

# Competencies for libraries

## Introduction

In 2008, WebJunction received support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop a set of competencies for those managing public access computing in their libraries. As a follow-up to this work, we developed a full *Competencies Index for the Library Field*, which outlines the full spectrum of library practice. The Index was published in 2009 and since July 2009 we've been using this index to help us identify the topics library staff most need to develop new skills or support around. Our online course catalog now includes links to the full competency index, and allows library staff to self-identify the areas where they'd like to develop skills, and easily find resources to help them in those areas.

Over the course of this last year, the staff at WebJunction started to wonder how other libraries or library service organizations were using also using competencies. This report outlines recent research we've completed in this area. Our goal was to explore the use of competencies by others in the library field, and shed additional light on how and whether this has been useful for those organizations. We invite you to consider the following in light of your own experiences in your library or organization, and hope to hear from you if you have something to add to this conversation. Please visit [www.webjunction.org/competencies](http://www.webjunction.org/competencies) to add your comments, questions or suggestions.

## What are competencies?

You may have heard the term “competencies” come up in your most recent staff training or development day, in a conversation with your colleagues in the Human Resources department, or in a recent job search in the library field. Libraries and other organizations have a variety of definitions for the word “competencies,” and many use competencies in different ways. The broadest definition of the term—the ability to perform a specific task—is helpful in that it's easy to grasp. But this description may be too broad, or vague enough to cause confusion in your library.

WebJunction talked to a number of library trainers and administrators using competencies in their libraries, and discovered that when competencies are used in a straightforward, transparent and specific manner, they can greatly benefit both organizational and individual development. In order to achieve these benefits, however, it's important to support competency programs with both a clear articulation of expectations and the resources needed to help your staff be successful.

## Prevalent uses of competencies in libraries

If a competency is a description of an essential task, then a list of competencies is often used to illustrate what is necessary to complete a particular assignment or be successful in a specific job function. In reading classified job ads, we've all seen sections labeled "qualifications" or "skills." These are similar to competencies, though often less detailed.

ALA's "Core Competencies of Librarianship" defines "the basic knowledge to be possessed by all persons graduating from an ALA-accredited master's program in library and information studies." The document starts with the statement, "A person graduating from an ALA-accredited master's program in library and information studies should know and, where appropriate, be able to employ:" and then goes on to list 41 competencies in categories such as Knowledge of the Profession, Reference and User Services, Research and several others.

While these requirements can be said to apply to all librarians, much more specific competencies will often be applied based on the type of library, level of job responsibility and technical requirements. The ALA list states that a knowledge of "the principles of effective personnel practices and human resource development" is necessary for all librarians. But this one competency could be broken down into several (if not dozens) of detailed job requirements depending on whether you're describing an entry-level position, a working manager or a library director.

Using competencies in this way is very helpful for evaluating potential employees as you seek to fill new positions in your library. They provide an objective checklist against which the skills and experiences of different applicants can be measured. However, using competencies this way alone doesn't make full use of the benefits they can provide your library.

More often, libraries are using competency lists not just in the hiring process, but as a tool for effective

**Marianne Lenox** is the Staff Training and Development Coordinator at Huntsville Madison County Public Library. Here she tells us a few ways her library uses competencies to guide training, to keep skills up-to-date and to manage more effectively.

### **The problem:**

We want to reward our library staff for "continual growth and development" in their positions, and create a pay policy based on a staff member's willingness to build the skills required for their job description. In a very practical sense, new staff members and I also needed a way to determine if he or she needed further training in regards to their skills.

### **The solution:**

I've used a very simple computer competency test during New Employee Orientation. We also have a new Job Descriptions and Pay Plan policy that states "The pay plan is designed to provide for progressive increases to employees as a reward for continual growth and development in their position, thereby increasing their value to the Library."

This strategy will involve personal development plans based on competencies for each job, based on title and description. I believe competencies need to be defined at the base level. Each separate job title (and its matching job description) would ideally have a custom-made set of competencies to achieve for each person in that role.

