



Business Case Competence Management in Practice

Accent

Action Plan

Objectives, Processes,
& Stakeholders

Social Dialog

Internal Implications

Lessons Learned

Successes & Improvements

The Future

What Next?

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Introduction

Our white paper *Competence Management at the Heart of Your HRM Policies* concluded with a lead-in to this white paper, posing the question, "All well and good in theory, but how does it work in practice?"

A while ago, we came across a document published by SERV*, titled *Inspirerende voorbeelden van competentiebeleid* ['Inspirational Examples of Competence Policies']. We were really impressed. It beautifully encapsulates competence management in day-to-day practice across a large number of highly diverse companies. We couldn't help ourselves. We had to share it with you!

*SERV: Flanders Social & Economic Council. SERV published this document in partnership with the Foundation Innovation & Work.

The document, which included ten concrete priorities, was published in response to the Flemish government and SERV's partners signing the *Competence Agenda*. One of these priorities focused explicitly on promoting all aspects of competence policy-making within companies and organizations.

The aim of the study that ensued was to investigate the current state of affairs of 'competence policy-making' in Flanders. It ignored theoretical discussions and focused exclusively on concrete examples that had already been put into practice within Flemish companies and organizations.

They sought examples of competence policy-making that had specifically arisen from social dialog and would serve as an inspiration to others.

As far as we're concerned, they succeeded!

Over a hundred companies were involved in the study of which eight formed the basis for extensive case studies. We've selected two case studies to share with you that we thought would prove particularly valuable – Accent and ETAP Lighting.

Sector	No. of Employees		
	1–99	100–499	500+
Health Care	Accent		
Metal Proc.			ETAP Lighting

This document examines the SERV case study carried out at Accent.

It's well laid out and highly practical. What prompted their need to implement these policies? How did they tackle this? What were their goals? Who was involved? What tools did they create? And what did they learn? It makes for quite a read – twenty pages packed full of useful information that we didn't want to or know how to condense. In short, invaluable information for companies and organizations interested in implementing competence management principles and looking for information from pioneers in the field.

If you don't quite have the patience or the time right now to take it all in, [jump to p 26](#). There you'll find a clear and concise summary of the entire SERV study.

To make this information even more valuable and current, we interviewed Yvan Winne (Accent's managing director) in early 2016 to find out where they are now and whether they've gained any recent insights that they'd like to share with us all! You'll find [this interview on p 37](#).

If you're interested in the [other SERV case study](#), please feel free to download this as well.

Naturally, all credit goes to SERV and the Foundation Innovation & Work and our compliments on this in-depth and insightful publication.

Accent

Competences and key result areas for all staff and the organization as a whole.

Accent is a rehabilitation center in Kortrijk-Heule, Belgium, which helps children with developmental disorders in the broadest sense of the term, e.g. children with a mental handicap, a developmental disability, autism (or related disorders), complex learning disorders (inc. dyslexia), complex speech and language disorders, and hyperactivity (ADHD).

The center has twenty employees on staff of whom three work full-time and 90% are university educated. Accent is split into seven departments – management, psychotherapy, speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, welfare services, and maintenance.

1. Context

Accent's staff wanted more specific feedback about their performance.

Accent is subject to ever-changing external factors, as are most other companies and organizations. Several developments are of specific relevance to Accent.

Fewer children are presenting themselves with learning difficulties, but the percentage of children with complex disorders, such as ADHD and autism-related disorders, is increasing. Technology also affects Accent – new medical and paramedical technologies, such as nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) scans and improved medication.

Parents also feel a weight on their own and their children's shoulders imposed by the knowledge society in which we live. They're increasingly aware that their children's future standard of living correlates largely with the extent to which they are able to acquire the right knowledge and skills. **Consequently, Accent's staff also have to adjust to these developments by means of continuing professional education (CPE).**

The prime motive for implementing competence policies for the center, was a thorough analysis conducted by its managing director. This analysis was initially conducted as part of a management training course.

It revealed that Accent was paying very little attention to staff appraisal as compared with similar institutions. Accent's staff wanted more specific feedback about their performance and appreciation for their performance. They thought the existing system of appraisal interviews and performance reviews was vague, subjective, and irrelevant. The center's small size and a sense that it was doing a good job had also brought about a certain complacency.

Results convinced Accent's managing director of the need to implement new robust and scientifically-founded HRM policies. This could also prove particularly beneficial to Accent as a whole.



2. Objectives

Competences and key result areas point the way forward for the staff and the organization as a whole.

Two main objectives were critical to developing Accent's new competence policies:

- 1 helping staff do the right things and**
- 2 helping them do these things right.**

An organization's strategic competence policies ought to ensure that its mission, objectives, and strategy are clear to and upheld by its staff. Policies should clearly and precisely state what's expected of them.

By integrating a greater awareness of competences across various HRM domains, e.g. selection, induction, training, assessment, etc., these competences subsequently formed a means to work more efficiently and effectively.

