# In Search for a Public Servant Competency Model:

# A Literature Review

#### Joe Monang

Doctors Program of Industrial Engineering and Management Bandung Institute of Technology, Bandung, Indonesia Tel: (+62) 22-250-4189, Email: joemonang@gmail.com

#### Iman Sudirman

Industrial Management Research Group Bandung Institute of Technology, Bandung, Indonesia Tel: (+62) 22-250-4189, Email: <u>iman\_s@ti.itb.ac.id</u>

### Joko Siswanto Industrial Management Research Group Bandung Institute of Technology, Bandung, Indonesia Tel: (+62) 22-250-4189, Email: j.siswanto@ti.itb.ac.id

Abstract. Competency model has started to become popular in public organizations. In today's fast changing environment, competent public servants who possess appropriate competencies to effectively deal with complex tasks and problems are increasingly demanded. Inspired by the implementation of competency model in private sector, there is a growing trend for governments around the world to embrace this tool for promoting and maintaining high-performing employees. However, little is known about related researches of competency model existing in public organizations. This paper aims at reviewing literature of competency model created in public organizations. It will also examine a number of competency models used in five countries by undertaking a comparative analysis of competencies valued in those countries. Findings suggested that 41 competencies have been used in the literature obtained from database searches. Moreover, common competencies existing in the selected countries include analytical/strategical thinking, leading/ influencing, effective communication, relationship building, sound effective judgement, problem solving, adaptability, customer service orientation, negotiation, integrity, and teamwork. Interestingly, very limited empirical researches have been conducted to examine differentiating competencies in public organizations. The result can be used by the governments to craft their competency models. It can also be utilized by other researchers for future potential researches.

Keywords: competency model, public servants, public organization

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

It is widely known that a competency model is a key tool in human resources management systems commonly practiced in many organizations today as a means for increasing personal and organizational effectiveness. A competency model is a systematic list of competencies necessary for resulting excellent performance in a particular job, job family, organization, function, or process (Marelli et. al., 2005). It helps align the strategic objectives of organizations with its human resources system and has been utilized as a basis for a diverse range of human resources decision-making and processes. Various literatures have also highlighted several advantages obtained from using competency models in human resources activities. Vazirani (2010) acknowledged that the use of competency models would lead to enhancement of process, employee development, recruiting and performance management. Wickramasinghe and De Zoyza (2009) have exemplified that a competency model could enable organizations to execute a competency gap analysis in order to better devise strategies for improving employees' abilities. Furthermore, Chung-Herrera et. al. (2003) suggested that a competency model would make better and consistent performance standards when it was used consistently. It could also help organizations to predict employee performance against several key performance indicators (Dainty et. al., 2005).

While numerous researches have proposed a variety of competency models in private sector organizations for a number of occupations, little is known about competency models that have been created in public sector organizations. On the other hand, governments around the world face increasing pressure on performance and innovation as a result of increased global competition and dynamic change in external environment (Kim, 2008). Globalization trend and technological advancement has changed the way organizations are conducted and forced organizations to focus on delivering results in real time. Citizens are now demanding better public services. They expect high quality of service delivery and greater transparency and accountability for outcomes (Abouchakra and Khoury, 2015). The demand for competent public servants who deliver high performance in a defined job is also continuously rising and many public organizations begin to use competency models to better integrate this circumstances with their human capital resources (Vathanophas and Thai-ngam, 2007). In a similar vein, to coping with these dynamic changes, public servants are required to possess desirable competencies in order to effectively deal with these challenges, and thus identification of appropriate competencies for public servants become increasingly important.

This article will review related literature focusing on competency models for public servants. It will investigate related researches that have been conducted to develop competency models in public organizations. It will also examine several competency models used in various countries by undertaking a comparative analysis. Finally, it will identify common competencies used acrosss selected countries.

# 2. SOME DEFINITIONS

Research on competency gains popularity after David McClelland (1973), an American psychologist, introduced the term in his seminal paper 'Testing for competence rather than for intelligence'. In his article, he argued that intelligence and aptitude tests were inadequate to predict job performance and success in life. This traditional job assessment method was also seen to be discriminative against minority groups. As an alternative, competency testing was proposed for a better predictor. However, there is no consensus existing on the exact definition of competency.

