



**A Report on
*Workplace Learner
Competencies***

By

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An Old Chinese Saying Retold

“Fish for people, and they can eat for one day; teach people how to fish and they can feed themselves; *help people learn how to learn and they can discover new ways to feed themselves and others.*”

-- William J. Rothwell, 1998

Purpose

To consider what “they do”
as learners.

Objectives

Upon completion of this presentation, participants will be able to:

- Define the term *competency*
- Explain why it is useful to know about competencies
- Review what has been done to define the competencies of people in our field
- Summarize what has been written about learner competencies
- Participate in establishing a framework for thinking about “learner competencies”



Part I:

Background

Definition of Competency

A competency is an underlying characteristic that leads to successful performance. It may include knowledge and skills as well as bodies of knowledge and levels of motivation.

How Competencies Differ From Knowledge and Skill

Competencies focus on what is unique about individuals doing the work rather than what people must know or do to perform the work alone

Definitions

- **Competency identification:** The process of discovering what competencies are necessary for exemplary or fully-successful performance
- **Competency model:** A narrative description of the competencies for a targeted job category, occupational group, division, department or other unit of analysis
- **Competency assessment:** The process of comparing an individual's competencies to those of a competency model

Why Competencies Are Important

Competencies are important because they:

- Distinguish what is necessary for exemplary performance
- Encompass more than just knowledge and skill

Five Generations of Thinking

You might think of our field in five generations:

- **Generation 1:** Training
- **Generation 2:** Human Resource Development
- **Generation 3:** Human Performance Improvement
- **Generation 4:** Workplace Learning and Performance
- **Generation 5:** The Workplace Learner

Generation 1: Training

- This generation focused on one activity—that is, training
- Training changes individuals by equipping them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to perform successfully
- Competency studies consolidate and codify a generation
- Two competency studies were key to this generation: Pinto & Walker (1978) and McLagan (1983)

Generation 2: Human Resource Development

- Human Resource Development (HRD) is defined as the integrated use of training, organization development and career development
- HRD changes individuals through activities both at present (through training) and in the future (through career development) as well as changes the work environment (OD)
- The competency study that codified and defined this generation was McLagan, P. (1989). *Models for HRD practice*. 4 vols. Alexandria, VA: The American Society for Training and Development.

Generation 3: Human Performance Improvement

- Human Performance Improvement (HPI) is the process of identifying the root cause(s) of human performance problems and finding solutions or interventions to address those causes
- HPI is interested in results, not activities
- HPI uses any or all means to achieve results
- The competency study defining this generation was Rothwell, W. (1996). *ASTD models for human performance improvement*. Alexandria, VA: The American Society for Training and Development.

Generation 4: Workplace Learning and Performance

- WLP is defined as “the integrated use of learning and other interventions for the purpose of improving human performance, and addressing individual and organizational needs. It uses a systematic process of analyzing and responding to individual, group, and organizational performance issues. It creates positive, progressive change within organizations by balancing humanistic and ethical considerations” (Rothwell, Sanders & Soper, 1999, p. 121).

Generation 4: Workplace Learning and Performance

- WLP reinvents HRD in light of HPI
- WLP emphasizes learning as a tool for achieving improved work performance in organizational settings
- Unlike training, which is done to people, learning is something that is done by people
- The competency study defining this generation was Rothwell, W., Sanders, E., & Soper, J. (1999). *ASTD models for workplace learning and performance*. Alexandria, VA: The American Society for Training and Development.

Generation 5: The Workplace Learner

- WL focuses on individual change through learning, not through training
- Learning is a means to achieve an end of improved performance
- A focus on learning implies a new role for the trainer, HRD professional, HPI practitioner, or WLP practitioner
- The competency study defining this generation is in the works

Why a Need for a New Way of Looking at What We Do?

Why is there need for a new study of the field now? Some reasons include:

- Overemphasis on our role diminishes the role of the customer/learner
- What we do should be a function of what learners/performers do
- People need to learn how to learn to remain competitive both inside and outside organizational settings
- *Other reasons?*

Point Worth Emphasizing

- Research by Tough (1979) revealed that adults undertake at least 1 or 2 major learning projects annually--and some people undertake more than 20.
- It is common for people to devote *as much as 700 hours per year* on a learning project.
- More than half of any learning project is focused on gaining and retaining knowledge and skill.

