

BEYOND DUTIES

EMBEDDING CORE VALUES
AND COMPETENCIES IN JOB
DESCRIPTIONS





Beth Hatch / bhatch@ualibrary.org

Beth is Director, Upper Arlington (OH) Public Library.

📖 Beth is currently reading *Dare to Lead*, by Brene Brown.



Mark Fiala / markfiala@oahumanresources.com

Mark is President, Organizational Architecture, Inc.

📖 Mark is currently reading *Visiting Mrs. Nabokov*, by Martin Amis.

Creating effective job descriptions is more than just listing responsibilities and qualifications. To build a strong workforce and a thriving organizational culture, organizations must go beyond defining what a job entails and focus on how it should be performed. This means incorporating competencies and core values into job descriptions, ensuring that employees not only complete their tasks but also demonstrate behaviors and attitudes that align with the organization's mission.

This approach is especially critical for supervisors and managers, as their leadership shapes team dynamics and organizational success. By clearly defining the competencies required for a role, organizations can improve hiring decisions, enhance employee development, and set clear performance expectations.

Competency Categories

Using a framework developed and used by the Society for Human Resource Management,¹ competencies are comprised of two categories:

Technical Competencies

These reflect the specific knowledge required for a particular role. For example, the Ohio Library Council² has identified technical competencies such as Acquisition, Cataloging and Metadata, Patron Awareness, and others, as necessary for one to perform the specific technical aspects of a given job. Technical competencies are usually role-specific; not all technical competencies apply to all roles.

Behavioral Competencies

These describe the traits and behaviors deemed critical to doing the job in accordance with the organization's values. Again, using the Ohio Library Council's

model examples include Adaptability, Communication, Customer Service, Innovation, Leadership, etc. Behavioral competencies can be role-specific or apply to all jobs.

When competencies are not integrated into job descriptions or when expectations are set, the emphasis on getting things done irrespective of how it gets done can lead to a lot of collateral damage to the organization. The salesperson who exceeds their goals at the expense of collaboration with their internal teams and the customers often leads to low customer retention rates. The autocratic executive who rules by fear, even if they meet the letter of their job duties, leaves nothing but stress and disharmony, and increases turnover, lowers performance, and undermines the culture. If you're new to working with competencies, begin by grounding them in your library's strategic plan and core values.

Defining Your Core Values

To strengthen our workplace culture and align our mission with the right employees, the Upper Arlington (OH) Public Library (UAPL) embraced the "Building a Culture of Distinction" framework.³ Through this initiative, we identified our intrinsic values, ensuring they align with our mission and guide our recruitment, staff development, and daily operations. This approach allows us to attract and retain individuals who share our commitment to excellence and service.

Our core competencies are:

Respect: We create a friendly, inclusive, and professional workplace where contributions are valued, differences are respected, and staff have the resources they need.

Positivity: We maintain a can-do attitude, embrace change, and seek proactive solutions to challenges.

Collaboration: We share ideas, support each other, and work together to meet community needs.

Communication: We prioritize timely, honest, and clear communication, actively listening, and providing constructive feedback.

Accountability: Staff receive clear guidance on expectations and goals and are held responsible for results.

Adaptability: We continuously adjust our services and spaces to meet evolving community needs.

The Role of Competencies in Job Descriptions

Competencies refer to the skills, behaviors, and attributes required to perform a job effectively. While traditional job descriptions focus on job duties and qualifications, a competency-based approach ensures that employees also exhibit the right workplace behaviors to be successful.

UAPL defined a list of core competencies and uses them for job descriptions, job postings, and interview questions. Examples of some of our foundation core competencies include accountability, conflict management, customer focus, dealing with ambiguity, interpersonal savvy, managerial courage, motivating others, peer relationships, problem solving, and understanding others.

Having the same behavioral competencies for everyone makes it easier to communicate them, develop standards or expectations around them, and differentiate how the employee is demonstrating them.