While developing Accent's new competence policies, the realization gradually dawned that greater attention also needed to be paid to performance management. In other words, it wasn't only about developing competences, but also about measuring results, making improvements, and adjusting course, whenever necessary. Accent aimed to do this at two levels – a staff level and an organizational level.

At a staff level, quantifiable results were intended to contribute towards more objective appraisals. Paying greater attention to results would ensure that not only competences were being appraised, but also their performance.

At an organizational level, quantifiable results were intended to help the executive board make Accent's mission and vision more tangible, and enable it to assess Accent's performance as a whole.

While developing Accent's new competence policies, the following objectives played a prominent role:

- To make it clear to staff what was expected of them by defining competence profiles and key result areas (KRAs).
- To help staff develop required competences by drafting a more targeted training policy.
- To appraise existing competences and performance levels more effectively by developing a clear and more objective assessment system.
- To involve the Executive Board more closely in Accent's operations.

3. Competences, Tools, and Target Groups

Competences and KRAs were clearly defined using behavior profiles and indicator scores.

3.1. Competence Profiles

Competences covered the total sum of staff members' knowledge, skills, motivation, and personality. Each Accent staff member's competence profile contained four core competences and eight role-related competences. Technical competences were also added to certain technical roles.

The four core competences were the same for all staff members. These were based on the organization's mission and vision – *commitment, customer focus, learning, and social awareness*. Core competences were defined, but not assigned any behavior levels. In contrast, each of the eight job-related competences were also defined, but also assigned the ideal behavior level required for each job in question.

For example, the following eight role-related competences and behavior levels had been selected for the role of occupational therapist:

- Creativity – **Level 2** – comes up with new or alternative ideas and solutions
- Initiative – **Level 3** – encourages others to take initiative
- Learning – **Level 2** – seeks new learning opportunities
- Oral Communication Skills – **Level 3** – communicates effortlessly and fluently with different audiences
- Flexibility – **Level 2** – anticipates and responds quickly to developments
- Quality Focus – **Level 2** – improves his/her quality of work
- Organizational Commitment – **Level 2** – shows commitment by making an effort to achieve goals
- Teamwork – **Level 2** – consults with and helps others

Specific technical competences were defined for speech, physical, occupational, and psychotherapists that primarily involved performing and interpreting certain tests. For example, an occupational therapist needs to be able to test children's manual skills by means of tests such as the Movement Assessment Battery for Children (Movement-ABC) and Peabody Developmental Motor Scale (PDMS).

3.2. Job Descriptions

Each staff member also received a job description outlining his/her:

- role's purpose
- position within the organization
- competence profile
- KRAs

Each key result area was described and clarified in terms of several core tasks, each of which were in turn assigned measurable indicators. A traffic light principle was used for assessing these core tasks, i.e. **green** for 'keep up the good work', **orange** for 'pay careful attention', and **red** for 'take immediate measures to rectify this situation'.

For example, three KRAs were defined for the position of Social Assistant – case follow-up, communications, and administrative tasks.

- KRA: case follow-up
- Description (customer expectations): This role involves keeping patients' files up to date, compiling files for patient discussions, and verifying that children's files contain all essential elements.
- Core Tasks (essential for achieving results in this area):
 - **Core Task 1:** Inform and assist parents with administration.
 - Indicator: Parent satisfaction survey rating
 - Source: Parent survey
 - Assessment:
 - **Green:** >90% satisfied
 - **Orange:** 80–90% satisfied
 - **Red:** <80% satisfied
 - **Core Task 2:** Compile files for the health authorities' medical consultants.
 - Indicator: No. of files rejected by health authorities
 - Source: List of health authority rejections
 - Assessment:
 - **Green:** <5 rejections
 - **Orange:** 5–8 rejections
 - **Red:** >8 rejections

- **Core Task 3:** Follow up on cases for new examinations, discussions, and interim evaluations.
 - Indicator: No. of files missing at cross-disciplinary meetings
 - Source: List of files missing at cross-disciplinary meetings maintained by psychologist.
 - Assessment:
 - **Green:** <3 files missing
 - **Orange:** 3–5 files missing
 - **Red:** >5 files missing

3.3. Organizational KRAs

Not only did Accent introduce KRAs for individual roles, but it also did so for the organization as a whole. It aimed to translate its mission and vision into several key performance indicators (KPIs). Once again, Accent opted for a traffic light principle.

For example, Accent's mission and vision states that, "We are a government-accredited non-profit organization, which provides diagnosis and therapy for children and adolescents with a disorder, as well as assistance for those around them."

To maintain this status, Accent has to carry out treatments for at least 92% of its 8,000 patient cases. By doing so, the center ensures sufficient funding to cover its salary and operational costs. Green equates to more than 92% of cases, orange to between 90 and 92%, and red to less than 90%.

On this basis, various indicators were defined to make the organization's mission and vision more tangible for its executive board. Previously, only financial and operational results had been discussed at this level.

4. Process

Competence policies were drafted and implemented step by step with consensus from all staff members.

4.1. **STEP 1:** Introduce competence policy checklist.



