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Enhancing Workplace Learning and Performance by Adopting Skills Framework

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Introduction

Enterprises have long been enthusiastic in search of methodologies and resources to build a sustainable learning and performance culture at the workplace. While performance is inherently expected, a workplace is a place of work; it is not necessarily thought of as a place for learning. Yet sustainable work performance cannot be achieved unless there is learning out of the work.

In order to build an effective learning and performance culture, there must be first be alignment and clarity throughout the organisation - "to learn X to perform Y standard to achieve Z." Where there is no target, no performance expectations, there is no need for clarity of skill needs.

HRM and HRD managers would know very well first-hand the difficult task of developing, from scratch, performance and competency standards for learning and performance purposes. The development process requires technical and domain expertise that often resides with the line function managers, who usually have other work priorities to compete for time. Even when a competency framework has been developed, to keep it up-to-date requires a lot of organisational resources. Often, the document is considered outdated even before the performance and learning processes it intends to support can be fully developed and mature in practice.

The national effort of helping industries to develop and sustain a Skills Framework at the industry level, by the users and for the users, has helped individual enterprises alleviate the long gestation period for developing a viable, credible and practical competency framework to apply to the workplace.

While the Skills Framework for the various industries is only at its infancy stage (version 1.0), more enterprises are seeing the benefits of its use. They have begun to adopt them in their HR processes throughout the employee life cycle, from talent attraction through to retention, such as job grade structures, recruitment and selection, performance management, learning and development. As the Skills Framework enhances over time, through industry feedback, the advantages for enterprises adopting it will most certainly increase.

As with any adoption of new practices, adopting the Skills Framework requires careful attention to details, to make it a success within the unique idiosyncratic cultures of each enterprise. This paper will share three actual case studies of enterprise early adopters; the area of human resource practices for which Skills Framework had been incorporated; how it was done; the implementation challenges and insights from the front line.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Developing a Job Grade Structure for Career Development and Equitable Compensation

Background

An oil seal manufacturer with about 200 employees was seeking to review their job grade structure. The company has been operating in Singapore for over 40 years and has several loyal and long service employees among them. Jobs within the company ranges from tooling inspectors, mould

makers, machinists, cam programmers, storekeepers, drivers, packers, technicians and engineers among the workforce. The company's previous job grade structure consisted of 12 grades covering all job roles from store assistants to directors in two tracks – General Management and Technical & Engineering.

Employees have been compensated based on their performance appraisal result. However, when an employee reaches the maximum of the salary scale, among all other HR practices to manage such situation, a common practice is to automatically promote the employee into the next higher grade to avoid resentment and decrease in motivation. The promotion did not require the employee to take on higher responsibilities or to acquire new skill sets.

Over time, while there was stability in the workforce and retention of institutional knowledge, the company was operating at a comparatively higher wage cost. The lack of new skills requirements for the promotion implied that there was no increase in capabilities that commensurate with the increase in wages. Because of long tenures, the enterprise was also challenged with a bottleneck in the progression pathways especially for the Technical & Engineering track.

Therefore, the directors of the enterprise hoped to review its job grade structure in order to:

- Provide a career pathway for its engineers
- Differentiate job roles and skills requirements for each job grade
- Provide clarity in criteria for promotion

Adopting Skills Framework

A job grade structure consists of a sequence or hierarchy of grades, bands or levels into which groups of jobs that are broadly comparable in size are placed. It is often developed primarily for the purpose of establishing equitable compensation where jobs of similar job size will be paid in a similar salary range. The primary determinant of a job size is the roles and responsibilities of the job. As a result, job analysis is often carried out, where job roles and responsibilities data are collected. The job analyst will identify the compensable factors and conduct a job evaluation to establish the relative job values for each job. In turn, the jobs will be placed in a hierarchy of grades based on the respective job values to establish a job grade structure. The job grade structure will provide clarity to the progression pathways of a job family, also facilitating equitable compensable amount to be established. The clarity of roles and responsibilities will also give a clear indication of the skills requirements for the job. By developing a job grade structure, the company directors' objectives will be met.

