument…

Intelligence Problems

Student: What's this test about?
Psychologist: It will tell me about your intelligence.
Student: What's intelligence?
Psychologist: It's what my test measures.

Old joke, I know. What astonishes me is that it still sums up the truth so well.

What's the problem with intelligence tests?

Well, classic IQ theorists have been searching for a test of general mental capacity that doesn't change with education or training.

The reason they want a stable score is to try to convince us that they are measuring an innate aptitude. You're born with it. And if you've made an unlucky draw, there's nothing to do but cope.

That problem is that virtually any human characteristic can be altered by experience. We are creatures of change.

Take a simple example. If I blow a puff of air on your eye you will blink. (Duh.) Now, I'll play a little "Tata Tada" and then blow a puff on your eye. If you actually let me do this over and over, well, that might be a test of your intelligence. With repetition, your eye will eventually learn to blink just from the sound. Your eye has figured out what's coming and gets ready for it.

All these amazing, little things we learn is what makes us so fantastically adaptable. Whatever it is, intelligence can change.

Good for humans, bad for intelligence testers. The IQ tester response has been to invoke sorcery. Use arcane problems that don't look like everyday life. Shroud the test in mystery. Keep it secret, so folks can't learn how to do it. Say it can't be trained to keep people from even trying.

So, instead of a test that gets at a deep, central aspect of mental functioning, we may just have a test of a highly specialized skill that bears little relation to everyday life experience.

You can learn a lot of useful things, and still perform the same on the intelligence test. You can also get better at IQ tests. But doing that won't much help you improve in school or on the job.

So, why should we be interested in such a specialized skill?

There is another approach. Another way to think about what your mind can do.

What is Competence?

In contrast to intelligence, competence is straightforward and transparent. Competence on a task or job means that you have some ways of thinking or behaving that matter for performance on that task.

For example, if you're a seller, then your ability to establish trust with customers affects the sales you make. Being able to establish credibility is a part of your competence in that job.

If you're a scientist, then your ability to notice puzzles and dig into them affects the discoveries you make. Inquiry and related metacognitive strategies are an important part of competence in that job.

How can we know that these competencies relate to performance?

If you want to know what it takes to be a good scientist, entrepreneur, teacher, or anything else, you need to go out into the field. Find and study these people, using cognitive field research methods, to figure out how the thoughts and actions of good and poor performers differ.

This is the main thrust of our research at Global Cognition.

Naturally, there is a problem with this approach. The danger here is that you can wind up with very many,

detailed lists of skills and knowledge elements for any important aspect of job performance.

Intelligence tries to make a magic leap from one specialized skill to mental performance in general.

Competence could wind up with thousands of specific skills. The relevance of each can be known. But the list is overwhelming nonetheless.

Fortunately, there's a solution.

If you begin from this base (and many have since the time of McClelland's article), you can look across jobs to identify elements of competence that crop up everywhere.

We can do some things that humans are very good at: Classify, categorize, build taxonomies.

For example, *information seeking* is a competency that studies have shown to be relevant to performance in many jobs. It's a general cognitive skill that's been proven to matter. This competency is a category. It can be broken down to a more refined list of knowledge items and skills, such as the specific questioning strategies you use.

With the competence approach, we can move away from sorcery, and focus on science of the mind. Not as mysterious, not as enchanting. But effective.

Relevant, transparent results that generalize across a wide range of situations. This is what the psychology of competence is about. Many are moving in this direction, both in professional workplace settings and in education.

Because it makes sense.

Image Credit: ShiftGrafiX

McClelland, D. C. (1973). Testing for competence rather than for "intelligence." *American psychologist, 28* (1), 1-14