What Do We Know About Learner Competencies?

What we know about learner competencies is a function of what we know about learners.

Adult learners:

- Are problem-centered in their outlook
- Can be motivated by appeals to personal growth or gain
- Can increase their motivation to learn
- Should have their needs and problems kept uppermost in mind, so preprogram assessment is important

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Adult learners:

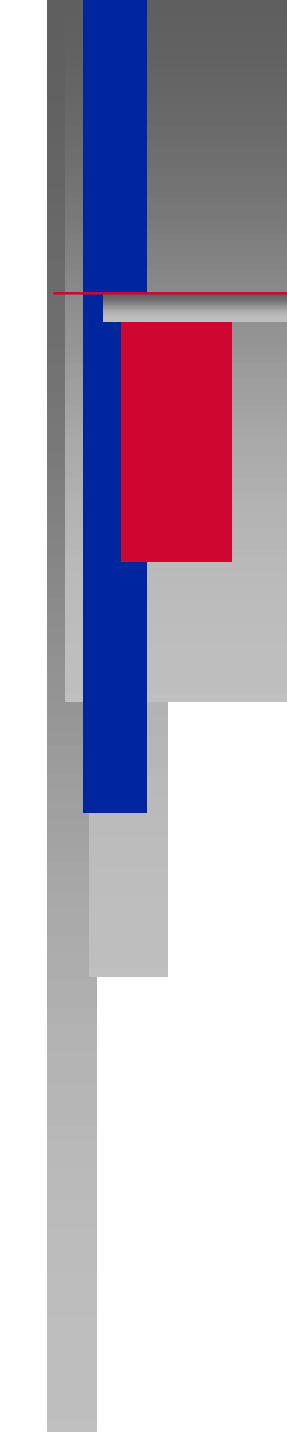
- Demand realism
- Need feedback and recognition
- Differ in their learning styles
- Are continually growing and changing
- Require transfer strategies to be explicit
- Need a psychologically “safe” environment in which to learn

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Adult learners:

- Usually prefer facilitated discussion preferable to lecture
- Need activity to understand and retain what they learn



Part II:

The Study

Key Questions

- What learning competencies characterize individuals in selected industries and hierarchical levels?
- What do organizations do to help or hinder learning?

Sample

- Convenience sample drawn from available, willing individuals
- Participants must fall into one of 9 hierarchical levels and one of 5 industries
- The study design was modeled on the SCANS study

Sample

Health and Human Services	Office, Financial Services & Government	Accommodations & Personal Services	Manufacturing, Agri-Business, Mining & Construction	Trade, Transportation & Communications
Officials and Managers	Officials and Managers	Officials and Managers	Officials and Managers	Officials and Managers
Professionals	Professionals	Professionals	Professionals	Professionals
Technicians	Technicians	Technicians	Technicians	Technicians
Sales workers	Sales workers	Sales workers	Sales workers	Sales workers
Office and clerical	Office and clerical	Office and clerical	Office and clerical	Office and clerical
Craft workers (Skilled)	Craft workers (Skilled)	Craft workers (Skilled)	Craft workers (Skilled)	Craft workers (Skilled)
Operatives (Semi-Skilled)	Operatives (Semi-Skilled)	Operatives (Semi-Skilled)	Operatives (Semi-Skilled)	Operatives (Semi-Skilled)
Laborers (Unskilled)	Laborers (Unskilled)	Laborers (Unskilled)	Laborers (Unskilled)	Laborers (Unskilled)
Service Workers	Service Workers	Service Workers	Service Workers	Service Workers

Source: Adapted, in part, from the U.S. Department of Labor (1991). *What work requires of schools: A scans report for America 2000*. Washington, DC: Superintendent of Public Documents.

