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Core Competencies and the Learning Organization

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D esigning libraries that can thrive in changing, chaotic environments is a continuous challenge for today's managers. To succeed, libraries must now be agile, flexible, and able to adjust to a world that resembles an amusement park roller-coaster ride or white-water rafting.

One system that can help managers in today's environment is that of the learning organization. A learning organization is an organization that has an enhanced capacity to learn, adapt, and change, and is "skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge and insights."[1] In these organizations, staff are encouraged to continuously learn new skills. For learning to be effective, however, the learning must result in improvements in the organization's operations.

While much of the literature on learning organizations emphasizes the importance of individual learning, there is little evidence that individual learning will necessarily result in a learning organization. Rather, individual learning needs to lead to behavioral changes that clearly improve overall organizational performance. Furthermore, the results of learning must become a part of the organizational culture and processes. Although an individual may become an expert in a particular area, if that information and expertise is not shared with the organization, the organization will lose that

expertise when the individual leaves. Conversely, if an individual's expertise is incorporated into organizational documentation and is shared through cross-training efforts, the expertise remains in the organization after the individual leaves. This transfer of knowledge and expertise is a key component of a true learning organization.[2]

Promoting this type of sharing of ideas and skills throughout the organization then becomes crucial. But what skills need to be present throughout the organization? One way organizations can identify those key skills needed for growth and adaptation to change is by identifying core competencies that are essential to the organization.

Core Competencies

Core competencies are the skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that contribute to an individual's success in a particular position.[3] To be useful, the competencies must relate to the organizational goals, objectives, and strategies. They are the knowledge and skills that make the organization a success and help the organization change to meet a changing environment.

While identification of core competencies has been well explored in the business literature, the topic is not as well covered in library literature. Articles that have been published discuss skills

needed by graduates of library schools or discuss skills needed in a particular area of the library. Little has been written that outlines library-wide competencies that are part of everyone's position, including both staff members and librarians.[4]

At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, development of core competencies was done as part of the ongoing process of transforming the organization into a learning organization. This article will describe the process used to develop the list of core competencies and will discuss how these competencies are being used both for hiring new employees and in the education of current employees.

During the fall of 1996 the University of Nebraska–Lincoln libraries' administration decided that developing and using core competencies would be one way to help prepare staff for the certain, and unknown, changes in the libraries. In order to help staff see the importance of competencies, as well as to gain valuable input from staff members, the libraries' administration felt that library staff would need to be heavily involved in developing core competencies for the organization. A committee made up of library staff from all employee groups—faculty, managerial/professionals, and office/service staff—was charged with developing a list of core competencies, giving strong consideration to flexibility, information literacy, and adaptability to new technology.

The committee began by reviewing the literature on core competencies and by meeting with the university human resources office. The committee also met with a team from the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) about the work that had been done at UNMC on core competencies. The committee used the information from UNMC as a starting point for outlining core competencies for the university's libraries.

After developing a preliminary list of competencies, the Core Competencies Committee met with staff groups to solicit input, sought guidance from the libraries' top management group, and refined the core competencies using suggestions from library staff and administration. By June 1997 the final list of twelve core competencies was ready for implementation. Core competencies for UNL libraries staff are: analytical skills/problem solving/decision making;

communication skills; creativity/innovation; expertise and technical knowledge; flexibility/adaptability; interperonal/group skills; leadership; organizational understanding and global thinking; ownership/accountability/dependability; planning and organizational skills; resource management; and service attitude/user satisfaction. Each core competency includes a brief definition and examples of behavioral indicators or key actions for the particular competency (see figure 1).

Core Competencies in Recruitment

Recruitment and interviewing were the first steps in using core competencies with library staff. Once the university libraries adopted the Core Competencies document, the Core Competency Committee then began to develop interview questions for job applicants. Since the list of core competencies applied to all positions, the plan was to develop sample interview questions to serve all applicants for positions in the libraries, regardless of the employee group: faculty, managerial/professionals, or office/service staff. Using examples of interview questions from other departments in the University of Nebraska system and from other libraries, the committee developed a list of interview questions for use in the libraries (see figure 2).

