

Competence at Work

"There is only one proof of ability: doing it." [Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach]

Abstract

Do you want to convince your boss of your excellent performance? Or, as a boss, do you need to allocate your staff to various teams based on their skills?

The book "Competence at Work" by Lyle M. Spencer and Signe M. Spencer can help. Originally intended to aid companies and HR departments in successful staff selection, this book presents necessary competencies for different working profiles with scale values.

You can also use these scale values to present your personal competencies or to rank the competencies of your staff in a comprehensible way. They helped one of my friends in London, who worked for an investment bank. He demonstrated to his boss his achievement orientation and impact and influence with explicit examples. Consequently, they no longer disagreed about his performance when discussing his annual bonus.

Scales for Most Common Competencies

You can rank yourself using the competency scales presented here. If your self-assessment closely matches your boss's view, your ranks should not differ by more than one level on any scale. Even in case of a difference, you can now discuss the detailed description of each scale value or provide explicit examples. This is also true for your assessment of your staff.

The file below shows scales for the most common competencies in six areas.

Achievement and Action	Helping and Human Service	Impact and Influence	Managerial	Cognitive	Personal Effectiveness
(1) Achievement Orientation - Intensity and Completeness of Achievement motivated Action	(5) Interpersonal Understanding - Depth of Understanding Others	(7) Impact and Influence - Actions taken to influence Others	(10) Developing Others - Intensity of developmental Orientation and Completeness of developmental Action	(14) Analytical Thinking - Complexity of Analysis	(17) Self-Control
(1) Achievement Orientation - Achievement Impact	(5) Interpersonal Understanding - Listening and Reponding to Others	(7) Impact and Influence - Breadth of Influence, Understanding or Network	(10) Developing Others - Number and Rank of People developed or directed	(14) Analytical Thinking - Size of Problem addressed	(18) Self-Confidence - Self-Assurance
(1) Achievement Orientation - Degree of Innovation	(6) Customer Service Orientation - Focus on Client's Needs	(8) Organisational Awareness - Depth of Understanding of Organisation	(11) Directiveness - Intensity of Directiveness	(15) Conceptual Thinking - Complexity and Originality of Concepts	(18) Self-Confidence - Dealing with Failure
(2) Concern for Order and Quality	(6) Customer Service Orientation - Initiative to help or serve Others	(9) Relationship Building - Closeness of Relationships built	(12) Teamwork and Cooperation - Intensity of Fostering Teamwork	(16) Technical / professional / managerial Expertise - Depth of Knowledge	(19) Flexibility - Breadth of Change
(3) Initiative - Time Dimension			(12) Teamwork and Cooperation - Size of Team involved	(16) Technical / professional / managerial Expertise - Breadth of managerial Expertise	(19) Flexibility - Speed of Action
(3) Initiative - Self-Motivation, Amount of discretionary Effort			(12) Teamwork and Cooperation - Amount of Effort or Initiative to Foster Teamwork	(16) Technical / professional / managerial Expertise - Acquisition of Expertise	(20) Organizational Commitment
(4) Information Seeking			(13) Team Leadership - Strength of the Leadership Role	(16) Technical / professional / managerial Expertise - Distribution of Expertise	

Technicians and Professionals

For technicians and professionals, the five most important competencies are:

Competency	Explanation	Weight
Achievement Orientation	Measures performance, improves outcomes, sets challenging goals, innovates	6
Impact and Influence	Uses direct persuasion, facts, and figures, gives tailored presentations, shows concern for professional reputation	5
Conceptual Thinking	Recognizes key actions, underlying problems, makes connections and patterns	4
Analytical Thinking	Anticipates obstacles, breaks problems down systematically, makes logical conclusions, sees consequences and implications	4
Initiative	Persists in problem-solving, addresses problems proactively	4

Interestingly, self-confidence, concern for order and quality, teamwork and cooperation, technical expertise, and customer service orientation are less critical for technicians and professionals.

Example: Evaluation of a Technical Professional

For technicians and professionals, the five most important competencies are Achievement Orientation, Impact and Influence, Conceptual Thinking, Analytical Thinking, and Initiative. Let us examine the relevant scales for each competency and rank an imaginary female technical professional on these scales.

Achievement Orientation

Assume the employee gets her superior's and some colleagues' buy-in to work on a project with a new method in addition to her regular work. Her boss and five colleagues support her. The new method is successful and innovative for the company.

In this case, she would be ranked at levels 7, 3, and 2 on these scales for Achievement Orientation:

Level	Intensity and Completeness of Achievement-Motivated Action	Achievement Impact	Degree of Innovation
-1	No standards of excellence for work		
0	Focused on the task		Does not do new things
1	Wants to do the job well	Individual performance only	New to the job or work unit
2	Works to meet others' standards	Affects 1 or 2 others	New to the organization
3	Creates own measure of excellence	Affects a work group (4 - 15 people)	New to the industry
4	Improves performance	Affects a department (more than 15 people)	Transformation
5	Sets challenging goals	Affects an entire mid-size firm (or a division of a larger company)	
6	Makes cost-benefit analysis	Affects an entire major-size firm	
7	Takes calculated entrepreneurial risks	Affects an entire industry	
8	Persists in entrepreneurial efforts		

Impact and Influence

If the employee took several steps to convince her boss and colleagues to influence decision committees to approve her project, and if her project impacts the entire mid-size firm, then she would be ranked at level 7 on “Actions Taken to Influence Others” and level 4 on “Breadth of Influence, Understanding, or Network”:

Level	Actions Taken to Influence Others	Breadth of Influence, Understanding, or Network
-1	Personalized power	
0	Not applicable	
1	States intention but takes no specific action	One other person
2	Takes a single action to persuade	Work unit or project team
3	Takes a two-step action to persuade	Department
4	Calculates the impact of one's action or words	Division or entire mid-size firm
5	Calculates a dramatic action	Entire large organization
6	Takes two steps to influence	City governmental, political, or professional organizations
7	Three actions or indirect influence	State governmental, political, or professional organizations
8	Complex influence strategies	National governmental, political, or professional organizations
9		International governmental, political, or professional organizations

Conceptual Thinking

The employee simplifies complex old-fashioned methods with her approach, which ranks at level 4.