Using a checklist, an inventory was taken to determine whether the prerequisites had been met for implementing competence policies. Were sufficient time and money available? Were sufficient resources available? Were staff able and willing to make the change?

The following decisions were made based on the checklist:

- Additional work and time investment would have to be kept to an absolute minimum. The managing director would carry out all preparatory, planning, and organizational work.
- Accent is a small organization that didn't have the funds to hire an external consultant. At a board level, there was consensus for basing training policies on competences and investing extra money, if required.
- An internal survey revealed that the staff believed staffing levels to be adequate, that they had sufficient access to continuing professional education, and that they had sufficient resources and materials to do their jobs properly, e.g. therapy equipment.
- Nearly all staff members were highly educated, which meant that they were more willing to accept these changes and to cooperate with their implementation.

4.2. **STEP 2:** Inform executive board and staff members.



The executive board and staff members were informed about the competence policies and their purpose in two separate meetings. This included information about competences, core/role-related competences, competence management, KRAs, etc. Staff members were also informed about how policies would be implemented step by step and what would be expected of them.

4.3. **STEP 3:** Draft a mission and vision.



Independently of one another, the executive board and staff members each drafted its own version of Accent's mission and vision. Results were discussed in more detail by both groups during several meetings, resulting in a common, shared mission and vision. These are re-evaluated every year by staff members (during their appraisal interviews) and by the executive board during its annual review of Accent's operational performance.

4.4. **STEP 4:** Define core competences.



The managing director and staff members jointly defined the organization's core competences, guided by its mission and vision. They asked themselves the question, 'What is Accent better at than its competitors?' This revealed four core competences.

4.5. STEP 5: Draft a competence library.



An Accent *Competence Library* was compiled before drafting the specific competences for each role. The purpose was to harmonize the terms used within Accent to describe the various roles. Many companies and organizations openly publish their competence glossaries for general use. The managing director copy-and-pasted an initial selection, which were relevant to Accent's mission, vision, goals, and strategy. These competences and their corresponding definitions were examined and modified to suit Accent's particular needs. Ultimately, Accent's *Competence Library* was honed down to thirty-three competences split into four categories:

- 1 Professional
- 2 Organizational
- 3 Relational
- 4 Managerial

Professional Competences

1. Accuracy
2. Analytical ability
3. Creativity
4. Flexible behavior
5. Innovativeness/initiative
6. Integrity
7. Learning
8. Listening
9. Oral communication
10. Written communication
11. Judgment
12. Stress resistance
13. Cost awareness
14. Progress monitoring
15. External awareness
16. Vision

Organizational Competences

17. Decisiveness
18. Flexibility

19. Initiative
20. Quality focus
21. Commitment
22. Conviction
23. Planning/organization
24. Teamwork
25. Negotiation

Relational Competences

26. Reliability
27. Customer focus
28. Networking
29. Social awareness
30. Assertiveness

Managerial Competences

31. Direction
32. Coaching
33. Delegation

Each competence was detailed in terms of three discernibly different levels of behavior. Differences included aspects such as the extent of the behavior's impact, complexity, difficulty, effort, reactivity, proactivity, etc.

Example:

- Competence: Learning
- Definition: The ability to reflect on own traits and learning opportunities, and to work on personal and professional development, as well as that of the group as a whole. The ability to put new experiences into effective, practical use.
- Three Behavior Levels:
 - **Level 1:** Applies feedback and experiences in order to alter behavior
 - Inquisitive and willing to learn. Observes others and discusses tasks they find difficult with other staff members.
 - Asks for feedback about performance, listens actively, and probes further.
 - Translates feedback into concrete action with the help of the person giving the feedback.
 - Keeps up to date with developments in their field, reads relevant specialist literature, takes training courses.
 - **Level 2:** Seeks learning opportunities
 - Learns from mistakes and seeks new approaches. Directs own personal and professional development.
 - Examines personal performance/behavior, identifies personal strengths and weaknesses, and asks for feedback from other staff members.
 - Works on personal and professional development on an ongoing basis through self-study and training courses.
 - Puts professional developments into practice.

o **Level 3:** Reflects on and identifies personal blocks and opportunities to alter behavior

- Distances themselves from daily routine, acts inquisitively and with self-reflection in unfamiliar situations, asks questions, and admits to personal uncertainty.
- Shares experiences with and sets an example to others by admitting to and learning from mistakes.
- Reflects on personal experiences, identifies areas for improvement, and improves/alters behavior on subsequent occasions.
- Examines personal learning process and identifies learning strengths and weaknesses.

By identifying and defining competences in concrete terms, Accent aimed to avoid a situation in which each staff member would interpret competences in their own individual way. The selection and definition of these thirty-three competences were discussed in depth between all staff members with the aim of reaching consensus.



