

Cohen-Scali, Valérie

## Competence management and adult education

*Cohen-Scali, Valérie [Hrsg.]: Competence and competence development. Opladen : Verlag Barbara Budrich 2012, S. 95-114. - (Study guides in adult education)*



Quellenangabe/ Reference:

Cohen-Scali, Valérie: Competence management and adult education - In: Cohen-Scali, Valérie [Hrsg.]: Competence and competence development. Opladen : Verlag Barbara Budrich 2012, S. 95-114 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-103459 - DOI: 10.25656/01:10345

<https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-103459>

<https://doi.org/10.25656/01:10345>

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Study Guides  
in Adult Education

Valerie Cohen-Scali (ed.)

# Competence and Competence Development

Barbara Budrich Publishers



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# Study Guides in Adult Education

edited by

Regina Egetenmeyer

Valerie Cohen-Scali (ed.)

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Barbara Budrich Publishers  
Opladen, Berlin & Toronto 2012

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This book is available as a free download from [www.barbara-budrich.net](http://www.barbara-budrich.net) (<http://dx.doi.org/10.3224/86649462>). A paperback version is available at a charge. The page numbers of the open access edition correspond with the paperback edition.

ISBN 978-3-86649-462-6

eISBN 978-3-86649-514-2

**DOI 10.3224/86649462**

Barbara Budrich Publishers  
Stauffenbergstr. 7. D-51379 Leverkusen Opladen, Germany

86 Delma Drive. Toronto, ON M8W 4P6 Canada  
[www.barbara-budrich.net](http://www.barbara-budrich.net)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
Die Deutsche Bibliothek (The German Library) (<http://dnb.d-nb.de>)

Institutional Editor: University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany  
Jacket illustration by disegno, Wuppertal, Germany – [www.disenjo.de](http://www.disenjo.de)  
Copy-editing: Carsten Bösel

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## Preface

In recent decades, the term competence has become a keyword in the international discussion about education. This international discussion was accompanied by several national discussions, which mostly had a different emphasis compared to the international context. Especially in the European Union, competences became the central term in discussions about learning outcomes. Here, competences emerged as a counter-concept to the idea of qualifications – which are strictly bound to (national) educational systems. As the European Union, in the Maastricht Treaty, has agreed not to harmonise the educational systems of its member states, national differences tend to become more pronounced; thus qualifications cannot bring transparency and comparability to European education. Competence, in contrast, is a concept that can be used to compare people's knowledge and skills across national education and training systems.

To look at competences rather than qualifications means to shift the focus from educational input (length of a learning experience, type of institution, etc.) to the outcomes of learning processes. Competences as learning outcomes have nowadays been defined in almost all educational programmes. Furthermore, referring to competences highlights the fact that they can also be developed outside of educational programmes. Therefore, a variety of contexts became relevant that enable or constrain competence development. These contexts include the workplace, social class, family, and friends, for example. As a consequence, the validation – that is, the evaluation, recognition, and certification – of competences acquired outside of educational systems became relevant. To address this issue, a variety of methods and instruments were developed throughout Europe. On this basis, competences can support transparency and comparability in education and lifelong learning in Europe.

What is more, the term *competence* also serves to introduce a new didactic approach to adult education. The competence discussion helps strengthen

individuals' self-responsibility and self-efficacy as they engage in their learning processes. In other words, it is up to the learners to decide whether, where, when, and how they learn or not. Adult education programmes can merely provide contexts to facilitate learning processes and stimulate motivation. This is especially relevant in the education of adults, since adults are much more independent than children in their decisions about what and when to learn.

In this study guide, Valérie Cohen-Scali, Alain Kokosowski, Thierry Piot, and Richard Wittorski introduce the topic of competence development with a special focus on the working context. They give an insight into the Western backgrounds of the competence discussion and show the consequences of this discussion with respect to professionalisation and competence development in adult education. Furthermore, they present a variety of instruments for validating and evaluating competences. Finally, they raise the issue of competence management in adult education and highlight some of the changes in vocational education and training brought on by the competence discussion.