### **The benefits:**

We do a better job of keeping up! If it's a race, staff members who are left behind may quickly find themselves coming in last. What we've got to show is that it's a relay: we can help each other along the way when we know what skills we need to build, and can identify others to help us. Many new tools make it easier to learn from each other, and develop our skills together.

### **Your tip for using competencies:**

Human Resources can't possibly dictate every bit of information a Branch Library Assistant or Clerk needs to know in order to serve our patrons. HR can, though, work closely with individual managers to develop competencies to cover skills needed for each branch or department.

**Pat Carterette** is the Director of Continuing Education Georgia Public Library Service. Pat's unique and extensive experiences using competencies in learning and training provide both a useful example and plenty of food for thought.

**The problem:**

When planning presentations for library staff, I want to ensure that I deliberately or intentionally relate the content to particular skills or knowledge areas.

**The solution:**

When I'm invited to Georgia libraries to present programs I use a home-grown Presentation Planning Template (called Presentation Planner on our Web site) to prepare for the presentation. This template includes a space to indicate the competency and corresponding skills/knowledge that will be addressed in the presentation. I use the *WebJunction Competency Index* for this, but now that the *IMLS 21st Century Skills* (competencies) are available I'll probably start using these too. I've made this Presentation Planning Template available to the Georgia library community—there's a link to it from our GPLS Web site at [www.georgialibraries.org](http://www.georgialibraries.org). When giving presentations such as Learning or Peer Training, at the very least I mention this planning form and talk to them about competencies—why they're important, where to find them, what you can do with them. Sometimes I go into more detail and give the audience a printout of the form.

Our state library gives out “scholarships” to WebJunction courses and occasionally for a few other learning events. I'd like to revise the scholarship application form to include a space for the applicant to specify the competency that the course addresses. Our Georgia library people request an E-Learning Attendance Certificate from us upon participation in webinars... I'd also like the requestor to indicate the competency that the webinar addressed. This would be a way to build awareness of competencies.

Another future plan for competencies is to highlight one competency every month in a CE newsletter or blog to the Georgia library community—this would include a definition of the competency, bulleted skills and behaviors associated with it; a short list of recommended resources, current learning opportunities and a link to the *WebJunction Competency Index*.

My hope is that the program proposal form for our annual Georgia library conference can be revised to include a drop-down menu of competencies. Proposers will be asked to select a minimum of one competency from the list that their proposed program addresses.

One more thing: our proposed statewide library leadership institute (we're awaiting notification on funding) is tied to competencies—we're using the *IMLS 21st Century Skills* as a foundation to build the program content.

**The response:**

The word “competency” seems to scare people, or be off-putting. Competencies are nothing more than the skills, knowledge and behaviors that are necessary for success in one's position. Most job descriptions refer to the skills and knowledge needed for the position. These are competencies. I like to refer to competencies as blueprints for success at work. They are also like a roadmap for those who want to learn more or prepare themselves for other positions. Knowing about competencies also helps one articulate their skills—especially useful during performance reviews, in writing resumes and in the hot seat at a job interview.

**The benefit:**

Competencies ARE expectations—but if they're presented and addressed in the right way, they can be a relief because people will know what it takes to be successful in one's job. Competencies can be seamlessly woven into the fabric of the organization through position descriptions, personnel evaluations and learning opportunities offered to staff. You can have fun with competencies too by creating self-assessments in the form of checklists. Once one identifies gaps in knowledge they can create their own personal learning plan. And the beauty of competencies is that you don't have to address them all at once.

**Your tip for using competencies:**

You gotta start somewhere! Start with the basics, build a good foundation. Then worry about keeping up with changes.

staff development and training. Once lists of required job duties are made for different positions and roles, then those lists can be used to pursue or even construct staff training. Many libraries see the greatest benefit from this application of competencies.

The training and continuing education programs derived from job duty competencies may run the gamut from informal to highly organized. Either way, you'll get your biggest win out of competencies when you synchronize your competency goals to specific training efforts.