	Diagnosis	Rehabilitation	Parent Guidance	External Consultation	Reporting	Total
Accuracy	1	1		1	1	4
Analytical ability	1	1	1	1	1	5
Creativity					1	1
Flexibility	1	1		1	1	4
Innovativeness/initiative						0
Integrity			1			1
Learning	1	1	1	1	1	5
Listening	1	1				2
Oral communication	1	1	1	1		4
Written communication					1	1
Judgment	1	1				2
Stress resistance	1	1				2
Cost awareness						0

4.6. **STEP 6:** Select role-related competences.



Role-related competences were then selected from Accent's Competence Glossary with staff members from each department. The basic premise for this selection was a matrix of the department's core tasks versus Ascent's thirty-three core competences.

Each department discussed its matrix and assigned a score of '1' to each competence that everyone believed to be essential to performing a core task properly. Eight role-related competences were jointly selected. Next, the level, which someone should ideally reach in this role, was assigned to each role-related competence.

4.7. **STEP 7:** List technical competences.



Staff also requested that technical competences also be defined for certain roles, e.g. performing and interpreting certain tests and their results. During their studies, psychologists and speech/occupational/physical therapists are not always taught some of the specific technical competences required to work in children's rehabilitation centers. They often have to acquire or develop these competences on the job. Hence, an inventory needs to be kept up to date as their competence evolves.

4.8. **STEP 8:** Define KRAs and KPIs.



Accent is still outlining KRAs for each role and KPIs for the organization as a whole. In addition to its focus on developing competences, Accent also wanted to be able to measure results, make improvements, and adjust course, whenever necessary. The main KRAs and core tasks were defined for each role, so that the managing director could identify quantifiable parameters for each task. For example, Accent asks referrers and parents to complete questionnaires. KRAs and KPIs were also defined for the organization as a whole, which the executive board subsequently approved. This process is today still being refined on an ongoing basis.

5. HRM Domains

Competence profiles serve as a framework for appraisals and more effective training policies.

5.1. Recruitment, Selection, and Induction

Job descriptions and competence profiles are used as extensively as possible when announcing a job vacancy and selecting candidates.

"Selecting new staff used to involve studying relevant experience and references, combined with a fair degree of intuition. Nowadays, we address competences and if possible, actually measure technical proficiency levels. However, generally speaking, there's a shortage of job applicants in our sector. It isn't always possible to make a selection based on competences," explains Accent's managing director.

Job descriptions and competence profiles were also put to good use for new or interim staff member inductions. They've proved excellent tools for explaining staff tasks and clarifying exactly what's expected of them.

5.2. Staff Appraisals & Guidance

Every staff member has a personal appraisal every two years, whereby half the staff is appraised each year. The managing director conducts a performance review with each staff member results before the appraisal. During this review, staff members present the issues that they think are important. As often as not, they fall back on their competence profile.

Coworkers in the same role as the staff member being appraised are also involved in his/her appraisal. They individually appraise their coworkers in writing based on their competence profile. If coworker appraisals for any one staff member vary greatly, these are then discussed in the group until consensus is reached.

Performance reviews and coworker appraisals form the basis for the appraisal interview between the managing director and the staff member in question. Once again, the

competence profile forms the basis for this interview in which required proficiency levels are compared to actual levels. If the appraisal is positive, a follow-up is scheduled for a year later. If the appraisal is negative, a repeat appraisal interview is scheduled for a year later.

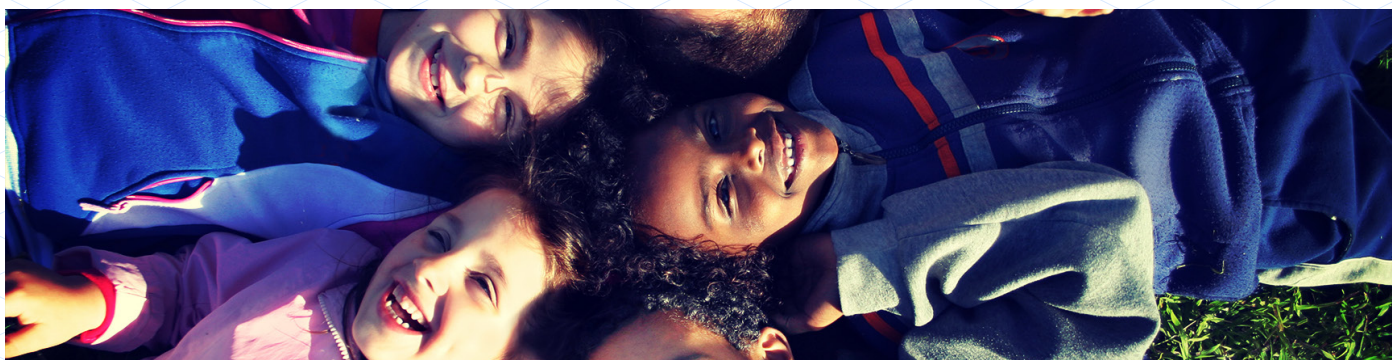
Initially, appraisals were only performed using competences, but later appraisals took account of both competences and KRAs.

5.3. Continuing Professional Education (CPE)

SWOT analyses made during appraisals provide a clear picture of staff members' training and continuing education requirements. Accent focuses initially on internal, informal training and education.