While the aspiration and objectives of the management was to establish a graded job structure, they were not able to commit extensive resources into the project, particularly in the carrying out of job analysis and evaluation. This presented the HR manager with a challenge to develop a credible job grade structure with minimal resources.

A job evaluation tool of 6 levels was created using the 4 general Descriptors of Technical Skills and Competencies (see Table 1). Managers and Heads of Department used the tool to evaluate each job based on the 4 descriptors to establish the job value.

GENERAL DESCRIPTORS	DESCRIPTION
RESPONSIBILITY	Degree of supervision and accountability
AUTONOMY	Degree of decision-making
COMPLEXITY	Degree of difficulty of situations and tasks
KNOWLEDGE AND ABILITIES	Required to support work as described under responsibility, autonomy and complexity

Table 1: General Descriptors of Technical Skills and Competencies (TSC)

The HR team was then introduced to the career maps from the Skills Framework for Electronics, Logistics and Precision Engineering, which contained the most relevant job titles as compared to the job titles in the company.

The career maps were referenced to create an alignment between company job titles with the job titles found in the Skills Frameworks. Table 2 illustrates some examples of the job titles that were mapped as part of the alignment exercise.

Job Grade	Company Job Title	Skills Framework Job Titles (Electronics (E) / Precision Engineering (PE) / Logistics (L))
11	Engineer III	Engineer (E & PE) Master Craftsman (PE)
10	Engineer II	Engineer (E & PE) Master Craftsman (PE)
9	Associate Engineer	Associate Engineer (E) Assistant Engineer (E & PE)
8	Team Leader Technician Senior Mould Maker	Technician (E) Process Specialist (PE) Group / Team Leader (PE)

Table 2: A Section of Alignment between Company Job Title and Skills Framework Titles

The alignment was conducted with reference to the Critical Work Functions and Key Tasks descriptors for each job title such that it matched as closely as possible to the roles and responsibilities of the incumbent.

Once the alignment was completed, the Technical Skills and Competencies (TSC) and the Generic Skills and Competencies (GSC) are used to identify the skills required for the job. The result of this exercise provided a more detailed description of criteria for career development and promotion.

As a result of using the Skills Framework, the HR team was able to rationalise and update the current job grade structure. The current 12 grades were expanded to about 18 grades with possible career progression pathways and criteria for development and promotion being developed as guidelines.

From the development point of view, the management objectives of providing a career pathway for its engineers, differentiating job roles and skills requirements for each job grade and providing clarity in the criteria for promotion have been achieved. The wealth of information provided by the Skills Framework has also eased the development challenge of the HR team.

Application Insights from the Frontline

While the Skills Framework can serve as a good reference and basis to build an enterprise's job grade structure, the following insights / challenges were identified:

- It was difficult to review each of the Skills Framework currently on the website. The current website design serves more as a depository site of all the industry frameworks. It did not allow for key word search across documents within an industry's skills framework or across different industries' documents. This created a search fatigue situation where the user had to open one file at a time to review its relevance.

- Enterprises' organisation charts can look very different from how the career maps look like. Further training needs to be provided to differentiate between the two so that users are able to reconcile the career map with their own organisation chart.

- It is natural for users of the Skills Framework to assume it reflects the market practice and thus there should be more similarities than differences compared to their own organisation's job roles and responsibilities. Users need to be mindful of not succumbing to such assumptions as the semantics and job role classification in the Skills Framework can be very different for each organisation and thus there may be greater incidences of finding differences than similarities. This must not hinder the user to reference the Skills Framework or be too quick to deem the framework as irrelevant.

- The skills for adapting Skills Framework may require more in-depth attention as it may involve many supporting knowledge and abilities, such as the skill of interpretation, contextualising and editing, in order to be confident in the adaptation work.

- User mindset that the Skills Framework is authoritative and the enterprise is subordinate to it will not build confidence in the adapting and contextualising work that is required of the user.