## Setting expectations and making preparations

To share their experience, we interviewed competency-savvy librarians about their experiences using competencies. Their experiences are summarized in case studies that appear in sidebars throughout this document. One thing we learned is that “competencies” can be a threatening concept for some library staff. Pat Carterette, Director of Continuing Education Georgia Public Library Service, notes:

For some reason, the word “competency” seems to scare people, or be off-putting. Competencies are nothing more than the skills, knowledge and behaviors that are necessary for success in one's position. Most job descriptions refer to the skills and knowledge needed for the position. These are competencies. I like to refer to competencies as blueprints for success at work. They are also like a roadmap for those who want to learn more or prepare themselves for other positions. Knowing about competencies also helps one articulate their skills—especially useful during performance reviews, in writing resumes and in the hot seat at a job interview.

From a manager's point of view, the use of competencies certainly can be helpful and even necessary. For your staff, however, there is often no more stressful a subject than performance reviews. Even preparation for a promotion or new position, while exciting, can be tense and worrying. For this reason, it is important to be as clear about expectations as possible, and to provide the complete resources necessary to allow people to be successful at any required competency.

Sarah Houghton-Jan, Digital Futures Manager for the San José Public Library, describes how competencies worked best in the libraries where she used them:

By delineating a specific set of skills for staff members based on their job classifications and duties, libraries are able to say to staff directly: “This is what you need to know to be successful in your job.” This benefits not only the library (as it gets an army of well-trained, savvy staff) but it also benefits the employee with a set of increased job skills, confidence and promotability. Libraries also need to provide adequate training in every area, and plenty of it on an ongoing basis. It's not fair to tell someone that a certain skill is required for excellence if you're not willing to train on that skill.

In rolling out job skills lists, it's important to remember to expect the best of staff. In all likelihood 99% of people want to learn more. They just need the opportunity to do so. Everywhere I've implemented job skills sets, staff have responded with that innate desire to learn, to develop and to improve. Most of us got into libraries to serve customers, and learning more will always help us do just that. Finally, as a library trainer, I have long used the term “competencies,” but of late have started using “skills” or “skill set” instead.

“Competencies” has a subtextual implication that if you do not yet possess that particular knowledge, you are “incompetent.” As such, I have started using an alternative way of addressing the same topic.”

Let’s repeat one point Sarah made: “It’s not fair to tell someone that a certain skill is required for excellence if you’re not willing to train on that skill.” This gets to the core of what makes many employees nervous about competencies.

When competencies are matched with explicit training and development opportunities, they can provide a way of increasing employee satisfaction, as well as efficiency.

## Possible objections to competencies and how to overcome them

Before starting up a competency program at your library, take stock of your own opinions as well as those of your employees. Do any of the following sound familiar?

### **Competencies can be overwhelming, given how fast technology changes.**

This will be true for some sets of competencies much more than others. Clearly a set of competencies around something like maintaining public access computers would evolve fairly rapidly. As Betha Gutsche points out in her, “Competencies for Continual Motion,” article in the March 1, 2010 issue of *Library Journal*, “Some competencies are timeless.” For example, “... interpersonal skills for anyone who works with people.”

Betha points out that focusing on our professional mission in library service can make rapid competency evolution less troublesome. “Literacy has now expanded to include computer and media literacy, but retains the intent of preparing individuals with the tools they need to move through their lives. By investigating and experimenting with new tools and methods... librarians may discover powerful new ways to accomplish the basic goals.”

Along those lines Betha also notes “...an increasing number of positions in the library...tile even farther toward the entirely technical end of the scale,” for which, “entirely new competency areas must be defined.” If this situation is not admitted clearly and up front, your staff may see competencies in a less favorable light.

This needn’t be the case, however. While defining a large set of evolving competencies can seem daunting, if your library sets appropriate priorities and allocates sufficient investment in staff training and continuing education, creating these competencies will actually be hugely helpful and breed future success. If your staff can expect specific and realistic support, competencies can be used to good effect and seen as a welcome set of achievable objectives. In short, they can make the pace of technological change more manageable while tying development efforts to specific skills. This is far more helpful to staff than vague admonishments to “keep up with the latest technology.”