All of the authors are French researchers with special expertise in the area of competences. The study guide, therefore, gives an insight both into the European discussion and into the French discussion about competences. Valérie Cohen-Scali developed this study guide during her guest professorship at the University of Duisburg-Essen. By bringing on board her French colleagues, she created an interdisciplinary team of experts from psychology, human resource management, and education. As a result, the study guide provides an interdisciplinary perspective on the topic. Thanks go to Valérie Cohen-Scali for coordinating this study guide and to all the authors for their contributions to this volume.

*Regina Egetenmeyer*

## 1. Introduction

*Valérie Cohen-Scali*

Since the 1980s, questions around people in the workplace have been addressed more from the point of view of competences than the time match between an individual and a particular role. Approaching work through competences appears to be at odds with a tradition which conceives of work as the association between an individual and a task. This traditional conception of people at work emerged with the development of industrialisation in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. It was profoundly influenced by the principles of Scientific Management developed by Frederick Taylor, an engineer, who was invited into factories in the United States in order to help them introduce a more rational way of organising their work. Taylor's primary preoccupation was with the best way of doing a particular job, what an appropriate workload would be, and what fair payment was, with the aim of increasing workers' efficiency and performance. He carried out numerous studies (Kanigel, 1997) of the work stations of manual workers and made recommendations in order to provide workers with the most appropriate tools for the way they worked.

This conception of work as an activity was strengthened in the twentieth century with the advent of the Second World War, which prompted an acceleration in the development of occupational psychology. Military activities led, on the one hand, to the development of psychological evaluation tools to be used on soldiers, and on the other, to the creation of military equipment which was easier to handle and better suited to the morphology and cognitive abilities of its users. Later, social conditions at work came under intense scrutiny, addressing questions such as motivation, job satisfaction and supervision. Nonetheless, work as an activity continued to be perceived in terms of the relationship between the individual and the task.

This may have seemed relatively well suited to a context of stable industrial production, a booming socio-economic environment, and homogeneous demand. The 1970s are associated with the first world economic crisis linked to an increase in the price of fossil fuels. This was accompanied by a harshening of the socio-economic environment and an increase in unemploy-

ment in Western societies. Businesses needed to be more vigilant about the changes occurring in a more uncertain and complex environment. They also needed to prove that they could be more responsive and more flexible. Many national governments focused on vocational training to tackle the changes taking place. This meant training employees with inadequate skills and qualifications to carry out increasingly varied and changing activities, which often required a more extensive range of cognitive abilities.

From this point onwards, the traditional conception of work as a relationship between an individual and a relatively simple task no longer seemed appropriate. Researchers in sociology, psychology, and training reflected on other paradigms which might be better suited to defining the new reality. The term *competences* gradually came into common use. It was initially used by Chomsky in 1960 in relation to linguistics, as a document published by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) explains:

The use of the term 'competence' goes back to Noam Chomsky and was related to his creation of the theory of generative grammar as well as being part of his contributions to linguistics and cognitive psychology ... Chomsky distinguishes between linguistic competence as the speaker/hearer's knowledge of his language on the one hand and linguistic performance as 'the actual use of language in concrete situations' on the other hand. (Cedefop, 2009b, p. 108)

The term *competences* is used to describe the actual use of a particular aptitude in a given context. In the working environment, the term *competences* emphasises on the one hand, the role of the specific context of a particular activity as a determinant of the way a worker will approach a given task, and on the other, highlights the fact that work is essentially an individual and/or collective process of problem solving. According to Weinert, implementing competences in the workplace relies on the use of several processes: 'ability, knowledge, understanding, skill, action, experience, motivation' (Winterton, Delamare-Le Deist, & Stringfellow, 2006, p. 34).