For each competency, the committee developed a number of possible questions to give supervisors some options so they could tailor the interview to the position. The committee also provided supervisors with information on how to interpret the questions to obtain the information they needed for the candidates.

For example, when trying to determine problem-solving and decision-making skills, questions such as, "Describe a time when you weighed the pros and cons of a situation and decided not to take action, even though you were under pressure to do so," help the interviewer to determine the decision-making and problem-solving skills of the candidate. They may also show whether the candidate uses sound judgment and a well-ordered approach to solving problems when under pressure. For new graduates without work experience,

Core competencies are the skills, knowledge, and personal attributes that contribute to an individual's success in a particular position.

questions such as, "What was the toughest academic decision you had to make? How did you go about making the decision? What alternatives did you consider?" can help the interviewer learn more about the analytical, problem-solving, and decision-making skills of the candidate.

Answers to interview questions for the competency "creativity/innovation" can be very helpful for interviewers trying to determine if a candidate will be a "good match" for the open position and the department or unit. Sometimes the answer to a question such as, "Give me an example of a new way you were able to apply existing knowledge to solve a problem" helps the interviewer to determine several things, including how the candidate defines creativity. The interviewer may ask himself, how "new" is the solution the candidate describes? Is it truly innovative? Sometimes a department or unit may be full of people who are very good at getting the job done but not particularly creative, and might be looking for a candidate who is more of an "innovator" than an "implementor," or

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Competencies are the skills, technical knowledge, and personal attributes that contribute to an individual's success in a particular position. These core competencies apply to all library staff, although some aspects of each of the competencies may not apply to every staff person.

Analytical Skills/Problem Solving/Decision Making

Recognizes patterns, draws logical conclusions, and makes recommendations for action. Uses a well-ordered approach to solving problems and sound judgment in making decisions despite obstacles or resistance.

Communication Skills

Listens effectively, transmits information accurately and understandably, and actively seeks constructive feedback.

Creativity/Innovation

Looks for opportunities to apply new and evolving ideas, methods, designs, and technologies.

Expertise and Technical Knowledge

Demonstrates broad, in-depth, and up-to-date knowledge of pertinent fields and awareness of current technology.

Flexibility/Adaptability

Performs a wide range of tasks, responds to changes in direction and priorities, and accepts new challenges, responsibilities, and assignments.

Interpersonal/Group Skills

Builds strong work relationships with a sensitivity to how individuals, organizational units, and cultures function and react. Establishes partnerships at all levels and across department and functional lines to achieve optimum results.

Leadership

Sets and models high performance standards characterized by integrity. Earns trust and respect of others by coaching, inspiring, and empowering teams of people to achieve strategic objectives.

Organizational Understanding and Global Thinking

Demonstrates an understanding of the institution in its entirety and works to achieve results across disciplines, departments, and functions. Develops and maintains supportive relationships across the organization.

Ownership/Accountability/Dependability

Accepts responsibility for actions, results, and risks. Gets the job done.

Planning and Organizational Skills

Anticipates and predicts internal and external changes, trends, and influences in order to effectively allocate resources and implement appropriate library initiatives.

Resource Management

Demonstrates a consistent focus on minimizing expenses while maximizing results.

Service Attitude/User Satisfaction

Understands and meets the needs of users and addresses their interests and the concerns of those affected.

Figure 1. Core Competencies, University Libraries, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

vice versa. Answers to these questions help the interviewing supervisor to know how creative or innovative a candidate really is.

Candidate's answers to questions about technical knowledge and expertise can be very helpful. In addition to the importance of asking questions to determine what technical skills and experience the candidate already has and would bring to the position, interviewers should ask questions such as, "Describe how you solved a technical problem," and "Describe the most challenging work you've done." The interviewer should consider the answers carefully; how difficult is the technical problem described and how challenging is the "most challenging" work? Experienced interviewers learn to judge whether or not the candidate really does possess skills or is perhaps talking over his/her head. For new graduates, expertise and technical knowledge core competency questions can be easily adapted to course assignments or school projects.

