

An integrated approach to professional development

Business change projects are often driven by the need for organisations to grasp opportunities from technological developments, improve competitiveness or handle threats from the external environment. To be successful, such projects have to make sure they balance four critical areas – process, technology, organisational and people changes. However, in recent years, those working within the business change area have been the subject of change initiatives themselves as organisations recognise the potential benefits offered by business analysts and other change professionals. This recognition has increased the drive to improve the capability offered by the business analysis practice and reduce expenditure on external consultants by developing the internal consultancy skills.

When developing such skills across an entire BA practice, an integrated approach is vital to ensure that the skills framework may be used as the basis for capability improvements, to evaluate performance, define career development paths and assess individuals for promotion.

The Performance Development Model™

At AssistKD we use a formal model for identifying areas for competency definition; the Performance Development Model™. This model is adopted for categorising and identifying key areas of competency and provides a three-view approach as shown in figure 1.



Figure 1: Performance Development Model™

The model reflects the importance of developing competency in three key areas:

Professional – the specific areas of competency, the tools and techniques, required for the relevant discipline. In business analysis these would include process modelling and improvement, requirements definition and management, stakeholder management and business case development.

Personal – the qualities and attributes that should be demonstrated by practitioners of the discipline. These typically include presentation, communication, influencing and facilitation skills.

Business – the skills and knowledge particularly relevant to the business domain within which the individual is employed.

The model also emphasises the need for all three areas of competence to be present. A highly knowledgeable and skilled professional cannot succeed in today's business world without corresponding personal skills such as effective communication and negotiation; organisations are also recognizing that a lack of knowledge of the business within which the professional works can diminish the value that professional and personal skills can bring.

The AssistKD skills management process

However, to be successful in developing capability, it is important that the performance development framework encompasses more than just the job role/competency definitions. While these are the core of the framework, they have to be linked to performance assessments and defined learning mechanisms.

AssistKD has developed a generic process for developing performance frameworks. The process overview is shown in Figure 2.

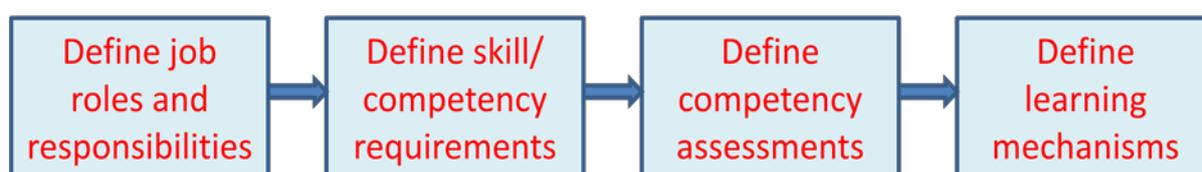


Figure 2: Performance Framework Development Process

Define job roles and responsibilities

This stage includes the review of the current job roles, bands and skill definitions. It involves interviews and workshops with key stakeholders in order to understand the responsibilities required of the current roles, any issues identified with the skill definitions, and the requirements to be encompassed within the new learning curriculum.

Define skill/competency requirements

Once the current definitions and requirements have been gathered and understood, they should be analysed in the light of established industry frameworks such as the Skills Framework for the Information Age (SFIA). This framework is discussed further below. The development framework and taxonomy is developed to set out the skill definitions, competency levels, job roles, and skill/competency mapping to job roles. In essence, the framework provides the definition of 'what' skills and competency levels are required for individuals to develop and progress.

Define competency assessments

This task considers how the achievement of skills are assessed and validated; this may include the use of professional qualifications as an assessment mechanism, ensuring the chosen assessment approach is consistent with the competency level being assessed. Progression between levels is defined within the framework, including what is required at each grade for each role.

Define learning mechanisms

The learning curriculum is defined to define the means of acquiring new skills or enhanced competency in existing skills developed. Learning maps are produced specifying how individuals can achieve the skills at the relevant levels of competency. The learning curriculum may also include references to the relevant qualifications.

Implementing a skills framework

At the heart of the implementation of the framework lies a gap analysis for each individual. So the next stage is to specify the knowledge, behaviour or expertise that should be demonstrated to confirm possession of a competency. Bloom's Taxonomy for cognitive domains is one of the most commonly-used frameworks for defining competency assessments. The Taxonomy is organized in six knowledge levels as shown in figure 3.