Two terms are now commonly used in adult education: competence and competency. According to Eraut, there is a subtle difference between the two:

There is a distinction mostly in the American literature between the term 'competence' which is given a generic or holistic meaning and refers to a person's overall capacity, and the term 'competency', which refers to specific capabilities. However even the word competency can be used either in a direct performance-related sense: a competency is an element of vocational competence, a performance capability needed by workers in a specified occupational area or simply to describe any piece of knowledge or skill that might be construed as relevant. (Eraut, 1996, p. 179)



Other, more specific shades of meaning are also found in the literature. For example, instead of generic competences, there are references to key competences:

Key competences are context-independent, applicable and effective across different institutional settings, occupations and tasks. These typically include basal competences, such as literacy, numeracy, general education; methodological competences, like problem solving, IT skills, communication skills, including writing and presentation skills; and judgement competences, such as critical thinking. (Winterton, Delamare-Le Deist, Stringfellow, 2006, p. 33)

A series of other terms used in the literature on competences are defined in the box below.

**Keywords: Knowledge, understanding, and capacities**

Wittorski (see Chapter 3) defines a number of concepts similar to competences: knowledge (theoretical, action, and professional), understanding, and capacities.

A piece of knowledge can be defined as a socially validated and communicable statement. It is therefore a descriptive or explanatory statement about a given reality. Knowledge can be differentiated in a number of ways:

- Knowledge is described as theoretical when it is established and recognised by a given academic and cultural community at a given time (certain laws of fundamental physics, for example) as a dominant phenomenon, based on a *truth criterion*. Knowledge of this kind is disseminated through encyclopedias, textbooks, and specialist publications in the place and at the time concerned (in the form of slate tablets, papyrus or parchment rolls, papers or books, or files).
- Knowledge can be described as 'action' knowledge when a social community (made up of people who engage in the same activity) decide to validate a statement describing a sequence of actions judged, as a dominant phenomenon, to be 'effective' (*the criterion here is its effectiveness for action*, whilst the challenge is to organise effective local practices and produce a *social identity*).
- Knowledge can be described as 'professional' when an actual or prospective professional community decides to validate a statement describing a sequence of actions judged, as a dominant phenomenon, to be 'distinctive and legitimate' in order to have it acknowledged and recognised in the social arena (the criterion here is that of legitimacy and better recognition in the selected arena, whilst the challenge lies in social intelligibility and the production

of a *professional identity*). Knowledge therefore has a very strong social dimension, combined with an identified or codified process of formalisation.

The judgement or validation criteria mentioned here are not exclusive, but are dominant criteria for each type of knowledge (some theoretical knowledge, for example, may also be validated according to an effectiveness criterion).

Understanding, however, is a social construct which refers both to the process of internalisation and assimilation (transformation) by the individual of the knowledge and/or information passed on to them or which they contribute to producing, and the result of this process. From this point of view, understanding is on the one hand, the process (and the product) of comprehension and memory (i.e. what the individual retains in qualitative and quantitative terms of the knowledge passed on to them), and on the other, the process (and the product) of drawing conclusions from their actions by the individual, which constitute the value they derive from their experience. In this last case, experience, in the sense of 'known' experience, lies more in the subject identifying their modalities of action and the results they produce. Experience is therefore constructed primarily by a process which consists of deriving understanding from one's actions. Understanding therefore has a much stronger subjective dimension.

In the same way that there is a close link between competence and identity, there is a close relationship between understanding, knowledge, and identity. Effectively, knowledge and understanding constitute a communicative situation about or for actions and people, and act to some degree as 'markers' and 'foils' for identity.

Capacities are social constructs which describe a relatively transversal ability to take action. Capacities represent an acquired potential to take action: they are not in use at the point at which they are described but are nonetheless available to be brought into play when needed.

