

COMPETENCE ASSURANCE in a NUTSHELL

Planned maintenance is carried out in order to positively ensure that machinery and other support systems are in good working order. We accept it as one of the normal processes required to keep a ship operating. It is a proactive process. Competency Assurance can be looked at in same way with respect to people.

Long experience in discussing the matter of crew competence with colleagues in the industry leads me to believe that not everybody is on the same page, so bear with me whilst I take the liberty of revisiting the basic terminology. I will try to be concise:

THE BASICS

Competence and Competency – what's the difference ?

Competence is the ability to perform particular tasks and duties to the standard of performance expected in the workplace.

In other words: doing the required task to the required standard

Competency is the description of the knowledge, skills, experience and behavioural attributes necessary to carry out a defined function to the standard of performance expected in the workplace.

In other words: the performance standard.

Performance Standards or Training Standards ?

Competence is about doing – it is an outcome. It does not describe the learning process which someone has undergone in order to become competent. That is covered within the context of vocational education and training. However, the two go together rather well. In a well designed system for professional development, the performance criteria for any given unit of competency become the learning objectives of any training required to acquire the desired competence.

Focusing on *performance standards*, rather than *training standards*, opens the door to employing more innovative, efficient and cost effective methods of transferring knowledge and skills that are directly relevant to the jobs seafarers are required to do.

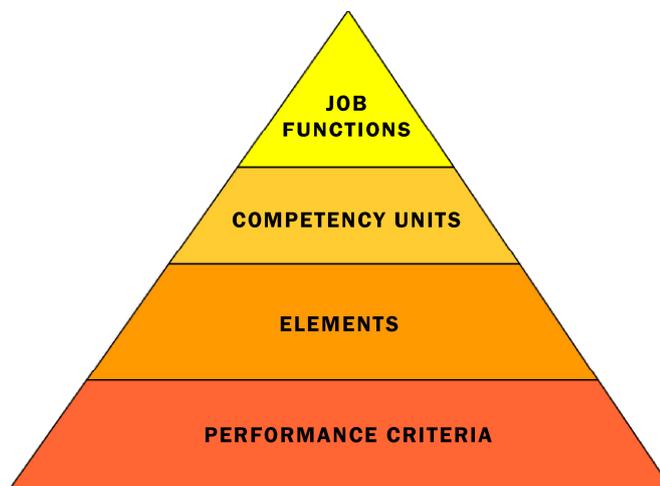
At present it seems that our industry focuses on training standards, which tend to be too prescriptive, and as such they restrict the training developers freedom to innovate and thereby to improve. This makes life needlessly complex and tedious for the seafarer and his employer alike.

A performance based approach is much easier to measure in terms of ROI on training expenditure. Analysis of the results gives information that contributes significantly to the targeting of expenditure on training that will deliver positive results in the workplace.

At the end of the day what matters is *“Does the individual have the required competence to do the job?”* How he/she acquired their competence is secondary.

Job Functions and Competency Units

This pyramid shows the relationship between job functions, competency units and performance criteria.



To be able to do a particular job function, one or more units of competency will be required.

A unit of competency is a stand alone function or task, comprised of elements within which performance criteria are defined.

WHAT IS COMPETENCE ASSURANCE ?

In a nutshell it is an assessment process, for individuals and organizations, which measures workplace performance.

The output from the assessment process provides critical information that allows an organization to manage risk more effectively by identifying the gaps between measured performance and the required standard for a job.

It is the link between individual performance and organizational success.

A properly designed Competence Assurance System will:

- *Provide proof that the workforce is competent by way of an auditable record of the management of competence at both the organisational level and the individual level.*
- *Provide a structure and process that aligns mission and safety critical competencies to business goals and objectives.*
- *Provide an inventory of performance standards in the form of competency units.*
- *Measure performance in the workplace against standards and monitor compliance.*
- *Review performance, identify gaps, determine training needs to close gaps, provide an evidence guide for assessment, and manage substandard performance .*

WHY DO WE NEED IT?

We live and work in a changing world, and the rate of change is increasing. Individuals and organizations need to keep up with the changes, to ensure that they are “current”.

Competence is not forever. Changes in policy, procedures, regulations, technology and equipment, business goals and objectives, all mean that workplace performance standards need to be modified and updated. New standards must be developed for new job functions.

Measurement and alignment of learning and workplace performance to the needs of an organisation are on-going business processes, and should be looked upon with the same thoroughness as other business processes.

The ability to learn and adapt is as important for the individual as it is for the business, and the successful performance of one is mutually dependant on the successful performance of the other.

Competencies that are identified as being “mission critical” and “safety critical” will require a shorter interval between workplace assessments than other competencies. To some extent this is what we are doing onboard anyway, but perhaps we look at it differently.

For example emergency drills are conducted weekly on most vessels. If done properly, these drills ensure that the members of the crew are competent with respect to emergency response. They also identify any substandard performance or equipment failures. This prompts corrective action to be taken, thereby preventing similar or more serious incidents from occurring. Drills are required to be done frequently in an effort to mitigate the risk of known hazards causing harm. This is the same reason that workplace assessment is required, although the intervals are typically much greater, depending on the hazards and the level of risk.

Workplace Assessment is sometimes seen as challenging the existing qualifications and experience of seafarers. This is understandable and needs to be explained. Rather than challenge a person’s existing qualifications it supports them by ensuring that they are “current”. The process identifies any “gaps” between the standard and measured

performance. The individual is then directed to the resources which can bring them up to date or the training that can refresh lost skills or knowledge, or provide required new skills and knowledge.

The Competence Assurance process is proactive, and provides a clearly defined career development path.

WHAT BENEFITS CAN WE EXPECT FROM IT?

The principal benefits that can be expected from a Competence Assurance System are:

- *Performance standards are maintained, underpinning the competitive advantage of an organization.*
- *The workforce is current when there are changes in policy, procedures, regulation or equipment.*
- *Risk is properly managed.*
- *Greater success is achieved in making sound promotion decisions, based on quantifiable merit rather than subjective personal opinion.*
- *Motivation of personnel and improved retention. Individuals have a clear understanding of their job functions, the required performance standards, and the competencies they will need to move ahead for career advancement.*
- *A strategic resource in the form of Competency Units aligned to an organization's business.*

Competence alone does not guarantee safety. But a well designed Competence Assurance system, properly implemented, will reduce risk and improve the predictability of good performance.

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