Flexibility/adaptability is one of the most important core competencies in today's changing library environment. It can be very challenging to ask questions to determine a candidate's flexibility and adaptability. Answers to questions such as, "Tell me about an important project/task/assignment you were working on in which the specifications changed. What did you do? How did it affect you?" help the interviewer to determine how the candidate has adjusted to change. The nature of the "important project or task" can be very telling. How important does the project seem? Does the candidate's answer show that he/she adjusts well to less important changes and has trouble with bigger change? Follow-up questions may be necessary to get a true picture of the candidate's ability to accept new challenges, responsibilities, and assignments.

For libraries with many committees, working groups, or teams, the answers to the interview questions for the interpersonal/group skills competency may be particularly important. Very few library staff work alone any longer. Most work with staff in their own departments and across department lines on committees and other projects. It is necessary to assess whether or not a job candidate will be able to work well in group situations.

Questions such as, "Describe a time you worked with a group or team to determine project responsibilities," and "What did you do to help the group reach a decision?" as well as "Tell me about one of the toughest groups you've had to work with—and what made it difficult," can be very helpful. Answers to these questions show the interviewer what kind of role, active or passive, the candidate takes in group situations, as well as how the candidate defines "group" or "team" and whether the candidate's definition fits with the library's definition.

Answers to questions asked to help determine the candidate's competency for ownership/accountability/dependability, such as, "Describe a work decision you made that you wish you could make over," help the interviewer to determine whether or not the candidate has the emotional maturity to deal with the results of his or her own actions and decisions. Regardless of the candidate's answer, whether it is bad results, late-arriving data, wrong information, or something else, the interviewer can begin to assess whether or not the candidate accepts responsibility for his or her own actions and accomplishes tasks.

Planning and organizational skills can be very important for some positions. When asked questions relating to this competency, such as, "What objectives did you set for this year?" and "Walk me through yesterday and tell me how you planned the day's activities," candidates should be able to provide a list of objectives and a plan for an organized workday. If the candidate struggles with answers, and cannot think of any goals or objectives for the year, or even more troubling, does not have an answer for how they planned a recent workday, the interviewing supervisor should have an indication of the candidate's competency level for planning and organizational skills. Another benefit of the questions for this competency is that it is often apparent from a candidate's answers whether they are self-directed or require motivation from others. For some positions, this may be less important, but for others it can be a key component for success in the position.

When trying to determine a candidate's service attitude, questions such as "Sometimes it is necessary to work with a customer who has unusual requests.

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Please describe a time when you handled a request that seemed unreasonable. What did you do?" can highlight the candidate's customer service philosophy. It is also helpful to see what a candidate will describe as an "unreasonable" request. This can help a supervisor to see just how far the candidate would go to serve a customer. On the other side, however, it is important to try to determine how realistic a candidate who seems to have an excellent service attitude really is. A statement such as, "Some days can be very busy with requests from customers and coworkers. Please describe a time recently when you didn't have enough time to completely satisfy a particular customer. How did you handle the situation?" can elicit answers that may help the interviewing supervisor to determine if the candidate realizes the limits in what the library can provide.

Answers to core competency questions help interviewers to determine many things, such as whether the candidate takes a passive or active role in committee work, accepts responsibility for actions and/or decisions, and about the candidate's learning style. Without asking the candidate these questions specifically, and then relying on the candidate to accurately describe himself, interviewers can assess more carefully the strengths and weaknesses the candidate might bring to the position. Asking questions that are based on real-life examples of past experiences helps the interviewer to assess how the candidate would react in similar situations.