Whilst the notion of competence and research into competences is now widespread, particularly in the context of studies carried out by the European Union (published by Cedefop) in the area of Vocational Education and Training (VET), it must be said that guides to this area aimed particularly at students are rare. The aim of this study guide is to provide European students with an overview of competences and their development, as far as possible from a European perspective. Its objective is therefore both to describe the main theoretical developments in relation to the concept of competences, and to underline the way in which the European Union deals with the question of

competences at both a reflective and practical level in order to support the development of qualifications. The guide has been written by a number of French authors specialised in adult education and training, and tackles the question of competences from a number of different and complementary points of view, with an emphasis on VET professionals and activities.

Chapter 2 describes recent changes in the working environment that explain why competence-based approaches now appear to be particularly relevant in adult education.

Chapter 3 addresses competences from a theoretical perspective, given the imperatives of professionalisation for individuals and the continuous emergence of new activities.

Chapter 4 addresses the question of the transmission of competences and learning in the workplace, with a presentation of professional didactics.

Chapter 5 discusses options for evaluating and validating competences, identifying the evaluation methodologies and validation practices currently in use in various European countries.

Chapter 6 outlines the main features of management practices in relation to competences, which are currently emerging as a recent but major concern in major European businesses.

Chapter 7 focuses on changes in employment in adult education and training and the consequences of these changes on the competences of professionals.

The guide is designed to enable students to work independently or as a group, both inside or outside the classroom, by referring to the suggested exercises and tasks at the end of each chapter. The bibliography lists a large number of English publications and documents to help students gain a more detailed understanding of the theoretical aspects or explore practical illustrations and examples implemented in a number of European countries.



## 6. Competence Management and Adult Education

*Valérie Cohen-Scali*

Competence management has emerged as a key concept in contemporary organisations development. According to Gilbert (2003), it has become a very widespread notion but is difficult to define precisely. Several other expressions are also used with the same meaning: competence-based logic, management by competences, competence-based management, and so on. Nevertheless, competence management can be defined by the following characteristics:

- A set of professionals (managers, human resource executives, consultants, training staff, etc.) make their management-related decisions based on competence considerations.
- A variety of management-specific tools and methods (skills referential, portfolios, etc.) are used.
- Individual-focused norms of behaviour, individual responsibility, and the autonomy of the employee are valued.
- A set of human resource management practices (projected occupations and competences management, competences assessment, etc.) exist.

Competence management emerged as a new way of organising work in a more effective way, allowing firms to better face new constraints from the environment than was possible with the stiff traditional approach related to the adequacy of worker-task. Issues involving the production process thus can no longer be settled in Taylorian terms, according to which there would only be one way of realising a task. This approach would mobilise only a few, very well-mastered skills. Competence management corresponds to a more global conception of a worker capable of limitless learning in the workplace, a source of collective skills, and of organisational development.

In this chapter, competence management is approached through two developments. On the one hand, we will explore the main factors involved in current management practices, and on the other hand, we will look at some examples of practices implemented to support organisational or individual evolution.

**Keyword: Competence management**

'Competence management originated and developed in response to businesses' need to adapt to changes in the competitive environment and in line with their decision to adopt a flexible model of organisation; it is used as a means of re-establishing the relationship between employment and training. It is linked to an increasing level of individualisation in performance-related pay.' (Gilbert, 2003, p. 24)

## **6.1 The main determinants of competence management**

Four main factors have an influence on individual and collective competence management in most of today's European firms:

- European directives
- national policies related to training
- firms' strategies to face the evolution of the economic market
- the individual and the new attitudes they have to adopt in such a work context.