"Training doesn't have to be formal. First and foremost, it's important that staff members discern the need to develop a particular skill or competence for themselves, e.g. oral communication skills. Often, this self-awareness itself is enough to bring about the required improvement. Other times, staff can learn from one another," explains Accent's managing director.

Whenever an external training course is required, SWOT analyses again provide a far more effective means to making the right choice.



6. Social Dialog

Even Accent's managing director and the organization as a whole are appraised.

A balance was sought while drafting and implementing Accent's competence policies that would involve and inform its staff as fully as possible, without placing a time burden on them.

We also spotted several comments in Accent's competence policies from a local labor union official, responsible for the Kortrijk region, who had regular contact with the organization.

- Labor unions played a relatively minor role in the context of implementing Accent's competence policies, but its staff were nonetheless involved at every stage of the process. Accent didn't seek to inform labor unions about its competence policies, but willingly provided a lot of information at their request.
- Accent's staff responded positively to the new competence policies. Firstly, they were all closely involved in the process as a whole and secondly, they were generally all highly educated individuals.
- Competences can form an excellent basis for appraisal systems if staff fully accept and support their use in day-to-day operations, as was the case at Accent. Previously, appraisals at Accent had been highly subjective. Labor unions are not advocates of systems where staff members assess one another, because people often find it difficult or uncomfortable to assess their coworkers. However, at Accent, it seems to work well. It's a system in which even its managing director and the organization as a whole are appraised.

- Working with competences at Accent ensures that objectives are clear to everyone involved. Staff members are more aware of what they're doing well and what areas need improvement. This also entails that staff are better able to formulate their expectations.
- You need competent people to implement competence policies. This is a vital prerequisite for drafting effective competence policies.
- Get this right and you can expect some of the following benefits:
 - Staff have a better understanding of their own role, those of their coworkers, and the performance of their organization as a whole.
 - Communication within the organization improves.
 - Staff experience greater job satisfaction.
 - Companies and organizations have a better picture of the competences needed throughout the organization or within a team when recruiting new staff.
- The importance of competences and competence policies will continue to grow in the years ahead. Even companies are becoming increasingly aware of the need to implement competence policies. Companies also benefit from sound staff management policies, e.g. improved retention rates or internal reassignment. At several companies, training is even being provided for staff during periods of temporary unemployment. Labor unions hope that staff will also come to view competence policies as a tool for gaining greater awareness of their own competences and knowledge, and for directing their own continuing personal and professional development still further.

7. The Future of Accent's Competence Policies

The next step involves outlining and integrating KRAs.

Every year, Accent's competence policies themselves are also appraised during the reviews held between the managing director and those staff members being appraised that year. Accent's executive board members also appraise the system at one of its annual meetings.

The system has already been appraised by this group. Results were generally speaking positive. Appraisals are now more objective and relevant. Staff members now have the sense that appraisals are not only fairer, but that their outcome is more useful, e.g. identifying a relevant training course.

Accent's managing director noted the following, "By drafting the mission, vision, and competence profiles together, staff members are now far more aware of how they personally contribute towards achieving the organization's mission as a whole. KRAs and KPIs also play an important role. This doesn't only apply to staff carrying out the organization's core tasks, but also to our maintenance staff. Results from our parent satisfaction survey revealed that parents were particularly pleased with the cleanliness of our classrooms."

Even the executive board is now far more aware of what the rehabilitation center stands for and is more closely involved.

Several changes will still have to be made. These are minor changes, however. For example, first focusing on discussing positive points during appraisal interviews before moving on to areas for improvement. More work also needs to be carried out defining and integrating KRAs and KPIs for individual roles and the organization as a whole.

8. Factors for Success and Potential Pitfalls – According to Accent's Managing Director

Try to avoid over-emphasizing appraisals in communications about competence policies.

At the first information meeting about Accent's new competence policies, staff were told that this would be about changing the appraisal system. Because appraisals were a bone of contention, staff initially reacted suspiciously and negatively. The ultimate goal of implementing competence policies has to be clear to staff from the outset. It's also vital that management be actively involved in the entire process. At Accent, there's a competence profile and job description for each staff member, and everyone is appraised.

For small organizations and companies, such as Accent, time and money are often stumbling blocks preventing them from implementing competence policies. **A lot of information about these policies has already been made available by other companies and organizations. It's possible to re-use their information and tailor it to suit your own needs and requirements.** Ultimately, competence policies have to be put into practice, i.e. they're not something that just looks great on paper.

It's extremely important that staff members be actively involved in implementing these competence policies. Yet it's also critical that this doesn't become too great a burden for them. At Accent, the managing director took on most of the administrative and preparatory work himself. This included preliminary studies that involved a major time investment. Involving staff members in drafting Accent's mission, vision, and competence profiles ensured that they felt involved in the process of implementing its competence policies. Every decision was made by consensus.