Case Study 2: Establishing a Competency-based Recruitment for a Structure Skills-Onboarding Process

Background

A local industrial automation control components and process measurement company was reviewing its recruitment and selection procedure and seek to be able to align its recruitment and onboarding processes. The company serves the needs of many industries such as pharmaceutical, building and construction, oil & gas and electronic manufacturing with product ranges in temperature controllers, sensors and encoders. The company did not have a dedicated HR person in charge. The day-to-day HR operations were handled by a manager who was also in charge of finance and administration. The company's recruitment activities included advertisement, shortlisting, interviewing, testing, offering and onboarding training during the probationary period.

New candidates were usually interviewed by the director, who is also the owner of the business. The interview was supported by the manager. Generally, interview questions and format were unstructured and were dependent on the director's experience and knowledge of the job requirements. Upon being recruited, the new hire was provided with some unstructured training by the technical supervisor. No specific competency standards were set as a benchmark for proficiency. At confirmation, it was generally a 'gut feel' that the new hire was teachable and was making progress before the person was confirmed on the job.

The manager wanted to develop a recruitment process that is more structured, objective, efficient and effective in its execution rather than its current form that is dependent on the interviewers' knowledge and experience. By so doing, the task of interviewing candidates and training of new hires may also be delegated to the technical department with a higher degree of execution consistency.

While the company has a high level job descriptions, where each job's key tasks were recorded, it was used primarily for job advertisements only. This purpose often did not require the job description to be written in detail, or even be up-to-date. Several of the job descriptions recorded

the tasks in a general way, with the final statement 'any other tasks as assigned from time to time by management' as a catch-all phrase to ensure comprehensiveness in terms of coverage.

The job specification document was similarly insufficient in the level details of skills required for the job. As the job specification document was also maintained for the purpose of job advertisement only, it mostly recorded the pre-requisites of qualifications, experience and special licenses needed for the job. Records of skill requirements were very general, with only a listing of generic areas such as teamwork, communications, customer service etc.

In order for training to be effective in bringing a person to the required level of proficiency, it requires a clear description of what the level of proficiency look like. In the context of the workplace, it would be the expectations and result of the executed work task. To do so, a good set of job descriptions and specifications is necessary.

Adopting Skills Framework

The Skills Framework from a variety of industries were referenced for relevant job titles, domain critical work functions and key tasks. These were put together as a first draft for the manager to review and edit. Performance expectations of each task were obtained from the technical engineer.

An example of a Key Task with its related performance expectation is in Table 3.

Key Tasks	**Standards**
1. *Carry out calibration in both laboratory and on-site* 2. *Set up calibration work station and equipment* 3. *Collect data* 4. *Install and dismantle calibration equipment* 5. *Troubleshoot and repair calibration equipment* 6. *Pay visual attention to the performance of the equipment* 7. *Review and analyse data collected* 8. *Identify trending behaviour* 9. *Prepare and review report with Senior Engineer*	• Ensure that the company and client's instrument readings have minimized bias. • Ensure equipment is periodically calibrated *(every x weeks)* to reduce downtime. • Ensure that data is collected in a fair and unbiased way. • Ensure that problems arising from equipment are resolved in a timely and accurate manner to reduce disruption to work. • Ensure quick identification of poor equipment performance to facilitate diagnosis of its cause. • Ensure equipment is functioning accurately, without errors.

Table 3: Performance Standard Developed for the Tasks of "Performance Calibration and Data Analysis"

Competency-based interview questions were then developed to support the interviewer in asking structure questions to the candidate. An example of a competency-based question is as follow. (see Table 4)

Key Task	**Competency-based Interview Question**
Set up calibration work station and equipment	Tell me about how did you usually set up the calibration work station and equipment in the previous company.

Table 4: An Example of a Competency-based Interview Questions

The standards established in the job description would form the evidence that an interviewer looked for in a candidate.

If the candidate was hired based on his overall performance in the job interview but is still considered lacking in the proficiency in setting up calibration work station and equipment, the company will have to purposefully ensure that there is a systematic training and assessment program in this area in order for the new hire to be trained and be proficient at the end of probation.