### *6.1.1 The European framework*

As described in the EU activities assessment report (2002–2010) on vocational education and training (VET) (Cedefop, 2010), a set of instruments and principles have been developed under the Copenhagen process, which began in 2002:

- The **European Qualifications Framework (EQF)** has been designed 'to compare qualifications throughout Europe to support lifelong learning and educational and job mobility' (Cedefop, 2010, p. 25). A process of competence recognition and validation organised at the European level is implemented in order to allow learners to move from one qualification to another. The process covers all levels and types of qualifications. EQF offers the possibility to individuals and enterprises to know precisely what skills are needed regarding one qualification.
- The **European credit system for VET (ECVET)** 'helps validate, recognize and accumulate work-related skills and knowledge acquired during a stay in another country or in different situations, so that these experi-

ences contribute to vocational qualifications. This process favors mobility of students and workers.’ (Cedefop, 2010, p. 25)

- The **European quality assurance framework** allows countries to develop, improve, guide, and assess the quality of their VET systems and develop quality management practices.
- **Europass** is a ‘portfolio of documents to support job and geographical mobility to enable people to present their qualifications and skills using a standard format understandable to employers throughout Europe. Europass documents are the Europass CV, language passport, Europass mobility, diploma supplement, and certificate supplement. The Europass must favor employees’ mobility among European countries.’ (Cedefop, 2010, p. 25)

These instruments have been implemented in most European countries today. Moreover, two main principles are becoming central, emerging as important factors for modernising education and training systems and for helping individuals become more efficient in managing their competences. **Lifelong guidance and counselling** are strengthened in order to support European policies of education, training, and employment. It addresses four priority areas: career management skills, access to services, quality of guidance provision, and policy cooperation. Furthermore, the development of common **principles to high non-formal and informal learning** quality is designed to provide trustworthy approaches and systems to identify and validate non-formal and informal competences.

One of the EU objectives is to increase the skills of its workforce. Principles are defined and studies are made in the different countries in order to implement these principles. By doing so, the European Union provides a framework of strong strategies for the management of competence at the national level. But supplying general principles is not the Union’s only way of intervening. Another way is to supply instruments for the development of future skills. For example, the European Union conducts forward-looking studies which allow researchers to identify the evolution of skills needs during the next decade within the framework of the *Skillsnet* (Cedefop, 2009a).

**Keyword: Skillsnet**

In 2004, the European Cedefop agency created the skillsnet network. This network aims to identify new needs in skills early enough to be able to react to this information and to strengthen international cooperation and information exchange. The activities of the network are

based on research data: researchers analyse skills needs in the European labour markets and look for analogies between the various countries and professional sectors to reveal common evolutions and to examine the needs of particular groups (low-qualified persons, small firms, immigrants, etc.). (Cedefop, 2009)

### *6.1.2 Vocational training systems and lifelong learning national strategies*

Qualifications systems vary from country to country because they are embedded in national histories, values, and policies. At the national level, three sets of factors play a role in competence management (Louart, 2003):

- **The impact of liberalism:** According to liberal ideology, which is based on individual responsibility, it is mainly up to the employee to increase their competences. The impact of liberalism is very important in the United Kingdom, for example, where individual autonomy is strongly valued.
- **The major role of the educational system** and the government's involvement in economic markets are another key point. France, for example, is often considered as the country most concerned about diplomas and educational levels.
- **The weight of professional corporatism:** This factor is very high in Germany, for example.

Louart (2003), in response to the analyses of Slomp (2000), provides a typology of three major models by comparing the European systems of labour relations. The qualification system structure can relate to sectors, national qualifications registers, or education and training systems, and there is no standardised model of 'qualification systems'. We focus on the situation in three countries that exemplify the three models identified by Louart. In each case, the specific national context provides constraints as well as opportunities for enterprises and individuals. The national context thus emerges as a frame for the implementation of competence management in these countries.

#### United Kingdom

The British model provides firms with substantial leeway for negotiation. Based on this situation, the UK government has set priorities for lifelong learning (Cuddy & Lency, 2005):

- developing skills and knowledge for a productive workforce through fostering creativity, innovative thinking, and enterprise
- increasing and widening participation in learning including basic skills
- raising standards in teaching and learning.