Methodology

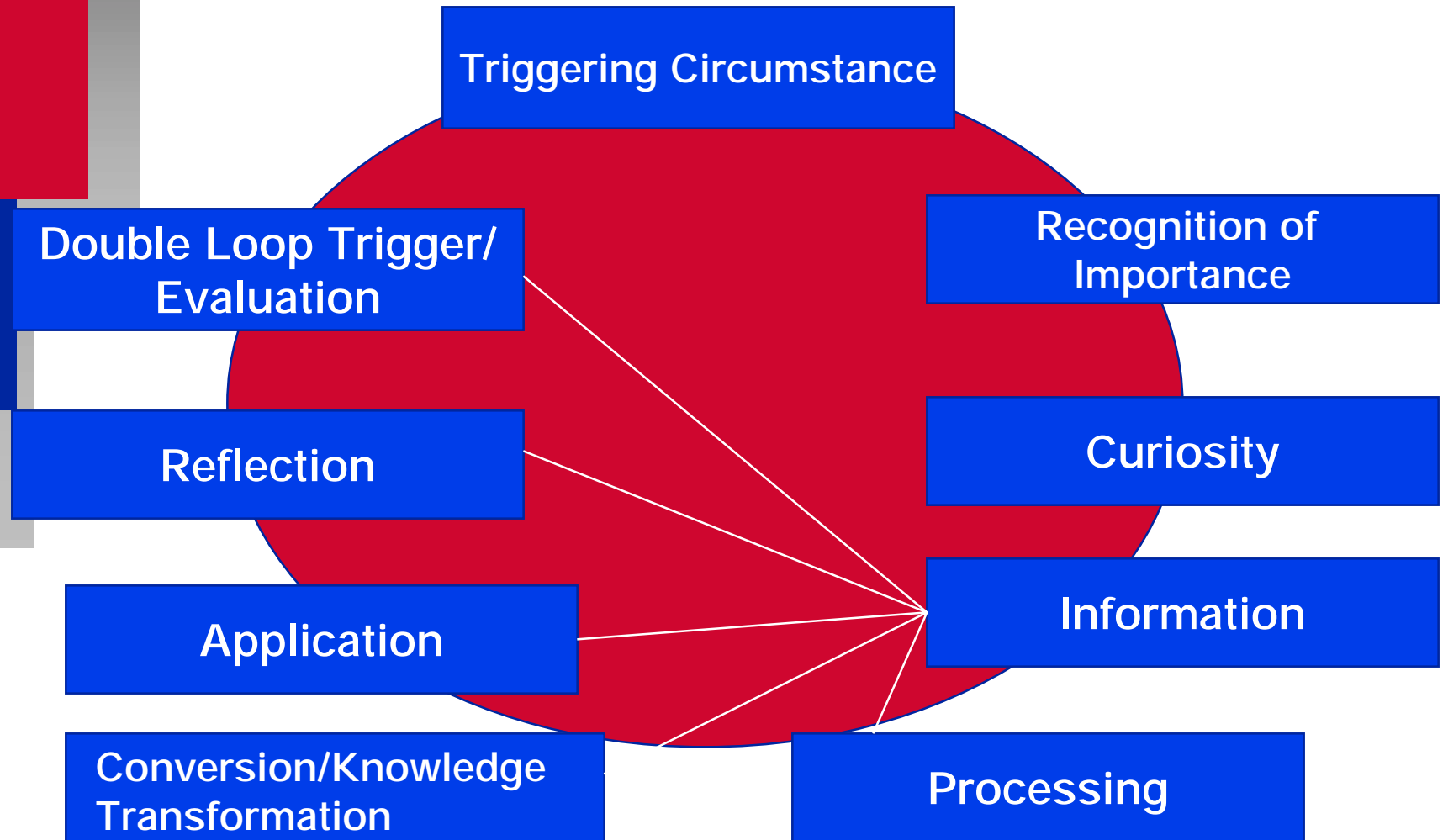
- First phase: Approximately 200 interviews with 5 individuals within the 45 grids formed by 5 industries and 9 hierarchical levels with 3 individuals within the 45 grids formed by 5 industries and 9 hierarchical levels
- Second phase: Approximately 100 interviews
- Participants must fall into one of 9 hierarchical levels and one of 5 industries
- The study design was modeled on the SCANS study