Boyatzis (1982) defined a competency as an individual's underlying characteristic in the form of knowledge, skill, motive, and self-image or social role that is associated with an effective or outstanding job performance. He later asserted that a competency was related to behavior set around underlying construct, labeled as "intent" (Boyatzis, 2008). Martina et. al. (2012) also used behavior notion to define competencies. For them, competencies were behaviors needed for satisfying an expected performance. Another definition of competency was offered by Jackson and Schuler (2003) who suggested that competencies should also include a person's abilities and other characteristics required for performing a job effectively. Marelli (1998) proposed competencies as individual capabilities that could be measured to satisfy job demands. Others described competencies as such underlying work-related characteristics that all employees needed to achieve successful performance as knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, motives, and traits (Chen and Naquin, 2006). Moreover, Spencer and Spencer (1993) emphasized that the most important feature of competency was its ability to predict future performance. From those attempts made to define competency, it is noticeable that a competency is linked to outstanding performance. In a nutshell, a competency can be regarded as knowledge, skills, abilities, and other attributes that makes individuals achieve superior performance and it usually leads to an observed behavior.

Several categorizations of competencies also circulate in the literature. Spencer and Spencer (1993) divide competencies into threshold and differentiating competencies. Threshold competencies refer to essential characteristics to minimally perform a job, but are not able to distinguish high-performing employees from averageperforming ones. In contrast, differentiating competencies enable organizations to discriminate between average and excellent performers. Rainsbury et. al. (2002) classify competencies into hard and soft skills. Hard skills are connected with technical skills to complete a job, whereas soft skills are interpersonal, human or people relation skills. and McCrackin (1998) propose another Carrol classification of competencies, i.e. key, team, functional, and leadership and management competencies. Key competencies are behaviors necessary for all employees, whereas team competencies are those used for groups working interdependently and project-based. Functional competencies concern with technical knowledge and skills, but leadership and management competencies include relevant behaviors for supporting effective leadership and management. In his article, Agut and Grau (2002) categorize competencies into technical and generic competencies. The former is related to technical aspects to fulfill tasks and the latter is associated with non-technical

aspects, for instance self-efficacy, self-control, interpersonal relationships, and proactivity.

Competencies are fundamental elements for building competency models. A competency model is a narrative description of relevant competencies observed from employees with outstanding performance for a specific job or other unit of analysis (Draganidis and Metzas, 2006). It is a detailed and behaviorally list of desirable competencies for effective performance (Mansfield, 1996). Moreover, it can be viewed as a simple list of required competencies (Markus et. al. 2005). In short, it is the result of competency identification (Rothwell and Lindholm, 1999). A competency model is essentially needed when an organization plans to apply a competency-based approach in its human resouces management system, particularly for managing employee performance (El-Baz and El-Sayegh, 2010). Even though the use of competency models has become increasingly prevalent, in particular as a viable replacement of job analysis approach (Shippmann et. al., 2000), there is no standard structure of competency model appeared in the literature. Vathanophas and Thai-ngam (2007) used competency elements (motives, self-concept, skills and abilities) to organize their proposed competency model. On the other hand, Alldredge and Nilan (2000) proposed other categories, i.e. fundamental, essential, and visionary. Jeou-Shyan et. al. (2011) utilized a competency type (generic and technical) when they arranged a competency model for top managers in hotel industry. ElBaz and El-Sayegh (2010) used other certain categories, i.e. people, business, and environment, to picture a competency model of engineering managers.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In this paper, a literature review was applied to identify competency model existing in public organizations, thus it is descriptive rather than statistical approach. We searched related published articles primarily using databases: ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and EmeraldInsight. The search was limited to literature written in English and was conducted by scanning specific words or phrases, such as competenc\* model\*, competenc\* profil\*, public, government, and civil. All possible years of publication available in the databases were placed. The search strategies for databases are provided in Table 1.

Articles were selected on the basis of abstract, title, and keywords. All articles obtained, then, were reviewed. Articles that presented studies to develop competency models in public organizations were included; otherwise were excluded. Besides, we added competencies models that have been implemented by five different governments, mostly in developed countries to acquire a more complete picture of competency models existing for public servants, and an article obtained from personal collection.