Training policies are left to employers, but the government has identified weaknesses in terms of leadership and management skills in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), particularly at the middle management level. For Mudler (2007), 'VET development [in England] is driven by objectives of productivity improvement. [A] sector skills development strategy is followed. Competencies are embedded in national occupational standards, in which five levels of competence are distinguished, and national vocational qualifications.' (p. 12) Use of the competence concept is linked to evaluation and the ability to demonstrate skills and abilities. The link between competence and performance is also not always very clear and evident.

#### Germany

The German model gives a central role to the negotiation with professional sectors. In Germany, the VET system is characterised by openness, flexibility, and permanent transformation. VET is strongly connected with the dual system, which is characterised by theoretical and practical parts, in which workplace learning plays an important role. The VET system is based on co-operation between government and industry, with the government's role focused on regulation and organisation (Hippach-Schneider, Krause, & Woll, 2007). Training directives guarantee a uniform national standard. Training courses are evaluated with tests created by an independent organisation. These evaluations are designed to increase quality and transparency in the German VET system (Bousquet, 2007). Today, the emphasis is on general competencies, key qualifications, with a higher level of abstraction and better transfer potential. Competence development is aimed at work activity, or knowledge of work processes.

#### France

In the French model, the government plays a major role in organising labour relations. In France, the continuing vocational training system is more focused on individuals. One of the major challenges for vocational policies is to help people achieve career security. Different instruments are implemented (notably the *bilan de competences* and the validation of non-formal and information learning system (VAE)), allowing people to manage their compe-



tence analysis and development themselves. In France, for example, the continuing vocational and training system depends on a number of partners: the national government, the regions, firms, and social partners. Firms cover the main costs of continuing vocational training for their employees; funding provided by the government and the regions comes second. Nevertheless, firms do not manage the financing of the vocational training directly (Cedefop, 2008b): intermediate organisations intervene to distribute funds according to individual needs and labour market trends.

Table 4 provides some examples of the instruments utilised in France at the national, regional, and professional levels to plan the skills needs for the future.

*Table 4:* Skill needs anticipation by public employment services, involvement of relevant stakeholders in France

Level	Initiator	Main focus	Example of initiative
National	Prime Minister, Ministries of Employment and Education.	Recruitment, sector development	Prospective study contracts; state of sectors
Regional	Employment and training observatory	Analysis, forecast for school training, continuing training and training in enterprises	Regional employment and training observatories, periodical analysis of sector activities and professions
Professional	Industry branch joint observatory; set-up of professions and qualifications forecast observatory	Forecast on development of branch professions at regional levels	Observatory of automobile trades

Source: Cedefop, 2010, p. 62

In spite of the European Union's strategic orientations and activities, skills management approaches in these three countries vary widely. In some cases, firms enjoy considerable freedom proposing certain types of training, whereas individuals are very constrained. In others, individuals can use training or self-evaluation tools to help themselves to find a new career path (France). In some countries, government-industry relations are very close (Germany), whereas in others, these relations are more distended (France).

### 6.1.3 Competence management at the workplace

The third factor that has an influence on competence management relates to managing competences at the workplace. One of the challenges that firms have to face is managing their employees' competences. Managing competences, from the firms' point of view, means continuously adapting their workforce, in quantitative as well as qualitative terms, to the new challenges they meet because of the evolution of their work environment. Indeed, firms have to adapt to diverse trends (Citeau, 2002):

- the decreasing relevance of certain activities
- the necessity of developing a more participative type of management
- the development of new skills in the future
- the evolution of work organisation in connection with the development of new technologies
- the consideration of firm demographics.

To face these trends, firms have to define strategies, and then actions, regarding skills management. However, a look at firm practices reveals a strong degree of diversity regarding their definitions and utilizations of competence (Aubret, Gilbert, & Pigeys, 2002). Even though all firms are now concerned with competence management, some of them have implemented important changes in their practices, whereas others simply changed their vocabulary without changing their practices. The notion of competence can be central to a firm's philosophy, in which case the entire human resource management system will be designed to promote competence development. In other cases, the notion of competence is only connected to specific firm domains.