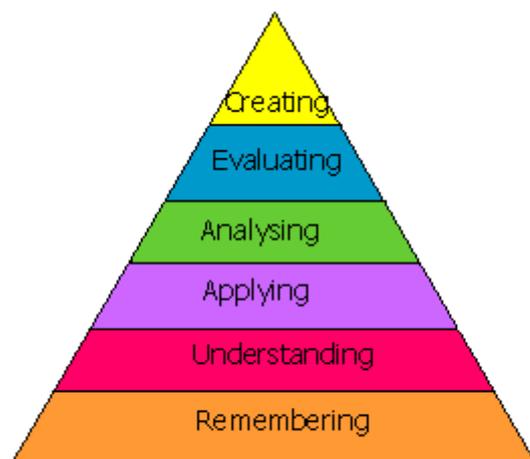


Figure 3: Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Domains

Each of the levels specifies the words to be used to express a competency assessment. For example, knowledge level two would use verbs such as describe, explain or recognize, whereas knowledge level four would be more concerned with the verbs appraise, contrast and distinguish. Such standard terms support the evaluation of performance against the required competencies.

The AssistKD process shows how the competency definitions have to be linked to competency assessment and learning. It is vital that organisations understand this when developing competency frameworks as failure to do so will lead to an unwieldy set of definitions that are unsuitable for practical use. Further, use of an integrated approach can yield significant benefits when evaluating performance, whether recruiting new staff or conducting annual performance reviews.

The Skills Framework for the Information Age

There are numerous professional specialisms within the information systems area, many of which lack coherent definitions of the skills and the competencies required to perform the role effectively. In recent years, many organisations have invested in building in-house role definitions, and specifying the competencies associated with each role. This can be a time-consuming exercise but can be assisted by the use of standard competency frameworks.

In the IS area, the most recognized framework is the Skills Framework for the Information Age (SFIA). This framework is owned by the SFIA foundation and is non-proprietary so is open for use by any organisation wishing to adopt this approach. The framework can be accessed at www.sfia.org.uk. There are seven levels of skill identified in the Framework as follows:

Level 1: follow - Works under close supervision. Interacts with immediate colleagues. Performs routine activities in a structured environment.

Level 2: assist - Works under routine supervision. Interacts with and may influence immediate colleagues. Performs a range of varied work activities in a variety of structured environments.

Level 3: *apply* - Works under general supervision. Uses discretion in identifying and resolving complex problems and assignments. Performs a broad range of work, sometimes complex and non routine, in a variety of environments.

Level 4: *enable* - Exercises substantial personal responsibility and autonomy. Performs a broad range of complex technical or professional work activities, in a variety of contexts.

Level 5: *ensure, advise* - Receives assignments in the form of objectives. Performs a challenging range and variety of complex technical or professional work activities.

Level 6: *initiate, influence* - Has defined authority and responsibility for a significant area of work, including technical, financial and quality aspects. Performs highly complex work activities covering technical, financial and quality aspects. Contributes to the formulation of IT strategy.

Level 7: *set strategy, inspire, mobilize* - Has authority and responsibility for all aspects of a significant area of work, including policy formation and application. Has a deep understanding of the IT industry and the implications of emerging technologies for the wider business environment.

SFIA provides definitions for skills required of IS professionals. Each skill is described at the relevant levels of competency. For example, the Consultancy skill is described at levels 5, 6 and 7 – as would be expected given the nature of this skill. Organisations can compile a skills profile for a job role by analyzing the skills and the levels of competency required to perform that job role effectively. As an example, the skills profile for a junior business analyst might include the following:

SFIA Skill	Competency Level
Business Analysis	3
Requirements Definition and Management	3
Business Modelling	2

Qualifications

In recent years, qualifications have become increasingly important as a means of assessing competency. BCS, the Chartered Institute for IT, offers a portfolio of recognised qualifications, including several relating to business analysis, that can support organisations in their performance development initiatives. The Chartered Management Institute (CMI) offers qualifications in relevant areas such as business consultancy. Many qualifications are mapped to the SFIA levels and are assessed using Bloom's Taxonomy knowledge levels, providing a seamless thread from competency to assessment.

As an accredited training and qualification organisation, AssistKD works with organisations to support their development of their staff competencies, linking the requirements of the organisation with the standards and qualifications available to support excellence in staff performance.

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Debra Paul has worked in business analysis for over 20 years. She is the Managing Director of Assist Knowledge Development (www.assistkd.com) and is an accredited SFIA consultant. Debra is the BCS Chief Examiner for Business Analysis and a Chartered Fellow of BCS. She is also the co-author of two best-selling books on business analysis.