

What Is The Key To Assuring The Skillset Of Your Frontline Workforce?



In this series, we focus on helping the next generation of frontline leaders and workers with companies and operation businesses where safety and technical skills are required. So far, we've looked at two main issues:

- In the US, there is a growing skills gaps between generations on the frontline, which is contributing to the rise in workplace injuries, illnesses, and fatalities.
- Exclusively training frontline workers is no longer the most effective approach to preparing new hires, so we've explored competency programs as a potential solution.

Competency is generally misunderstood in the US, with most people equating competency with training and passing a knowledge test at the end of a course. If we observe nations who moved to a Competency Management System (CMS) program for workers, we get a clear understanding of what occupational competency is and how it is defined. Competency is a set of skills, with each skill requiring knowledge, understanding, and connection to individual performance and a means of improvement.

Looking at these other nations that have found success in implementing and maintaining their frontline competency programs, we find that their success has been in ensuring that their workplace assessors are:

- Trained, qualified, and have verified ability as a workplace assessor, as well as maintain their qualification.
- Independent of the individual they are assessing.

- Only assessing individuals who hold the same type of job as the assessor previously held (e.g., an electrical assessor only assesses other electricians, a mechanical assessor, other mechanics).
- Neutral and only assesses others against the requirements defined within a competency standard for a given job role to conclude a competency judgment.
- Able to write the assessment summary in a legally defensible way, as well as provide the feedback to the person assessed in a manner that encourages them to continuously improve their knowledge, skills, and ability.

Failing to properly assess the competency of a workforce can lead to a whole host of issues including injuries, accidents, OSHA fines, loss of brand recognition, and loss of profits. Read our previous article on the cost impact due to lack of a fully skilled frontline workforce.

The workplace assessor is key to investing in and maintaining a quality competency program for your frontline workforce.

What does a Workplace Assessor Do?

Cranbrook College defines the role of the occupational assessor: *“The primary role of the assessor is to assess candidates’ performance and/or related knowledge in a range of tasks and to ensure that the competence and/or knowledge demonstrated meets the required standards and learning objectives.”*

The assessor, as defined by Brooks & Kirk, must have, *“...sufficient knowledge and understanding of the occupation to be able to make sound, valid and quantifiable judgements about a learner’s knowledge, skills and understanding of the task they are being assessed on.”*

At the heart of the assessor role is the ability to remain neutral and to defer judgment during the assessment process. During an assessment, the assessor is never a trainer or coach. The qualified assessor must determine whether the individual possesses the knowledge, skills, and ability to do their jobs when held to the company’s standard. The assessor does not base the assessment judgment on opinion.

[Jim Wetherbee](#), five-time NASA Space Shuttle Commander, wrote in his book, *Controlling Risk in a Dangerous World*:

“Employees are expected to conform to the standards and principles and comply with the policies and rules of their company. Employees must understand and accept their accountability by committing to perform. If the accountability is not accepted, the leader should not expect performance. When organizations fail, this is often the omitted step; the leaders may provide the policies and rules, but then will fail to set expectations to follow certain practices, won’t test for understanding or ask for commitment, and don’t verify that the expected practices are actually being performed.”

Assessors confirm if employees are meeting the expected standards within the company. This is a key part of an overall risk management strategy.

How do I Find Qualified Assessors?

Qualified occupational workplace assessors come in two forms:

- Provided by a 3rd party service in the field of occupational competence that can verify competence in a job role to agreed standards
- Internally selected individuals from the company's different job roles who receive training in the core assessors' skills and then are independently verified as workplace assessors to reach their qualification

Understanding Skills Gaps and How to Eliminate Them

The Deloitte and the US Manufacturing Institute 2018 [study](#) reported that due to the Boomer exodus in the US, manufacturers will likely be short 2.4 million skilled workers by 2028. They estimate if qualified workers cannot be found to fill open jobs, \$454 billion in additional manufacturing 'value add' could be at risk.

The worst-case scenario is having a team of newer inexperienced frontline leaders and workers driving the frontline. This could cause a domino effect of employees passing down incorrect information to new hires. If new hires are learning as they go, it will result in higher-than-average incidents, injuries, equipment damage, and reduced run time efficiency.

Having qualified workplace assessors, who determine if skills gaps exist, allows employers to save time and money by focusing on *right-time* training vs a *sheep-dip* approach to training. Once skills gaps are identified and recorded, a supervisor or manager can then setup the best training or coaching methods to help close the identified skills gap(s). After training/coaching, the employee is reassessed to verify that they know and can correctly perform the task they previously couldn't do against the company's competency standard.

Skills gaps are determined when assessors apply the company's competency standards to evaluate an employee's competency. If a competency is deemed *safety critical*, identifying those skills gaps can mean the difference between preventing a personal injury, equipment damage, environmental damage, or production down time.

Employee Retention as it Relates to Their Career Progression

Evaluating competency gives the employer the means to identify the best of the best employees. Back in the day, the only way to be promoted from an base role into an operations leadership position was to have a minimum of 10 years of experience. That's what operational leaders were told and they held to it.

More recently, companies are fortunate if they can wait 3-5 years before promoting someone into a leadership role. The assessment process allows managers to see who is excelling and demonstrating a desire to learn and grow their skillset. It pinpoints employees who should be invested in for future leadership positions. This also applies to those who are in line to move up through the ranks of the frontline operations.

Improve Employee Retention

Millennials have been unfairly tagged as having no loyalty when it comes to staying with a company long term. Contrast that with the previous Boomer generation, who stayed a lifetime with one company. The [Deloitte Millennial Surveys](#) report that the majority of Millennials are leaving companies in the first 18 to 24 months. Why is that? Deloitte found that Millennials leave a company for three main reasons:

1. "I hate my boss."
2. "I feel a lack of purpose in my job."
3. "No one is investing in helping me develop my skills."

Armed with that knowledge, employers can retain new hires longer by:

1. Put their frontline leaders through competency-based leadership training and follow up with a qualified leadership assessor. Invest in leaders' knowledge, skills, and ability and it will pay dividends in retention.
2. Showing employees the purpose and value that their role adds to the company. BASF, a German Chemical company, made an award-winning commercial in 1997. Their tag line was simple: "At BASF, we don't make the things you enjoy. We make the things you enjoy...BETTER!" To retain the next generation of employees, make an effort to show the value your company adds to others.
3. Providing ongoing support, coaching, and feedback. A once per year performance review no longer works for the next generation workforce.

We all know the icon called *The Corporate Ladder*, and just so you know, our next generation hates it! All they see is a really long line of people waiting to get on that ladder. They're not willing to wait in line to get on," so they leave. For more impactful data on changing the way individuals progress within a company, look at the process studied and tested by Cathy Benko and Deloitte, called [The Corporate Lattice](#).

No matter your industry, we believe training and competency programs are key to the future for the next generation workforce in the US. If you do implement a CMS, we suggest you consider an off the shelf CMS enterprise software system that allows a structured competency program to be managed easily and provides management a snapshot to know at any point where their frontline stands with their knowledge, skills, and abilities.

If you need help, we have solutions that can help you manage your next generation workforce. [Competency Consultancy Solutions](#) exist to help you reduce risk, improve performance, and save lives. Give us a call.