The emergence of the competence notion in firms and the question of competence management are associated with the idea of the learning organisation. This concept refers to an organisation in which employees have opportunities of learning and of transferring what they have learnt.

#### **Keyword: A learning company**

For Burgoyne, Pedler, and Boydel (1994), a 'learning company' is associated with specific characteristics in line with organisational practices of learning. The main characteristics of a learning company in direct relation with competences management are:

- mechanisms and employee relationships which encourage and support self-development

- a culture and climate which encourages responsible experimentation and shared learning from successes and failures
- forms of structure which both enable learning and could shift, adapt, and accommodate change resulting from it
- willingness and ability to learn with and from other organisations and companies.

Source: Burgoyne, Pedler, and Boydell (1994, p. 4)

As Eraut said, 'Learning opportunities for work-based learning are crucially dependent on the way in which work is organized and allocated; and that in turn is dependent on prevailing assumptions about the competence of the people involved.' (1996, p.168) Numerous big firms have committed themselves to competence management practices. Competence management has given birth to a range of software applications, for example, some of which are designed to help identify a firm's competence; others allow firms to realise graphic representations of their skill sets, whereas others aim at facilitating the projected competence management process. However, large portions of the economic sector, especially small firms, have yet to catch up with these trends.

#### *6.1.4 Competence management and new individual attitudes*

Competence management aims to stimulate individual employees to engage in the collective performance of their organisation. It seeks to improve cooperation and adaptation at work, which have taken on a new importance. The competence of individuals is not an end in itself. It must be made to serve a collective mobilisation of resources regarding efficiency, results, and adaptation to change (Monchatre, 2005). Competence management introduces major flexibility into the definition of work and its attributions. It aims to produce real competence at the organisational level. The organisation of work tends to provide personal initiatives. These initiatives drive the creation of spaces of autonomy and initiatives for pooling the knowledge that has been mobilised in a dynamics of innovation and enrichment at the workplace. The search for increased organisational efficiency has to deal with the implementation of standardised routines. Careers become more dependent on the progress of the individual's skills. But these evolutions tend to encounter numerous difficulties connected to the economic market, the organisation of work, and management.



According to Zarifian (1999), competence management involves a new way of managing individuals with the main objective of improving performance. The issue relates to the best way of reconciling this recognition of individuality with the collective character of work and lifestyles. In this context, individuals have to mobilise resources in an intense way: they have to become more autonomous, and they have to engage in training. They have to get involved in work while remaining under the control of the group. Individual commitment appears as the precondition for a successful and efficient organisation (Lozier, 2006).

In the framework of competence management, the individual becomes a subject and a player at the same time (Zarifian, 1999). Indeed, the individuals are asked to be more subjectively committed to their jobs, to be more motivated, and to give meaning to their activities. They must know up to which point they can involve themselves and control their commitment. Intense involvement can lead to unbearable stress, pathologies, and the impossibility to reconcile family and professional life.

In order to meet these new work requirements, individuals have to develop two keys skills, according to Zarifian (1999): initiative and autonomy. Initiative means beginning something new, taking action based on a personal decision. The main aspect of modern work life is making decisions and taking the initiative to successfully face any event arising in professional life, or even giving rise to it. Autonomy refers to defining one's own rules of action. It means acting by oneself, self-managing. Individuals have to acquire more freedom in their working life and work activities. This possibility also includes the risk of failure, requiring individuals to be very self-confident when putting themselves in situations that may threaten their identity.

## **6.2 Competence based on individual identity**

Today, employees have to develop new competences that allow them to internalise this new competence-based management logic, and to manage their professional life independently. This change calls for involving more counseling professionals to provide mentoring and psychosocial support, because individuals have to face more complex personal situations and more frequent professional breaks.