## **Every library is different. There is no one-size-fits-all for competencies.**

While often an objection, this is actually the key to why competencies can work so very well—and frankly, be difficult to understand clearly. As discussed above, there are certainly positions that require consistent skill sets and specific abilities. But these should always be adjusted by managers and directors based on local requirements.

For example, WebJunction created “competency sets” that cluster required skills in categories like Library Management, Personal/Interpersonal, Technology: Core Skills, Technology: Systems & IT and others. Subsections often include robust lists of specific skills, tying them to online learning opportunities. But these lists and associated courses are not intended to be prescriptive. Rather, they are meant to be aids, used in whatever form is most beneficial to a particular library or staff member.

The benefit of working competencies into continuing education and staff development programs is that you get to bring your experience and expertise into how they are repurposed for your library. No one else knows your organization and community as well you do. You can review many different competency lists from a variety of organizations—and then create your own. Whatever activities your library needs to be successful, you can create competencies to support them.

This can lead to confusion at times. It would be easier if the rules were hard and fast. “Learn 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and you’re done,” would make things simpler on the surface, but wouldn’t allow for the nuance, customization, unique expertise and fluidity that make your library uniquely valuable to your community.

Start with a foundation of competency sets—and apply your own common sense and creativity when deciding exactly how to implement their use.

## **A long list of expectations is not inspiring. It’s daunting and can make staff feel defensive.**

Without more information than a lengthy list, competencies likely often will not be welcomed, or particularly helpful beyond articulating duties.

Describing more information about each duty on the basic list of competencies is a great way to start expanding the usefulness of this first stage of competency work in a library. It’s also important to ask staff themselves about what competencies are important for their jobs. You may find that you’ve forgotten something vital if you go only by your understanding of another person’s job. By the same token, it doesn’t hurt to ask for staff opinions on appropriate competencies for their supervisors and directors.

Next, pointing to resources where staff can get additional training or information about how to accomplish the required task is critical. Let’s return to Sarah Houghton-Jan’s point on setting clear expectations from the start: “It’s not fair to tell someone that a certain skill is required for excellence if you’re not willing to train on that skill.” Planning for management support from the beginning is vitally important for competencies to add their deepest value to your library.

**Elizabeth Laukea** is the Learning Manager at the Pierce County Library System in Washington. Her practical, matter-of-fact approach to how competencies have returned value to the library is a best practice in itself.

**The problem:**

Ultimately we'd like to create a learning organization at PCLS—one where staff are actively engaged in their own learning and development. Part of the transition toward that is a period when staff may not be aware of what they need to learn to enable them to contribute to the Library System's goals (as defined in our strategic plan). This is because, like most other organizations, at PCLS staff in the past weren't asked to be actively engaged in their own learning—in helping determine what they need to know to be effective in their jobs or how to be creative in gaining the skills and knowledge they need. Of course to be able to do that I must first understand where I fit—the role I play each day in helping the organization achieve its mission and goals. Right now we're tackling both problems simultaneously—helping them understand their role and determining the skills needed to be effective in that role. For example, when it comes to our push to have technology access in our libraries for our patrons, staff understand that they must be fluent in specific types of activities on those computers to be able to assist patrons.

**The solution:**

At Pierce County we started using competencies when we first started thinking about Outlook training. We asked “What do they need to know?” and “What do they need to do?” to help them be successful and to ultimately contribute their piece in achieving the Library System's goals. In lieu of a needs assessment we created a list of competencies, and then an assessment based on these to identify what training they needed. After that came training, then post-training assessment at the end. The assessment piece allowed us to exempt many staff from any training because we knew they already had the skills. That saved us considerable money in staff time and also respected them as learners. Why attend training when you can demonstrate in a 20-minute series of exercises that you can perform the skills? Being able to ‘publish’ a set of competencies, by position, for Outlook created transparency in the learning process. We think this is critical as staff begin to take that active role in their own learning and development. In a way, technology competencies will act as ‘training wheels’ for when we start to talk about developing behavioral skills.

