

Ohio State University Extension Competency Study:  
Developing a Competency Model for a 21st Century Extension Organization

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Abstract:

The literature on competency-based human resource (HR) management provides a strong case for moving from a jobs-based to a competency-based approach to human resources. The purpose of this study was to develop and validate a competency model for a state Extension organization. Specific research objectives were to: (a) identify and describe competencies required for Extension professionals in Ohio to be successful now and in the future; (b) construct a competency model that includes core competencies, describes what they look like in practice, and reflects organizational preferences; and (c) ensure that the competency model created is a valid one. This study was designed as action research and took place in Ohio State University Extension (OSUE). Methods were highly participatory and relied on a criterion group of exemplary performers and key internal stakeholders for idea generation, model refinement, and validation. Mixed methods were used with an emphasis on qualitative approaches, including reviews of existing research and gathering data from employees through interviews and group processes. Peer debriefing and survey research were used to validate and further refine the results. The research design included multiple cycles of data gathering, analysis, integration, and peer debriefing.

The findings from this study are represented by two key pieces of information, a list of trends and their implications for Extension work and the *OSUE Competency Model*. Five trends (changing and complex conditions, increased competition and limited resources, changing complex organizational structures, changing demographics, and technology and life in the e-world) and seven implications are identified and described. The *OSUE Competency Model* identifies and describes a set of core competencies (including definitions and key actions that further illustrate each), relevant across job groups, that are important now and in the future for OSUE employees. The 14 core competencies identified were: communication, continuous learning, customer service, diversity, flexibility and change, interpersonal relationships, knowledge of Extension, professionalism, resource management, self-direction, teamwork and leadership, technology adoption and application, thinking and problem solving, and understanding stakeholders and communities. Each competency is further described using 3 to 8 key actions. Research results are presented documenting that the competency model reflects organizational preferences, has high face and content validity, and has catalytic validity.

As action research, this study provided a competency model that will be used and further developed by the participants who constructed it. Recommendations are provided for OSUE related to using the model and applying the research results to HR practices. This study also extends the body of knowledge in two ways: by providing a competency model with core competencies designed to cut across the entire organization, of which few exist, in the Cooperative Extension System and by using a criterion group of exemplary performers to construct and validate the model. Implications for practice are shared that focus on the research process, methods used, and potential replication by other organizations. This research documented a process from initial information gathering through validation that could serve as a model for other organizations.