Library supervisors began to use the interview questions in late spring 1998. Each supervisor and/or search committee selects pertinent questions from the list of core competency interview questions. No interviewing supervisor is expected to ask every question from the sample question list. The interview questions for the specific core competencies were developed so that supervisors and/or search committees could choose the questions most appropriate to the open position and use them with the questions that are specific to the job opening. Early concerns of supervisors included the extra time necessary for the interview, as well as concern about how to interpret the job candidate's answers. Although interviews are taking longer, most supervisors agree that the extra

time is worth the effort. As core competencies become more integrated into the libraries' operations, supervisors will see that many of the interview questions they have been asking over the years can be tailored to reflect competencies as well. As for concerns on how to interpret a candidate's answer, more training is underway.

Ongoing competency-related training for existing staff is equally important. Working with the staff development program already in place in the libraries at Nebraska, the library administration has supported additional training in the area of competencies. Programs on creativity, independent learning, and coping with change have been planned and offered by the libraries' staff development committee. Additionally, nearly all 150 staff members of the university libraries attended a sixteen-hour workshop titled, "Learning to Share Ideas: Building Effective Interaction," during the spring of 1998. This workshop helped staff to learn how to have productive exchanges of ideas and how to get ideas out to each other. Through presentations, exercises, and role plays, library staff members learned many practical skills for working for effective interpersonal and group interaction.

Integrating Core Competencies

The final step in the process of fully integrating core competencies into our operations and our move toward becoming a learning organization is adapting performance evaluation to include the core competencies. In a large organization this process will take some time. The libraries' administration agreed in June 1998 that at least one year would be necessary to make this transition. Beginning July 1, 1998, all library staff in the office/service and managerial/professionals job classifications will discuss core competencies and the incorporation of them into their own position descriptions with their supervisor at the time of their annual evaluation. The core competencies will be attached to the position description at the annual review time. For future years, the statement "Observes and practices the 'core competencies' adopted by the university libraries" will be added to the position description. The library faculty has

The move toward becoming a learning organization is an ongoing process.

chosen to incorporate core competencies into the promotion and tenure standards and post-tenure review documents rather than into the job descriptions. Since the standards documents are used in the reappointment and evaluation processes, the incorporation of core competencies into these documents is more appropriate than including them in job descriptions.

Conclusion

The move toward becoming a learning organization is an ongoing process. As library work changes, competencies will be adapted to fit those changes. Core competency-related interview questions assist hiring supervisors and search committees with determining whether a candidate already meets or shows potential to develop a particular competency. As fewer and fewer new positions become available in libraries, the need to hire staff who can meet the changing needs of the information age becomes mandatory. It is no longer enough to hire people who are simply task-oriented. Other necessary qualifications or characteristics include flexibility, adaptability, and enhanced communication and interpersonal skills, all part of the libraries' core competencies. The best candidate for the job will be someone who can both do the job well, and at the same time, work effectively within the organization. This candidate will adapt readily to changes in the position, the library, and the university.

Interview questions to determine competencies will evolve, as interviewing supervisors become more comfortable using them and begin to tailor the questions to fit the job openings. The learning organization encourages staff to continuously learn new skills and share them with the organization. Core competencies are an effective hiring tool, as well as a necessary guide for staff training and development, to help staff understand the skills that are needed for the organization.

References and Notes

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> The best candidate for the job will be someone who can both do the job well, and at the same time, work effectively within the organization.

Appendix: Sample Interview Questions for Core Competencies, University Libraries, University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Analytical Skills/Problem Solving/Decision Making

Recognizes patterns, draws logical conclusions, and makes recommendations for action. Uses a well-ordered approach to solving problems and sound judgment in making decisions despite ob-

stacles or resistance.
- Have you ever had to review proposals submitted by a vendor or by another committee? (Tell me about one of those situations.)
- Tell me about a time when you had to analyze or interpret numerical or financial information.
- Walk me through a situation in which you had to get information by asking many questions of several people. (How did you know what to ask?)
- Give me an example of a time you weren't sure what an internal/external customer wanted. How did you handle the situation?
- Think of a good decision you made and a recent decision that wasn't as good. What did you do differently in making those decisions?
- Describe a time when you weighed the pros and cons of a situation and decided not to take action, even though you were under pressure to do so.
- Your change from ____to____was a major career change. What factors influenced your decision to change jobs?