Key Benefits of a Competency-Based Approach

Emphasizing competencies in job descriptions helps organizations in several ways:

At UAPL, our interview questions align with core competencies, emphasizing behavioral metrics. We ask candidates to share examples of past decisions and what they learned (accountability/decision quality), describe experiences working with individuals with differing perspectives (peer relationships), and explain how they developed an idea and persuaded others to support it (motivating others).

Benefit	For staff	For managers
Clarifies performance expectations	Employees understand not just what they need to do, but how they are expected to perform their job.	Managers learn to reinforce the culture and articulate that achievement is measured both in terms of how it gets done and what gets done.
Enhances hiring, selection, and retention	Candidates and staff know what you value, and if it aligns with their values.	Recruiters and hiring managers can assess candidates for behavioral fit, not just qualifications and experience.
Improves performance management	Staff who understand and demonstrate the appropriate behaviors and are aligned with the organization are more productive and effective.	Competencies provide measurable criteria for evaluating employee performance, guiding professional development.
Strengthens organizational culture	Staff know what to expect, develop trust, and see alignment between what is said and what is done.	When job descriptions highlight competencies aligned with organizational values, they help reinforce a shared workplace culture.
Supports career development and succession planning	Clearly defined competencies allow employees to progress within the organization, offering a roadmap for professional growth.	It also helps the organization prioritize its training and development resources by focusing on what behaviors need to be enhanced across the organization.

Defining Competencies in Job Descriptions

For competencies to be meaningful in job descriptions, they must be clearly defined and aligned with the role. It is not sufficient to simply state ‘communication’ and leave it at that. The competency needs to be clearly described in terms of what it means in your organization. This may necessitate a separate guide or policy that can be linked or referenced to the job description.

A well-defined competency should include:

- A description of the behavior or skill: What the competency means in a workplace context.
- Practical examples: How the competency is demonstrated in day-to-day responsibilities.

- Proficiency levels: How expectations differ depending on job level or seniority.

For example, if communication is one of your competencies:

- A frontline employee may be expected to effectively relay information to customers and colleagues.
- A supervisor may need to facilitate team discussions and communicate organization policies clearly.
- A senior executive may be required to deliver compelling presentations to stakeholders and represent the organization publicly.

Selecting the Right Competencies

An organization's core values, mission, and vision serve as a strong foundation for identifying the competencies most essential for success. Core values define the guiding principles that shape organizational culture and decision-making, while the mission outlines the organization's purpose, and the vision sets its long-term aspirations.

For example, UAPL provides diverse collections, engaging programs, accessible technology, inviting spaces, and user-friendly services while fostering positive interactions and adapting to community needs. To live these values, we need staff who are collaborative, positive, innovative, adaptable, and people-oriented.

Other places you can look to as a starting point for determining what competencies to use for your library include:

- Your state library
- Your state library association
- Role-specific professional associations such as Society for Human Resource Management, Government Finance Officers Association, Association of Public Treasurers, etc.
- American Library Association⁴

You can also use this as an opportunity for team-building and leadership development. It's easy to create surveys that gather input from staff and managers on the behaviors they consider most important in your library. During staff development days or your management team meetings, you can facilitate focus groups to learn more about what is important to them. Soliciting feedback from your Trustees or when collecting community input during strategic planning are other ways of informing your process to identify competencies, especially the behavioral ones.

By aligning competencies with these foundational elements, organizations ensure that employees not only possess the necessary technical skills but also demonstrate behaviors that reflect the organization's identity and strategic goals. For

example, an organization that prioritizes customer satisfaction in its mission may emphasize customer service and problem-solving as key competencies, while an organization focused on innovation might prioritize adaptability and strategic thinking. When competencies are directly tied to these organizational pillars, they help cultivate a workforce that actively contributes to the organization's long-term success while reinforcing a strong, unified culture. While there are numerous competencies that can be included in job descriptions, organizations should prioritize the most relevant ones.