#### Table 1: Search strategies for databases

Database	Search Strategy		
ScienceDirect	[Title-Abstr-Key](competenc* model*) AND [Title-Abstr-Key](public OR government OR civil);		
	[Title-Abstr-Key](competenc* profil*) AND [Title-Abstr-Key](public OR government OR civil)		
EmeraldInsight			
Taylor & Francis Online	[[Article title: competenc* model*] OR [Abstract: (competenc* model*) AND (public OR government OR civil)]]; [[Article title: competenc* profil*] OR [Abstract: (competenc* model*) AND (public OR government OR civil)]]		

# 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The searches using ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and EmeraldInsight yielded, respectively, 377, 615, and 233 hits. Of 377 hits from ScienceDirect, 47 articles (not written in English) and 14 duplicate articles were removed. Similarly, 16 articles (not written in English) and 14 duplicate articles from Taylor & Francis Online were displaced in addition to 31 duplicate articles eliminated from EmeraldInsight database results. Out of these remaining 1,103 hits, 8 articles were considered eligible based upon abstract and title. Models of competency related to curriculum development in education institution, for example, were excluded. Finally, with additional 5 articles of competency models employed in several countries and one article from personal collection, as many as 14 articles were used in the review process. Figure 1 illustrates a flow process to generate these selected articles.

The full papers of 14 articles that presented the work of developing competency model in public sector organization could be successfully retrieved and, thus, were able to be reviewed. The 6 articles acquired from database searches and an additional article obtained from personal collection referred to competency models in specific jobs or occupations, thus they were not directly applicable across various jobs or occupations in public sector organizations. These models were mainly targeted for some professions in public health care, education, library, and agriculture extension. In contrast, two articles provided more general models. The first one can be found in Virtanen's competency model for public managers. According to Virtanen (2000), competencies required for public managers could be modeled in five dimensions: task, professional in subject area (e.g. social security and human resources management), professional in administration, politics, and ethics. Virtanen argued that the last two dimensions made significant differences between public and private managers. Political competency was important in order to make outcomes politically welcomed. Ethical competency included moral values and moral norms. Nevertheless, the paper did not provide the competencies making up each dimension and, of course, its definition. The second one was the work of Martynova and Maslennikova (2012). They developed a basic model of competencies for municipal employees based on Russian experience. The model consisted of six main competencies: orientation to the requirements of the society, orientation to the achievement of a result, responsibility, empathy, understanding of the features of the modern municipal management, and readiness for the development. However, the definition for each main competency was not provided in the paper.

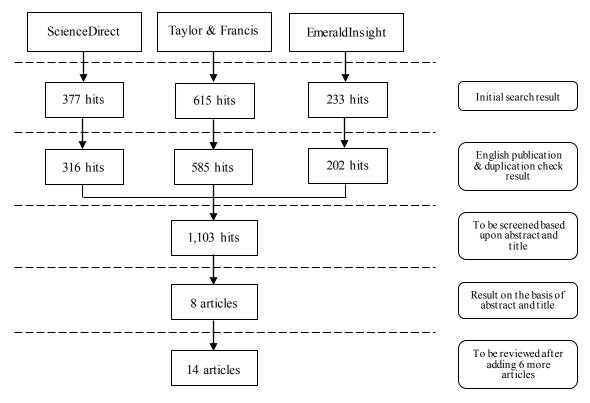


Figure 1: Flow process of article selection

In healthcare areas, Homer et. al. (2012) proposed a competency model of primary maternity services providers, i.e. obstetricians and midwives. They clustered the competencies into four domains: women centered care (philosophy of care, service provision, and body of knowledge). professionalism (ethics, equity, and performance improvement), workplace (management and leadership, teamwork, occupational health and safety), and communication (patient/client communication and professional communication). Unfortunately, further information explaining each domain was not available in the paper. Tataw (2011) developed a model of interprofessional competencies for health and social care as collaboration of two or more professionals or disciplines to solve health issues became important. Competencies proposed were clustered in terms of communication and interpersonal skills, systems based health practice, and professionalism.

Hamzah et. al. (2012) developed an empirical leadership competency model in Higher Educational Institutions using public universities as sample. According to Hamzah et al., leadership competencies were competencies to affect subordinates for positive changes. Their proposed competency model comprised 4 dimensions, namely futurist, governor, workforce developer, and selfmastery. Futurist was related to creating the future. Governor was about putting strategies into actions. Workforce developer concerned with workforce plan. Selfmastery was connected to proficiency in daily work routine. Nonetheless, the list of competencies for each dimension could not be found in the paper. Haycock (2011) explored characteristics of excellent public librarian branch managers and proposed a desired profile as following: effective people skills, motivational skills, direction-setting skills, human resources expertise, communication, and breadth of experience. On the basis of competency definition, the breadth of experience may not be classified as a competency.