Defining KRAs and KPIs for each role within Accent is and remains a weak spot. This is due to the cross-disciplinary nature of the work carried out at Accent. The outcome of a therapy is the result of several people's work. It cannot be attributed to any one person in particular.

Everyone needs to know what the organization's purpose is and how he or she fits in. This provides direction and ensures that staff members know what they have to do and why they have to do it. Implementing strategic competence policies is an excellent means to achieving this goal.

Interviewees

- Yvan Winne – Managing Director (Accent)
- Jelle D'Hont – former Secretary (ABVV Kortrijk)

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

from the Full SERV Publication

We've come to the following conclusions based on the information we gleaned from the eight case studies, as well as from information provided to SERV by the other ninety-seven companies and organizations:

1. Competence Policies: Not Limited by Size or Sector

The list of examples makes it clear that a structured approach to implementing competence policies doesn't depend on the size of your organization (expressed in terms of the no. of employees) or the sector in which it operates.

It includes examples from various industrial sectors such as automotive, construction, wood processing, clothing manufacturing, petrochemical, transportation, and food, as well as local government agencies, non-profit organizations, consultancy firms, etc. Companies of every size are also represented, ranging from small (<10 employees) to large (>500 employees).

A significant number of the examples reveal a sector-specific approach, whereby sectoral funds:

1. Give financial support for developing competences, but impose certain conditions, e.g. initiating a social dialog.
2. Help establish effective training programs, e.g. competence-centered management for team leaders.
3. Develop sector-specific tools for mapping competences.
4. Provide frameworks within which competence policies can be developed.

1

CONCLUSION 1

Competence policies are clearly of generic appeal, applicable to all sizes of organization and across all sectors. The way in which competence policies are implemented is partly dependent on the target group, the roles involved, and the size of the organization. This broad spectrum also dictated our choice of detailed case studies.

2. Why Companies Opt to Implement Competence Policies

Events and/or changes are generally what prompt companies to develop and implement structured competence policies. Sometimes, this is a seemingly unrelated event, e.g. a need to draft a company diversity plan, or an personnel manager/staff member who recently attended an HRM policy workshop. Other times, it's spurred by far-reaching technological or organizational upheavals within the company, that could lead to existing competences being lost, if staff left, or making certain competences superfluous. This is why knowledge needs to safeguarded.

A sudden growth in production and/or personnel levels also prompt companies to take a closer look at their competence policies. Improving staff motivation is often another reason why companies start tinkering with competences. In other cases, demands for better and more specific training from staff themselves and/or labor unions force the issue. Sometimes, external factors prompt companies to consider implementing competence policies, e.g. new legislation imposing higher levels of safety or hygiene, labor market shortages, external audits, new sector-specific training agreements, etc. Or as often as not, a combination of the above.

The desire to achieve greater levels of efficiency, quality, and customer focus is also a factor in many of the examples given. This can be achieved by paying closer attention to staff's personal and professional development.

2

CONCLUSION 2

Acknowledging the importance of developing competence policies in a structured fashion is in many cases the result of a real need or upheaval. Introducing such policies is rarely the result of an impulse based on some abstract or theoretical insight. The need generally always arises from practical situations.

The eight case studies and other examples also revealed a belief that implementing competence policies would contribute to achieving the company or organization's objectives, e.g. greater efficiency, or improved product or service quality levels.

Once the decision has been made to develop competence policies, defining these these objectives is then the following step.

3. Competence Policy Objectives – From Modest Pilot Project to All-Encompassing and Ambitious

When reading the case studies, it was noticeable how competence policy objectives affected virtually every part of the company's operations.

The main objective was generally to improve operational or organizational quality levels by developing and implementing competences. However, objectives were quite specific when it came to improving recruitment policies (i.e. attracting the right competences), scheduling personalized training programs, refining appraisal techniques, or motivating staff (e.g. providing greater working autonomy). The impact of implementing competence policies varies greatly, and is far from restricted to traditional forms of training.

It was also striking just how ambitious some objectives were. Often as not, even larger companies and organizations aimed to involve all staff members at every hierarchical level. In doing so, they were setting the bar extremely high for themselves. Yet even where objectives related to a specific target group or department, there was generally a very clear and logical argument or reason for doing so, rarely if ever on a whim or due to a lack of ambition. In one case study, initial objectives focused on the company's core tasks and in another, its senior management, but in both cases these were stepping stones to expanding policies to other departments or staff groups at a later stage.

Obviously, this wasn't the case in all the examples given. Many started by adopting a project-based approach and introducing competence-based working practices and/or limiting themselves to a single aspect of competence policies. It was noticeable how popular it was to draft and introduce competence profiles, to adopt a project-based approach to competence development, and to implement performance reviews as a means to gaining keener insights into what was happening at a grass-root level – either at an individual level or at a process improvement level. In some sectors where staff are rarely present on site, competence policies served as a means to create a stronger bond between staff and company, or between staff members themselves.