Common workplace competencies include:

- **Adaptability:** The capability to adjust to changing circumstances and remain effective in dynamic environments.
- **Communication:** The ability to convey information effectively to different audiences.
- **Customer service:** The ability to understand and meet the needs of customers by providing timely, professional, and high-quality service.
- **Leadership:** The ability to inspire and guide teams toward achieving organizational objectives.
- **Planning and execution:** The ability to set clear objectives, develop actionable plans, and efficiently manage resources to achieve goals.
- **Problem-Solving:** The capacity to analyze situations and develop effective solutions.
- **Teamwork:** The ability to collaborate effectively with others to achieve common goals.

In the case of the Leadership competency, you may decide that it is only applicable to those who directly supervise employees, or you can include it for everyone with the implication that anyone has an opportunity to demonstrate leadership, whether they supervise or not. For example, even if a person does not directly supervise people, they can still informally influence others by role modeling the core competencies, volunteering to lead task forces, or seeking ways to improve processes.

If you are just getting started using competencies, start with a few like the list above. Eight to ten

is an optimal number. Once there is a clear understanding of what the competencies look like in your organization, adding two to three additional ones can foster additional organizational development.

Some organizations have six to eight competencies for all staff, and an additional three to four that apply to managers because of the unique responsibilities managers have for leading change, interacting with external stakeholders, or demonstrating tact and political savvy.

Differentiating Proficiency Levels in Competencies

To ensure that competency expectations are appropriately scaled for different job levels, organizations should define proficiency levels. This helps set clear expectations for employees and provides a structured approach to career progression.

Basic [Entry-Level Proficiency]

- Understands the competency conceptually.
- Applies it in routine situations with supervision.
- Requires guidance and training to develop further.

Intermediate [Fully Competent]

- Applies the competency independently in various situations.
- Can troubleshoot problems and adjust approach as needed.
- Can coach or train others in this competency at a foundational level.

Advanced [Expert-Level Proficiency]

- Demonstrates mastery and innovation in applying the competency.
- Can develop strategies, solve complex challenges, and lead teams.
- Serves as a mentor or subject-matter expert.

For example, if “problem-solving” is a competency:

- **Basic Level:** Identifies routine problems and follows established procedures to resolve them.
- **Intermediate Level:** Analyzes problems, proposes innovative solutions, and makes independent decisions.
- **Advanced Level:** Leads high-level problem-solving initiatives, anticipates challenges, and drives organizational improvements.

Avoid the tendency to rate people at the highest level simply because they are performing adequately, and not exceptionally. Try to accurately assess the level of competence so that you can hire, coach, and provide feedback effectively. Don't be surprised if getting supervisors to assess people accurately takes time to properly calibrate. We know that managers sometimes conflate compliance or ‘doing the job’ as being the same as superior performance. We live in a world in which it is constantly reinforced to rate things ‘five stars out of five’ or strive towards one hundred percent/A-plus in school-based grading systems. Our experience has shown it can take several years for managers to become comfortable rating people accurately. Explaining the intent behind accurate performance and competency ratings in terms of what and how expectations are met or exceeded makes helping employees get the help they need to grow more effective.

Implementing a Competency-Based Approach

To integrate competencies effectively into job descriptions and workplace processes, organizations should follow these steps:

- Identify key competencies.
- Engage department heads and team leaders to define the most relevant competencies.
- Align competencies with organization's goals and culture.
- Incorporate competencies into job descriptions.
- Include a competency section in each job description.

- Indicate where to find more information on the competency and how it looks in your organization. To prevent your job descriptions from getting too bloated and wordy, simply state the name of the competency and reference where to find more details on it such as in your job description policy or guide.
- Use competencies in performance management.
- Align performance reviews with competency expectations.
- Provide employees with feedback based on how they demonstrate competencies in their work.
- Train Hiring Managers and HR teams.
- Educate recruiters on assessing competencies during interviews.
- Train managers on coaching and developing employees based on competency levels.
- Support employee development.
- Offer training programs that help employees develop key competencies.