For New Graduates
- What types of information have you used for your career search?
- Walk me through a situation in which you had to do research and analyze the results (for school, buying a new car, etc.).
- What was the toughest academic decision you had to make? How did you go about making the decision? What alternatives did you consider?
- What made you decide to attend ____(college, library school, training, etc.)

Communication Skills

Listens effectively, transmits information accurately and understandably, and actively seeks constructive feedback.
- How do you keep internal/external customers informed?
- Tell me about a recent major directive of management that you had to communicate and implement. How did you go about doing this?
- Describe a time you had to ask questions and listen carefully to clarify the exact nature of an internal/external customer's problem.

Creativity/Innovation

Looks for opportunities to apply new and evolving ideas, methods, designs, and technologies.
- In your current position, what have you done differently than your predecessors?
- Tell me about a creative idea you had to improve a library service.
- Tell me about a unique approach you took to solve a problem.
- Give me an example of a new way you were able to apply existing knowledge to solve a problem.

- Tell me about the way in which you worked with other staff to develop new and creative ideas to solve problems.

Expertise and Technical Knowledge

Demonstrates broad, in-depth, and up-to-date knowledge of pertinent fields and awareness of current technology.
- What technical training have you received? How did you apply this training?
- Describe a project, situation, or assignment that challenged your skills as a _____. What did you do to effectively manage the situation?
- Sometimes complex projects require additional expertise. Describe a situation in which you had to request help.
- Have you ever had to orient a new employee on a technical task or area? How did you do it?
- Describe a time you solved a technical problem.
- What equipment have you been trained to operate? How proficient are you?
- What word processing packages can you use? How proficient are you?
- Give me an example of a project that demonstrates your technical expertise in _____.
- Describe how you've gone about learning a new technical task.
- How much experience have you had operating a _____(mouse, keyboard, typewriter, word processor, etc.)
- Describe the most challenging work you've done.

For New Graduates
- Give me an example of an assignment you've worked on that shows your expertise in _____.

Flexibility/Adaptability

Performs a wide range of tasks, responds to changes in direction and priorities, and accepts new challenges, responsibilities, and assignments.
- Tell me about two of your coworkers who are most different from one another. How have you worked with (or managed or led) each one? Give me an example.
- Working with people from diverse backgrounds or cultures can be a challenge. Can you tell me about a time you faced a challenge adapting to a person from a different background or culture? (What happened? What did you do? What was the result?)
- Tell me about an important project/task/assignment you were working on in which the specifications changed. (What did you do? How did it affect you?)

- Tell me about a time you had to meet a scheduled deadline while your work was being continually interrupted. What caused you to have the most difficulty and why?
- Going from _____ (position) to _____ (position) must have been difficult. Tell me about a challenge that occurred when making that transition. (How did you handle it?)
- Describe a time you had to significantly modify work procedures to align with new strategic directives.
- Tell me about the manager/supervisor who was the most challenging to work for. How did you handle this challenging relationship?
- I see that you have moved a number of times. What was the biggest challenge you faced in moving? How did you cope?
- Going from (high school to college, college to graduate school, school to your first job) can be a dramatic change. Tell me about a particular challenge you had when you made this transition.

Interpersonal/Group Skills

Builds strong work relationships with a sensitivity to how individuals, organizational units, and cultures function and react. Establishes partnerships at all levels and across department and functional lines to achieve optimum results.

- Tell me about a time you were able to convince someone to cooperate with you on an important project.
- Tell me about an experience you've had working with a new employee. Give an example of your dealings with that person.
- Sometimes it can be frustrating to try to get information from other people for planning purposes or to solve a problem. Please describe a situation you have had like this.
- Our relationships with coworkers are not always perfect. Tell me about the most challenging relationship you had with a coworker. Why was it challenging? What did you do to try to make it work?

Group skills

- Describe a time you worked with a group or team to determine project responsibilities. What was your role?
- Can you give an example of a group decision you were involved in recently? What did you do to help the group reach the decision?
- Tell me about a situation when a group member disagreed with your ideas or actions.
- Tell me about one of the toughest groups you've had to work with. What made it difficult?