Level	Complexity and Originality of Concepts
0	Uses no abstract concepts
1	Uses basic rules
2	Recognizes patterns
3	Applies complex concepts
4	Simplifies complexity
5	Creates new concepts
6	Creates new concepts for complex issues
7	Creates new models

Analytical Thinking

If the employee analyzes complex processes for products of a major division of a large company, then she ranks at level 4 twice:

Level	Complexity of Analysis	Size of Problem Addressed
0	Not applicable or none	
1	Breaks down problems	Concerns one or two people's performances
2	Sees basic relationships	Concerns a small work unit
3	Sees multiple relationships	Concerns an ongoing problem
4	Makes complex plans or analyses	Concerns overall performance
5	Macht sehr komplexe Pläne oder Analysen	Concerns long-term performance
6	Makes extremely complex plans or analyses	

Initiative

If the employee has resolved her company's challenges for the next five years and motivated colleagues to join her extraordinary efforts, then the rank levels are 8 and 6:

Level	Time Dimension	Self-Motivation, Amount of Discretionary Effort
-1	Thinks only of the past	Avoids required work
0	Not applicable or does not take initiative	Not applicable or absent
1	Shows persistence	Works independently
2	Addresses current opportunities or problems	Extra effort
3	Is decisive in a crisis	Does more than is required
4	Acts up to 2 months ahead	Does much more than is required
5	Acts 3 - 12 months ahead	Makes extraordinary, heroic efforts
6	Acts 1 - 2 years ahead	<i>Involves others</i>
7	Acts 2 - 5 years ahead	
8	<i>Acts 5 - 10 years ahead</i>	
9	Acts more than 10 years ahead	

Managers

The five most important competencies and base requirements for managers are:

Competency	Explanation	Weight
Impact and Influence	Uses data or other information, points out the benefits to others, uses concrete examples, visual aids or demonstrations, appeals to reason or logic	6
Achievement Orientation	Works to meet a standard set by management, sets and acts to reach challenging goals, makes cost-benefit analyses, takes calculated entrepreneurial risks	6
Teamwork and Cooperation	Solicits the input of others and involves others, gives credit or recognition, encourages and empowers the group, works to improve group spirit, resolves conflicts	4
Analytical Thinking	Sees implications of situations or information, analyzes situations systematically to determine causes or consequences, anticipates obstacles, thinks ahead	4
Initiative	Seizes opportunities as they arise, handles crises swiftly and effectively, exceeds the bounds of one's formal authority	4
	Organizational awareness and relationship building, expertise/specialized knowledge	Base requirements

Surprisingly, developing other, self-confidence, team leadership, and conceptional thinking are generally less important for managers.

Teamwork and Cooperation

In contrast to technicians and professionals, managers also need to focus on teamwork. Here the relevant scales are intensity of fostering teamwork, size of team involved, and amount of effort or initiative to foster teamwork.

Level	Intensity of Fostering Teamwork	Size of Team Involved	Amount of Effort or Initiative to Foster Teamwork
-1	Uncooperative		
0	Neutral		Makes no extra effort
1	Cooperates	Small, informal groups of 3 - 8 people	Takes more than routine action
2	Shares information	A task force or temporary team	Takes much more than routine action
3	Expresses positive expectations	Ongoing work group or small department	Makes extraordinary efforts
4	Solicits inputs	Entire large size department of 16 - 50 people	Gets others to take nonroutine action
5	Empowers others	Division or major firm	Involves others in extraordinary efforts
6	Team-builds	Entire major-size firm	
7	Resolves conflicts		

Other Generic Competency Models

The aforementioned competency models for managers, as well as for technicians and professionals, were most important and interesting to me.

The recommended book “Competence at Work” additionally presents models for salespeople, helping and human service workers, and entrepreneurs:

Model	Most Important Competency	Second Most Important Competency	Third Most Important Competency
Salespeople	Impact and Influence (10)	Achievement Orientation (5)	Initiative (5)
Helping and Human Service Workers	Impact and Influence (5)	Developing Others (5)	Interpersonal Understanding (4)
Entrepreneurs	Achievement Orientation, Thinking and Problem Solving, Personal Maturity, Influence, Directing and Controlling, Orientation to Others, and other		

A Note of Caution

Generic scales are applicable to all jobs - and none precisely. Many competencies can be irrelevant to a given job. Even a critical competency for a job can show irrelevant scale levels for that job.

The scales just represent the most common competencies. Many jobs require unusual or unique competencies which might not been shown here. Unique competencies can cover 2% - 20% of a job. Many jobs require special combinations of competencies.

Higher levels on a scale are not necessarily better. Each job has an optimal point on each scale. Higher levels can result in as many issues as lower levels.

Literature

Spencer, L. M., & Spencer, S. M. (1993, Juli 13). *Competence at Work - Models for Superior Performance*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.