It's also worth noting how companies and organizations referred to their staff. In the examples given, they all aimed to be appealing employers to work for. Their staff were their foremost assets. Discussions and communications about implementing competence policies ensured that their staff's experiences were used as important, practical input for ensuing decision-making. This is why competence-based working has such an effect on company culture. Staff training and development is being professionalized, but staff are also expected to take responsibility and ownership themselves. Encouraging staff to learn from one another and to utilize the expertise already available also fosters mutual appreciation.

It's perhaps no great surprise that in several of the examples a link existed to the company's diversity and CSR policies. Age-awareness can be an important consideration in many cases, e.g. providing a proper induction for new staff members and introducing new approaches for keeping experienced employees motivated. Appointing older or more experienced staff as mentors to new or younger coworkers was just one of several approaches taken. The use of competence profiles also makes recruitment and selection procedures more objective, which in turn improves new opportunities for certain groups who often have challenges entering the workforce.

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CONCLUSION 3

Structured introduction of competence policies had a far-ranging impact, especially in the case studies discussed. In virtually every example, this automatically resulted in ambitious objectives being set for the entire organization. It did not however result in objectives being any less concrete. Remaining examples showed a more nuanced approach, starting with small-scale projects for a select group of employees and selected HRM policies.

Once objectives had been formulated and approved, it was then critical to initiate the process and get things rolling.

4. From Objectives to Results – An Intense Process

Garnering support and commitment from all members of staff when introducing competence policies is far from a foregone conclusion.

It needs a project-based and systematic approach. The case studies illustrate this point particularly well. It involves using tools and defining frameworks around which you can develop competence policies in a broader sense, e.g. conducting staff surveys to examine the current and required company culture, setting up programs to train managers to conduct appraisal interviews and performance reviews, outlining new job classification systems, analyzing whether the organization meets all the prerequisites for implementing competence policies, drafting the company's mission and vision, etc.

In many cases, these initiatives resulted in a systematic inventory of existing competences being taken and competence profiles being drafted. But this isn't where it stopped. The examples in which competences were acquired and validated are particularly noteworthy. Certifying competences proved to be beneficial to companies operating in an international arena, regardless of whether this actually improved safety levels.

Ultimately, all staff members get involved in the process in one way or another – albeit one step at a time. The involvement of the HRM department or head of personnel is generally a given. It's important that frameworks are sufficiently resilient, because as often as not well-structured competence policies take a long time to set up. It's important frameworks are resilient because as often as not well-structured competence policies take a long time to set up. Staff have to remain committed for the long haul.

Besides direct forms of staff commitment, formal channels also exist between senior management, works councils, labor unions (in organizations with more than fifty employees). Case studies revealed that labor unions are often inclined to be reticent in the early stages. Nor are competence policies merely an agenda item for the works council. Labor union concerns often revolve around procedural transparency and fairness, e.g. appraisals, staff participation, rights to appeal in event of a dispute, access for all to new training opportunities, etc. Unions play a more active and supportive role, the better management keeps them informed and the more positive the feedback they receive from staff about the how competence policies are being implemented.

CONCLUSION 4

Developing and implementing competence policies demands a systematic approach that often starts with one area of HRM policy and then expands to others. This process takes time, sometimes a lot of time, and its intensity doesn't remain at the same level throughout. This is why it involves implementing robust frameworks that closely involve staff and establish an open relationship with them and their representatives, where relevant.



5. A Complete Toolkit

The complete toolkit containing all the tools and techniques for developing or implementing competence policies is vast. Here are just a few of the tools or techniques taken from the case studies and examples given:

- staff surveys
- competence profiles & job descriptions
- appraisal forms
- personal action plans
- 360° feedback tools
- educational tools
- competence glossaries
- training folders
- work area instruction cards
- knowledge matrices
- employability matrices
- etc.

Depending on the objectives set, as well as company culture, it's important to select the right tools for the right job. They should allow for objectivity without neglecting the need for customization. This is often easier said than done.

The way in which tools were used and the intensity of their use varied greatly. Some organizations limited their use, others opted for intensive use of multiple tools. For example, it's clear that core tasks and responsibilities for packaging line workers need to be examined and defined very differently than those for health care workers in a rehabilitation center.

Smaller businesses and organizations called on the expertise of external HRM professionals more frequently than expected, either to assist with projects and processes or to coach individual staff members.

CONCLUSION 5

Implementing structured competence policies entails gaining proper insights into both existing and required proficiency levels. Companies and organizations either used or developed tools that satisfied their own particular needs or characteristics. What is important, however, is the realization that these tools are merely a means to an end, not an end in itself.

6. Learning from One Another – Practical Tips

The case studies and other examples highlighted several points that should be borne in mind by organizations considering competence policies.