Karbasioun et. al. (2007) conducted an expert survey to develop a competency model for agricultural extension instructors in Esfahan, which was a public service provided by Department of Agricultural. According to Karbasioun et. al., competencies perceived to be important were subject matter understanding, presentation skill, business understanding, learning understanding, feedback skill, intellectual versatility, relationship building skill, selfknowledge, adult training and development, and objective preparation skill. It is necessary to note that, however, extension services in some countries are already privatized. Oladele (2015) utilized Borich model to construct a competency model for agricultural extension officers. Competencies perceived important in Oladele's model were knowledge (e.g. awareness of government policy and

approaches to adult education), personal skills (e.g. communication, analysis and diagnosis, leadership qualities, and initiative), lead farmers, and personal qualities.

Vathanophas and Thai-ngam (2007) developed a competency model for a specific position level in governmental department, i.e. Chief of the General Administrative Sub-Division in the Thai Department of Agriculture. Nine competencies were recommended as critical for superior performance: service-minded, concern for order, quality, and accuracy, team leadership, achievement orientation, developing others, information seeking, integrity, organizational awareness, and selfcontrol. The competencies were grouped based upon competency elements, i.e. motives, self-concept, and skills and ability.

Since the identified competency models were created for various specific jobs in public organizations, it is more suitable to summarize competencies listed in the models rather than to identify common competencies used in the models. In short, the 41 competencies appeared in the were action-oriented, knowledge/information models seeking, directing, supervising, coordinating, monitoring and evaluating, delegating, planning, human resource and budgetary know-how, communicating, service-minded, concern for order-quality-and-accuracy, team leadership, achievement orientation, developing others, integrity, organizational awareness. emotional intelligence. presentation skill, technical knowledge in subject area, business understanding, relationship building, creative and analytical thinking, learning understanding, awareness of approaches to adult education, time management, problem solving, initiatives, commitment, self-confidence, empathy and understanding, self-motivation and determination, negotiation and conflict resolution, political skill, ethics, responsibility. readiness for development. equity. occupational health and safety, performance improvement, sensitive and responsive to culture

A number of countries have implemented various leadership competency models as part of their human resources management system. The next paragraphs will review various leadership competency models among five selected countries in order to expose a more complete picture of competency models created in public organizations. In this part, it is possible to identify common competencies existed in the models since they are more general. Table 2 depicts leadership competency models that have been adopted by those countries. Most of the models, however, are from advanced countries as they are easily accessible.

Some similarities exist among the models. They are organized in clusters or categories, in which each cluster consists of several related competencies and each competency is defined. The clusters are named differently

Key Leadership	Civil Service	Senior Executive Leadership	Executive Core	Managerial
Competencies	Competency	Capability Framework	Qualification	Competencies Indonesia
Canada	Framework	Australia	United State	
	United Kingdom			
Management	Strategic cluster -	Shapes strategic thinking:	Leading change:	Thinking ability:
excellence:	setting direction:	inspires a sense of purpose and	creative and innovation,	flexibility, innovation,
delivering through	seeing the big picture,	direction; focuses strategically;	external awareness,	analytical, conceptual
action management,	changing and	harnesses information and	flexibility resilience,	D
people management,	improving, making	opportunities; shows judgement,	strategic thinking vision	Personal management:
financial	effective decisions	intelligence and common sense	T P 1	adaptation to change,
management	<b>D L</b> L <i>L</i>		Leading people:	integrity, tenacity, self-
<b>F</b> (	People cluster -	Achieve results:	conflict management,	control, organizational
Engagement:	engaging people:	builds organizational capability and	leveraging diversity,	commitment, initiative,
mobilizing people,	leading and	responsiveness; marshals professional	developing others, team	achievement orientation
organizations,	communicating,	expertise; steers & implements change	building	Managing others:
partners	collaborating and	& deals with uncertainty; ensures	Results driven:	cooperation, developing
Strategic thinking: innovating through	partnering, building capability forall	closure & delivers on intended results	accountability, customer	others, leadership, guiding
		Cultivate productive working	service, decisiveness	
analysis and ideas	Performance cluster -	relationships:	entrepreneurship, problem	Managing tasks:
Values and ethics: serving through integrity and respect	delivering results:	nurtures internal and external	solving, technical credibility	customer service orientation
	achieving commercial outcomes, delivering	relationships; facilitates cooperation		occupational safety
		and partnerships; values individual	Business acumen:	awareness, developing work
	value for money,	differences and diversity; guides,	financial management,	relationship, negotiation,
	managing a quality	mentors and develops people	human capital management,	entrepreneurship,
	service, delivering at		technology management	information seeking,
	pace	Exemplifies personal drive and	Building coalitions:	attention to regularity, oral
	1	integrity:	partnering, political savvy,	communication, written
	Civil service values	demonstrates public service	influencing/ negotiating	communication, decision
		professionalism and probity; engages		making, organizing,
		with risk and shows personal courage;	Fundamental:	planning, change
		commits to action; displays resilience;	interpersonal skills, oral	management, quality
		demonstrates self-awareness and a	communication,	orientation, conflict
		commitment to personal development	integrity/honesty, written	management
		Communicates with influence:	communication, continual	al Managing socio-culture:
		communicates clearly; listens,	learning, public service	responsive to cultural
		understands and adapts to audience;	motivation	changing, empathy, social
		negotiates persuasively		interaction
	l	negotiates persuasively		interaction