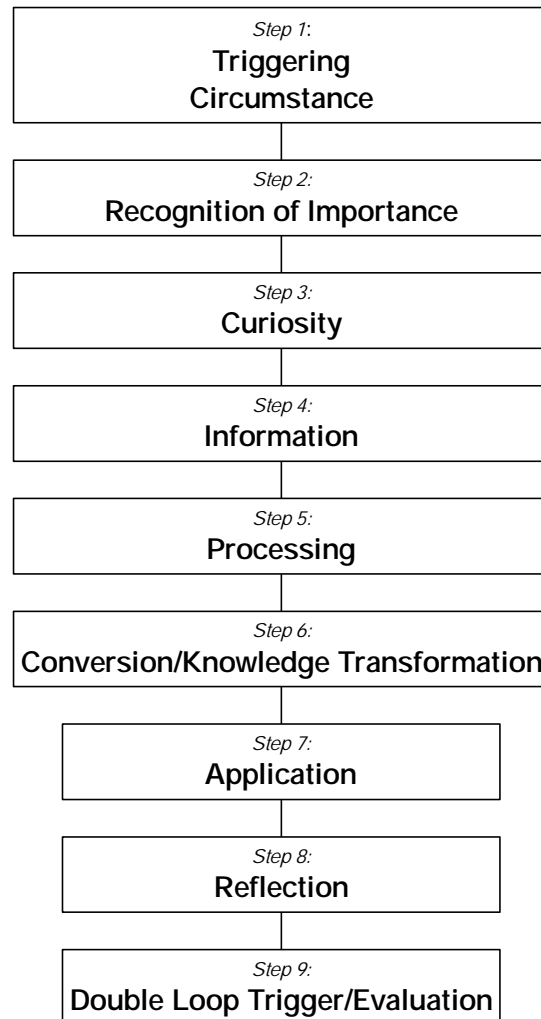
Part III:

The Results

The Learning Process



Relationship Between the WLP Process and Roles of the Workplace Learner



The Perceptivist

Information Gatherer

The Analyst

Evaluator

What Is a Learning Competency?

A learning competency is a characteristic that distinguishes a superior from a fully-successful performer

What Do We Do with Learner Competencies Once They Are Identified?

- Prepare an assessment instrument to compare individuals to the workplace learner competency model
- Isolate ways to **build** learner competencies

Why Should Trainers Care About Workplace Learning Competencies?

Trainers should care about workplace learner competencies because:

- Training is only as good as those who learning
- Most learning occurs on-the-job
- Only 8% of off-the-job training experiences transfer back to the job
- We can realize the promise of learning organizations only if we help individuals become exemplary workplace learners
- Radical change requires individualized learning

Organizational Barriers to Workplace Learning

- Lack of financial resources
- Unrealistic goals/expectations for learning
- No commitment to the learning process
- Lack of trust
- Factions in the organization with competing goals
- Unrealistic/unclear time constraints
- Lack of focus, goals and objectives

Organizational Barriers to Workplace Learning

- Poor communication inside the organization
- Limitation feedback from customers
- Unreasonable demands
- Multiple and conflicting workplace demands
- Lack of leadership
- No clear plan/milestone
- Lack of buy-in and commitment to learning

Organizational Barriers to Workplace Learning

- Limited education or background
- The learning effort represents a "flavor of the month"
- Double standards applied within the organization, depending on who does the learning
- Unclear process for examining and measuring work performance
- Lack of motivation to learn

Organizational Barriers to Workplace Learning

- Lack of existing knowledge, skill and vision
- Poor attitude
- Lack of measurement and accountability for the learning process
- Lack of a plan
- Lack of management support for workplace learning as evidenced by insufficient funding, people resources or information

Organizational Barriers to Workplace Learning

- Lack of clarity about "next steps"
- Unclear or vague expectations
- Lack of cooperation
- Lack of union support
- External environmental factors do not support the workplace learning process
- Fear within the organization
- No time to plan for learning
- "Turf issues"

Organizational Barriers to Workplace Learning

- Rapidly changing leadership with rapidly changing performance expectations
- Lack of empowerment
- Lack of coordination
- The incentives and reward system of the organization does not support learning or its results
- Responsibilities for who should do what is never clarified

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Conclusion

- Next steps
- Questions & Answers