Leadership

Sets and models high performance standards character-

ized by integrity. Earns trust and respect of others by coaching, inspiring, and empowering teams of people to achieve strategic objectives.

- Sometimes important projects have tight deadlines. Tell me about a time when you had to take action quickly to correct a problem on an important project.
- Tell me about a time you inspired someone to work hard to do a good job.
- Describe a face-to-face meeting in which you had to lead or influence a very sensitive individual.
- Tell me about a time you were able to convince someone from outside (i.e., your department) to cooperate with you on an important project.
- What strategies have you used to communicate a major change to employees? Which strategies have worked and which have not?
- Describe a situation in which you had to translate a broad or general plan into specific goals.

For supervisory positions

- Tell me about a time when you included one of your staff in solving a problem.
- Sometimes there's only enough time to tell people what to do and how to do it. Tell me about a time you needed to be this way with your staff.
- Tell me how you established rapport with the newest members of your staff.
- Tell me about a reward structures or incentives you established to help accomplish a new directive. How did it work?

For New Graduates

- Describe a situation in which you had to influence another student or peer to cooperate. What did you say?
- Tell me about a leadership role you had in an extracurricular activity. How did you lead?

Organizational Understanding/Systems Thinking

Demonstrates an understanding of the institution in its entirety and works to achieve results across disciplines, departments, and functions. Develops and maintains supportive relationships across the organization.

- Describe a situation in which you chose to involve others to help solve an internal/external customer's problem. (what was the problem? how did involving others help?)
- Describe an occasion when you decided to involve others from outside your department in making a decision.

Ownership/Accountability/Dependability

Accepts responsibility for actions, results, and risks. Gets the job done.

- Describe a time when you weighed the pros

and cons of a situation and decided not to take action, even though you were under pressure to do so.
- Describe a work decision you made that you wish you could make over.
- We all make decisions that turn out to be mistakes. Describe a work decision you made that you wish you could do over.

Planning and Organizational Skills

Anticipates and predicts internal and external changes, trends, and influences in order to effectively allocate resources and implement appropriate library initiatives.
- Walk me through yesterday (or last week) and tell me how you planned the day's (or week's) activities.
- What procedure have you used to keep track of items that need attention? Tell me about a time you used that procedure.
- What objectives did you set for this year? (What steps have you taken to make sure that you're making progress on all of them?)
- Sometimes deadlines don't allow the luxury of carefully considering all options before making a decision. Please give an example of a time this happened to you. What was the result of your decision?
- Tell me about a time you were faced with conflicting priorities. In scheduling your time how did you determine what was a priority?

For Supervisory positions
- Tell me about either a short or long term plan you developed for your department.
- What strategies have you used to communicate a major new initiative to employees? Which strategies have worked and which have not?

For New Graduates
- Tell me about the time your course load was heaviest. How did you complete all your work?
- What did you consider when setting up your class schedule?

- How were you able to balance your work with extracurricular activities?

Resource Management

Demonstrates a consistent focus on minimizing expenses while maximizing results.
- Tell me about one of the reward structures or incentives you established to help accomplish a major new directive.

For New Graduates
- How were you able to balance your school work with extracurricular activities?

Service Attitude/User Satisfaction

Understands and meets the needs of users and addresses the interests and concerns of all stakeholders.
- In your current job, how do you know if your internal/external customers are satisfied? (Give specific example)
- Tell me about a time when you were able to respond to an internal/external customer's request in a shorter period of time than expected. Contrast that situation with a time you failed to meet an internal/external customer's expectations. (What was the difference?)
- As a _____, how did you ensure that you were providing good service?
- Sometimes it necessary to work with a customer who has unusual requests. Please describe a time when you had to handle an unusual request that seemed unreasonable. What did you do?

Some days can be very busy with requests from customers and coworkers. Please describe a time recently when you didn't have enough time to completely satisfy a particular customer. How did you handle the situation?