Integrating competencies and core values into job descriptions is a strategic approach that enhances hiring, performance management, and employee development. By defining how work should be done, not just what needs to be done, organizations create clear expectations, improve cultural alignment, and support employee growth.

Differentiating proficiency levels ensures that competencies remain relevant across different job levels, helping employees progress in their careers while meeting organizational needs. Organizations that adopt a competency-based approach to job descriptions build stronger teams, drive performance, and create a workplace culture that thrives on shared values and behaviors. By taking the time to refine job descriptions with competencies and clear behavioral expectations, organizations position themselves for long-term success in attracting, retaining, and developing top talent.

After UAPL defined the key competencies, we set out to incorporate those competencies in performance evaluations, and trained managers on three main areas: our culture and values and how to live them (Building a Culture of Distinction);

appreciative and generative inquiry (Conversations Worth Having) and change management (Managing Transitions).

Refining Competencies Over Time

Successfully embedding competencies into job descriptions requires continuous refinement to ensure they remain relevant, measurable, and reflective of organizational needs. To refine competencies effectively over time, organizations should follow these key steps:

1. Regularly Review Strategic Alignment

Competencies must consistently align with the organization's evolving strategic goals and core values. Regular reviews, ideally conducted annually or in conjunction with strategic planning processes, ensure competencies remain relevant and effectively drive desired behaviors and outcomes.

2. Solicit Stakeholder Feedback

Organizations should proactively engage employees, managers, and stakeholders to gather insights into the practical application of competencies. Surveys, focus groups, and structured interviews can reveal which competencies are impactful, which need adjustments, and any emerging competencies critical for future success. Engaging diverse groups, including frontline staff, managers, and trustees, ensures comprehensive and balanced perspectives.

3. Monitor and Evaluate Competency Application

Implementing clear metrics to assess competency effectiveness allows organizations to track their practical impact. Performance appraisals should explicitly reference competencies, enabling managers to identify patterns, strengths, and development needs. Collecting and analyzing this data provides a foundation for refining competency descriptions and proficiency levels.

4. Adapt Proficiency Levels

Competency proficiency levels—basic, intermediate, and advanced—must accurately reflect job requirements and employee capabilities. Over time, these levels should be reviewed and adjusted to account for changes in role complexity, technological advancements, or organizational priorities. Organizations should regularly recalibrate expectations, ensuring clarity and consistency across all roles.

5. Integrate Competencies into Professional Development

Professional development programs must evolve alongside competencies. Organizations should regularly update training offerings to address identified skill gaps and align training opportunities with the competencies most critical to organizational success. Tailored coaching, workshops, and mentoring programs further reinforce competency development and help employees achieve proficiency milestones.

6. Facilitate Managerial Calibration

Given the tendency of managers to conflate adequate performance with exceptional performance, ongoing training and calibration sessions are necessary. Organizations should provide regular manager training focused on accurately assessing competencies. Calibration meetings help managers consistently apply competency criteria across teams, enhancing objectivity and fairness in performance evaluations.

Competency-based job descriptions are not static documents; their effectiveness hinges on ongoing evaluation, adaptation, and refinement. Organizations that embrace a competency-based approach must remain agile, consistently aligning competencies with strategic objectives, soliciting stakeholder feedback, and recalibrating proficiency levels. By embedding competencies deeply into recruitment, performance management, and professional development processes, organizations foster clarity, reinforce culture, and enhance employee engagement. This iterative approach ensures that job

descriptions remain powerful tools for attracting, developing, and retaining talent capable of driving sustained organizational success. [PL](#)

References

1. Society for Human Resource Management. 2014. The SHRM Body of Competency and Knowledge. Alexandria, Virginia: Society for Human Resource Management.
2. The Ohio Library Council. 2016. Ohio Public Library Core Competencies. Dublin, Ohio: The Ohio Library Council.
3. Margolis, Sheila. 2010. Building a Culture of Distinction. Atlanta, Georgia: Workplace Culture Institute LLC.
4. American Library Association. 2023. ALA's Core Competencies of Librarianship. Chicago, Illinois: American Library Association.