Both employee representation and management stressed the following points:

- Developing and implementing competence policies takes time. Prepare for the long haul, but don't forget that it'll be worth all the effort in the long run.
- Target a small group for each new initiative. Learn from your experiences before rolling out initiatives to the entire workforce. Do not underestimate the importance of line managers' roles in this respect.
- Communicate plans and initiatives clearly and concisely to all staff members.
- Keep it sweet and simple (KISS). Avoid administrative red tape and only use tools where they'll actually contribute towards achieving your objectives.
- Avoid developing competence policies based on a need to appraise personal performance levels.
- Use actual work situations as a basis.
- Call on external expertise if needed, as it can provide objectivity and motivation, but capitalize fully on the expertise that already exists within the company or organization. This also serves as a sign of appreciation.
- Involve every hierarchical level and all staff members affected by your competence policies.
- Ensure you have sufficient budget and resources. Implementing competence policies costs money!
- Distance yourself every so often and take an objective look at what you're doing and adjust course, if necessary.
- Start with a positive message, e.g. a means to greater motivation, increased job satisfaction, or more professional development opportunities.
- Competence policies are never complete. They form part of an organic and dynamic process that evolves over time together with the organization itself.

In several case studies, we identified several points formulated by the companies' labor union representatives:

- The process of implementing competence policies was experienced as being extremely positive.
- This was partly attributable to transparent and correct procedures being used throughout and the results achieved, e.g. greater staff commitment, improved induction procedures, more training opportunities, better feedback mechanisms for staff about managers' competences, etc.
- Critical aspects included a focus on maintaining objectivity in appraisals, not restricting recruitment and selection procedures to a mere competence-screening process, not linking competences to any form of remuneration or reward, and also including management competences.
- It was not so much which system, but how this system was being implemented, that was important.

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CONCLUSION 6

Organizations looking to implement their own competence policies can learn a lot from other companies and organizations' experiences, in terms of both inspiration and practical information. This can save a lot of time, money, and effort in the long run.

Interview with Yvan Winne

Status Update 2016



It's now 2016 and it's already been several years since Accent implemented its competence policies – reason enough to get in touch with its managing director, Yvan Winne, to inquire how far his organization and its competence policies has come.

I was curious whether the focus had lessened or intensified in the meantime. His response was incredibly positive.

"It's 2016 and our competence policies now form an integral part of our organization. They're part of our DNA. We're still improving the system by means of constant evaluation. For example, we often improve or amend our competence profiles, whenever needed. They're simply part of the way we work now. When we embarked on this course back in 2010, it was completely uncharted territory for us. It was at the top of every meeting agenda. Nowadays, competence policies are fully ingrained and are at the heart of our HRM strategy."

"Have there recently been any major changes or effects that have had an impact on your competence policies?" I then asked.

"Definitely, our target group has changed enormously, which means we needed to acquire and develop new skills and knowledge. Previously, 80% of children had some form of general developmental challenge; this group currently only accounts for 10%. The focus has shifted predominantly to children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) Our organization has therefore undergone a radical shift in knowledge and expertise.

Luckily, our competence policies helped us deal with this without too much effort, because we already knew which competences and technical skills our staff had. We simply compared these to the newly developed profiles and saw immediately that we only had to brush up on a few technical skills. Competences matched new knowledge requirements perfectly. And best of all, we coped with this change without losing any staff."

I mentioned to Yvan that I'd been given virtually the same answer at ETAP Lighting. They too had undergone a radical shift in skills and knowledge, and were glad they had their competence policies in place.

The lesson to be learned here is that a competence-based HRM strategy would appear to put organizations in an extremely strong position, when it comes to dealing with change. These days, the flexibility it provides them in terms of being able to manage and adapt skills and knowledge quickly and easily has virtually become a prerequisite for all companies.

Three Tips for Beginners

Yvan had the following three tips for organizations venturing into the world of competence policies as the basis for their HRM strategy,

- 1 "Involve your staff in the entire process! This is essential for successful implementation. We developed all our policies and tools in consensus with all staff members. I'm convinced this was the key to our success!"
- 2 "Communication! This may sound obvious, but it's crucial to keep communicating properly throughout the entire process. Above all, make the new competence policy's objectives clear from the outset. Be transparent about this and include your staff."
- 3 "It's a process of give and take for all concerned. For example, decisions were made at certain points in the process that I personally did not fully agree with. This is of course a natural consequence of making decisions by consensus. But more importantly, I did not override these decisions as Accent's managing director. It's sometimes challenging, but I'm convinced doing things on an equal footing is the right approach."

In response to my last question, **how he had succeeded in integrating competence policies into his organization on a fairly limited budget**, he stated that he had gathered a lot of information online, as well as from other companies with previous competence policy-making experience.

"Put it this way... you don't have to reinvent the wheel. I took a lot of existing information and tools, and adapted them to our specific situation and requirements."

He also made a reference to something one of his mentors had said to him while he was graduating from university,

"Concentrate on the resources that you already have, not on what you don't have."

I think his approach is particularly inspiring to anyone planning on venturing into the world of competence management. It once again demonstrates that the commonly heard objection,

"I don't have the resources to implement competence policies" simply isn't an argument for not starting.

Our thanks to Yvan for sharing his experiences!



Having read all this practical information, wouldn't you like a clear and concise explanation about how to get off to a flying start with competence management?

Take a look at our white paper!

Competence Management at the Heart of Your HRM Policies



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