The development process created a revised job description with performance expectations, job specifications, competency-based interview question list, interview assessment tool and an onboarding plan. The development objectives were met as more interviewers will be able to use the documents developed to conduct job interviews in a more consistent way in the future. The technical engineer will also be able to focus on targeted areas to train the new hire based on the interview assessment tool.

Application Insights from the Frontline

While the development work was completed and objectives met, it was observed that the enterprise may not necessarily have the capacity to develop a similar set of documents for other jobs. The enterprise may also not be able to sustain the practice of competency-based interviewing. Below are some observations and insights from the project:

- Enterprises need to develop a work culture that document work standards. Otherwise, the effort of documentation would come across more as a chore than a practice that enhances clarity, consistency and continuity of work standards.
- Enterprises need to develop a work culture that values setting objective work standards as a conduit to effective performance management.
- Enterprises need to subscribe to the management practice of competency-based management for recruitment, performance management, development and promotion, in order that identifying calibrated competency levels is a worthwhile project to invest time and effort.

Many small medium enterprises in Singapore may not be practising a competency-based approach to performance management. Cultivating a sustainable culture of continuous learning and performance in the workplace may be a pre-requisite to increase the adoption of the Skills Framework.

Case Study 3: Aligning the Performance Appraisal System for Better Assessment and Learning Needs Analysis

Background

An early childhood operator was reviewing their performance appraisal forms with the aim to enhance the evaluation criteria. The challenge with the current appraisal format was that the criteria definitions in the form tended to be general and was subjected to appraiser's interpretation. As a result, assessment ratings were inconsistent among appraisers. Both principals and teachers felt that there were room for improvement in terms of clarity. The individual learning and development plans were also difficult to develop as the areas for development were not consistently interpreted.

The aim was to adopt the skills standards statements from the Skills Framework for the Early Childhood and Care Education into the appraisal forms so that the assessment can be more objective. Individual learning and development plans can also be better aligned to industry standards. The appropriate courses offered by ECDA can also be selected as its portfolio of courses has already been aligned to the Skills Framework.

Adopting Skills Framework

In the new appraisal format, the skill standards statement was used as a basis to assess performance. The skill description was used as the definition for the skill standards statement. The 5 domains, namely, knowledge and analysis, application and adaption, innovation and value creation, social intelligence and ethics, learning to learn, were used as further references for the interpretations of the skills description. Additionally, the management also set up a project team to identify specific behavioural examples at the workplace and document them into a competency dictionary. Appraisers will then use the definitions and behavioural examples as a basis to assess teachers' performance. The successful demonstration of the behavioural example would be considered as proficient and meeting performance standards.

Application Insights from the Frontline

After the development of the new appraisal forms, a trial performance appraisal exercise was carried out. Appraisers found it confusing to use the 5 domains of the Skills Framework during the assessment. The question raised was whether all the specific ability descriptions in each and all the domains must be assessed like a checklist in order to rate the teacher to be proficient in that skill standard. Another common observation by the appraisers was that there were too many assessment criteria to assess a teacher.

A performance management and appraisal training session was conducted for the appraisers. Appraisers learnt about the importance of setting clear goals and standards. The skill standards help to articulate what, how and how well a task is to be carried out. As the objective is to achieve clarity, a dialogue needs to be established at the beginning of the performance cycle between the principal and the teacher. Feedback on observations of actual work done is extremely important to bring common understanding and clarity on the deviations to performance standards. The Skills Framework, and the well-developed in-house behavioural examples would serve as a reference to these dialogues. The information in the five domains will help the principal and teacher to identify areas for development to achieve better work performance.

After the training, the appraisers achieved better alignment of understanding and clarity on how to use the performance appraisal forms, how to interpret the skill standards and how to use them for assessment. More importantly, they have a clearer idea that the skill standards do not replace good dialogue and communication to bring better clarity of work performance and expect standards, they support the performance management process with better common understanding and clarity in terms of skills development planning.