Table 2: Competencies Models in Selected Countries

across the models. Moreover, only Canada and UK competency models explicitly stated public service values in the models. Nevertheless, by choosing the clusters of Indonesia managerial competency model as a reference, we can observe that each competency cluster in the Indonesia model can also be found, either partialy or completely, in other countries' competency models. Therefore, these competency clusters (thinking, self-management, managing others, task-related management, and managing society and culture) can be used for other goverments to create their competency models.

Competencies that are commonly used were identified by comparing definition of each competency in the model

and finding the keywords. We employed the Indonesia's model as a reference and, then, compare each competency used in the Indonesia model with that of other models. Finally, we identified common competencies practiced in those models include analytical/strategical thinking, leading/influencing, effective communication, relationship building, sound effective judgement, problem solving, adaptability, customer service orientation, negotiation, integrity, and teamwork.

Several differences can also be found in the models. Competencies related to business acumen, i.e. financial, human capital, and technology management, are emphasized in the US model, but not explicitly addressed in others. These competencies can be viewed as technical expertise as they may require extensive experience in managing financial, human, and information resources. It is interesting to note that occupational safety competency only appeared in the Indonesia model. The competency concerns about the awareness of civil servants to follow and improve occupational safety system in their working environment. Surprisingly, political skills are explicitly stated only in the US model. As argued by Virtanen (2000), political skills are competencies that make public and private manager profiles are different.

Based on findings from literature review, it was difficult to propose common competencies prevalent in all articles as not all identified articles provided the details of competencies listed in the competency models and several models were developed for specific jobs. Nevertheless, common competencies existing among five countries could be identified as the models are more generic, and thus could be applied across jobs in public sectors. Empirical research to examine differentiating competencies, the notion was proposed by Spencer and Spencer (1993), is also very limited. Moreover, other factors influencing performance (e.g. organizational support and climate) have not been thoroughly considered in the development of competency model. Therefore, future researches can be directed to these areas. Figure 2 shows proposed competency model development for a public servant in Indonesia, which will be part of authors' future research, after taking into consideration those findings,.

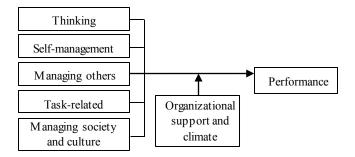


Figure 2: Competency model development for a public servant in Indonesia

# **5. CONCLUSION**

Several researches have been undertaken to develop competency models for public servants. Most models were developed for specific jobs in public organization, thus were not applicable for generic purposes. However, competency models adopted in several countries, used in this paper, could provide more complete picture about common competencies necessary for public servants, i.e. analytical/strategical thinking, leading/influencing, effective communication, relationship building, sound effective judgement, problem solving, adaptability, customer service orientation, negotiation, integrity, and teamwork. Furthermore, there is still ample room for future research on investigating differenting competencies for public servants as most identified researches has not been focusing on these competencies.

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