With Outlook e-mail, we originally thought one set of competencies would meet our needs. But later we realized that we really needed two levels: one for all staff (focused mostly on productivity related tasks), and one for managers (speaking more to efficiency and communications, like tasks, multiple calendar juggling, etc).

The Outlook training project helped us realize that some staff needed basic computer literacy skills before they could advance to specific software skills. Again we looked to competencies—others have already done the work of determining the specific skills and knowledge that make for a solid foundation for using computers and software—why reinvent the wheel? Basically we went through the same process again—adapted to allow for the problems associated with using technology as the platform to assess technology. We decided not to do formal training for these skills but instead to map the competencies to learning aides on our Intranet and let managers work with staff individually. We'll follow with a post-assessment in a few months.

I try to keep it concrete. I don't believe in learning technology just for technology's sake. I want staff to make effective use of the tools available to them to do their jobs better—and see the connection between learning the tools, the work they do and achieving the organization's goals. Competencies have helped us and all our staff do that and have also given our supervisors something they could point back to. If there was a skill that needed attention, it was very objectively and clearly communicated to staff who could then work toward acquiring the skills they need. It takes the ambiguity out of what it takes to be successful.

**Competencies tip:**

It comes down to this: What should staff skills look like in order for us to be successful and achieve our goals? The fact that WebJunction has gone and looked at the market and what others have done in this regard is hugely helpful, especially when it comes to technology skills. Not only does WebJunction have the list of skills, but seeing them mapped to courses is tremendously helpful. Even if you decide to teach your own course on the subject, you see how someone else has defined ‘Basic Excel’ and make sure you use the elements described in the WebJunction course description, using your own library's examples and applications. The work WebJunction has done has saved us a lot of time and it can save other libraries huge amounts of time, too.

## Next steps for your library

Hopefully, we've given you some good background on why competencies are important, how they can be used and some ways to counter typical arguments against their adoption. The next step is, of course, yours.

Here are some resources to review before you get started:

- WebJunction's central competency information site has links to dozens of resources, articles and examples of competencies being used in and for libraries and library staff: [www.webjunction.org/competencies](http://www.webjunction.org/competencies)
- WebJunction's "Competency Index for the Library Field" page with a link to the printable .pdf file: [www.webjunction.org/competencies/-/articles/content/67024491](http://www.webjunction.org/competencies/-/articles/content/67024491)
- Explore this page to see how WebJunction (and many other library folks) have integrated competencies to specific online learning offerings. While these competency connected courses are offered by WebJunction to libraries, we encourage adopting, using and remixing this work for your purposes: [www.webjunction.org/catalog/coursecatalog/competencies](http://www.webjunction.org/catalog/coursecatalog/competencies)
- ALA's "Core Competencies for the Library Field" (opens as a .pdf file): [www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf](http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf)
- Betha Gutsche's excellent March 1, 2010 *Library Journal* article, "Competencies for Continual Motion": [www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6719414.html](http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6719414.html)

And here's a very high-level project plan that can help you get the ball rolling:

1. Learn what competencies are, thinking about them in the context of your library.
2. See how other libraries and library staff are putting competencies to effective, practical use.
3. Brainstorm a list of ways competencies can work to make your work more effective and help your library achieve its mission more completely.
4. Discuss your ideas as necessary and draft a plan for use in your library.
5. Get the word out about your competency projects, implement, review, improve and expand.
6. Share your competency use experience with others. WebJunction is a perfect venue for exactly that. We would love to hear about how you have put competencies to use. Are there any things to look out for or any resources that have been particularly helpful? Please share your resources, experience and results! We'll incorporate those into future versions of this document, and into our online materials at [www.webjunction.org/competencies](http://www.webjunction.org/competencies).