This case highlighted the following in the use of Skills Framework:

- Enterprises need to know how to adopt the component parts of the Skills Framework into their current system, such as the performance appraisal system. Without clarity, the Skills Framework may be perceived as an over load of information.
- Enterprises need to have a culture that is comfortable to reference competency statements. Otherwise, there is no incentive to document the standards and use them for assessment and referencing it for action planning.

- To build such a culture, not only does HR needs to be trained, managers and supervisors must also recognise the benefits of and possess the skills to use competency standards to maintain consistency and continuity in performance management. This will help in supervisory coaching and communication during performance discussion with the employee.

Lessons Learnt

Skills Framework has provided the resources to form the basis for competency, recruitment, performance, learning and career development management. However, the cultural dimension, in terms of the readiness to adopt written standards as a way of managing daily work and skills, may not be sufficiently addressed while encouraging industry-wide adoption. The following are overall observations of the conditions in which enterprises display their readiness to adopt the use of Skills Framework successfully, based on the cases discussed:

1. Enterprises and users must be able to relate to the statements in their daily work in order to find them relevant for adoption. Otherwise, there is still a barrier to interpret what the statement means before finding them relatable.

2. Enterprises must develop a culture to use documented standard statements as a guide to manage performance, competencies, learning and development. Otherwise, the documentation may be perceived as restrictive because gut feel is more natural and perceptively efficient.

3. Enterprises should possess documented management processes as placeholders where the critical work functions, key tasks, technical and generic skills and competency statements can readily be placed. Otherwise, to adopt the Skills Framework may be perceived as added workload and administration overheads.

4. Enterprises should have a learning and performance culture in order for the Skills Framework to be a value-adding reference-base to support such a culture. Otherwise, the documentation of Skills Framework may be seen as another set of audit documents.

5. Enterprises need to train the users (managers and supervisors) on how to use the Skills Framework and cannot take for granted that once the statements are in the templates, the users will automatically know how to use them.

A possible self-assessment scale on the readiness to adopt the Skills Framework may be as follow:

Dimensions of Readiness		**1 - 3**	**4 - 6**	**7 - 10**	
Documentation	Key work processes are not documented				Key work processes are documented
Actions and Decisions	Actions and decisions are guided by gut feel and experience				Actions and decisions are guided by documented statements
Learning and Performance Culture	Standards and quality issues are highlighted and resolved only as when problems arise				There are established and observed standards and quality at the workplace

Dimensions of Readiness		1 - 3	4 - 6	7 - 10	
Ease of Using Documented Standards by Employees	Employees do not usually refer to any documentation to interpret work requirements				Employees are trained to interpret and use SOPs, Work Instructions, manuals, blueprints as a part of their work
Ease of Using Documentation by Supervisors and Managers	Supervisors and managers are not trained to use documentations to manage / standards work performance				Supervisors and managers are trained to use documentations to manage / standardise work performance

Table 5: Skills Framework Adoption Readiness Self-Assessment

Readiness Scale

Score	**Description**	**Next Step Recommendation**
5 - 18	Not ready. Requires significant work to build a culture to reference documented standards	Build culture by using Skills Framework in a specific function, process or location that will bring visible value to business operations to demonstrate benefit.
19 - 33	Somewhat ready. Requires strong leadership and communication to establish values and benefits to reference documented standards	Strengthen learning and performance leadership at all levels. Build consensus among leaders to adopt Skills Framework in agreed areas of work.
34 – 50	Ready. Contextualise the skills standards to existing document and carry out training	May adopt Skills Framework at the enterprise level including support functions and processes.

Table 6: Readiness Scale and Next Step Recommendation

Next Steps

The above self-reflection tool is aimed at identifying the readiness of a company to adopt documented standards as a way of managing daily work performance, competencies, learning and development. Enterprises should take the opportunity to consider how it can use the Skills Framework to build its human capability to support work performance and business results to do business in a lean workforce, where every employee's capability counts.

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