### *6.2.1 Individuals facing numerous career transitions*

Whereas, up until the 1980s, individuals used to go through traditional organisational careers, staying with the same company for many years, experiencing upward mobility, and receiving regular pay rises, they are nowadays more and more often confronted with periods of transition. According to Louis (1980), transitions are events punctuating career development – periods, that is, in which individuals change roles. This change of roles can be objective (inter-role transitions) or associated with a subjective change (intra-role transition). Nicholson (1984) defines transition as any change arising in the work context. It includes temporary changes and changes of status (leaving for retirement).

According to Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), any transition can be characterised by several aspects:

- The more or less predictable nature of the events triggering the change allows for distinguishing between anticipated transitions, non-anticipated transitions, and non-event transitions (those transitions that should occur but finally don't).
- The relationships between the person and the framework in which the transition occurs correspond to the transition context.
- The extent of the transition relates to the impact that it could have on the person's life.

For Schlossberg, each transition has specific characteristics and is managed by individuals with varied psychological and social resources. These resources appear as a set of strong and weak points when it comes to facing changes, and they concern the context of the transition (e.g. psychological pressure, duration of the event generating the transition, etc.), the individual self (e.g. abilities to control one's stress, self-knowledge, etc.), or the adjustment strategies that individuals pursue, as well as the social support they benefit from. The events initiating a transition in professional life are more numerous today than they were 20 years ago. They generate pressure in connection with the key role of work for the individual. Every situation of transition has several specific features:

- its character of discontinuity and break
- its crisis aspect, linked to the emergence of contradictions and incompatible elements
- putting adaptive strategies or behaviours to the test.

Adult education professionals often work with individuals facing a period of transition in their careers. They are often called on to support these individuals in the various changes that occur at different life stages. Their role is to help them to identify their strengths and weaknesses, develop scenarios for the future, and develop their ability to face uncertainty.

In some cases, individuals not only have to face periodic transitions in the course of their career, but also find themselves in new professional situations, which are far removed from the traditional career model.

### 6.2.2 *The emergence of 'boundaryless careers'*

Upheavals in organisational structures have led researchers to question the model of the traditional organisational career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). New forms of career are appearing, in particular as new forms of organisation (such as networked organisations) accentuate the role of the individual in managing their own career. The gradual weakening of the large corporate model and new forms of organisation have led to the erosion of prerequisites for an organisational career and opened the way to non-standard ways of working, such as temporary work and self-employment. Some researchers, such as Inkson (1995), suggest an incompatibility between the traditional career and current conditions in the working environment. Whilst we do not suggest that traditional forms of organisation have entirely disappeared, various economic and social changes are leading to the creation of new types of businesses, implying new views of career management.

**Keyword: Career**

Career can be seen as an overarching construct that gives meaning to the individual's life. It is a superordinate construct that allows people to construct connections among actions, to account for effort, plans, goals, and consequences, to frame internal cognitions and emotions, and to use feed back and feed-forward processes (Young & Collin, 2000, p. 5).

Most businesses can no longer offer a stable, lifelong career, but rather career opportunities, with the responsibility for their career development falling to individuals. We have also seen the emergence of the concept of the 'boundaryless career' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). This concept is based on the idea that careers are no longer constrained by the boundaries imposed by businesses and instead are made up of a series of job opportunities, which goes beyond the boundaries of a single workplace.

Several principles are embodied in this new career model.

The first promotes *learning* in all its forms, on the basis that this is an essential condition of adapting to new professional situations. In addition, the individual is not necessarily aware of the knowledge they have acquired through their various experiences and needs to go through a process of formulating what they have learned and exploring the contexts in which they can be transferred or valued. This accumulation of learning or competences constitutes an individual's 'career capital'. These may be broken down into sub-groups, including 'knowing how' (transferable know-how), 'knowing why' (the ability to ascribe meaning to one's experiences), and 'knowing who', which refers to one's social network, that is, familiarity with a network of contacts on whom one can rely for work and for emotional support.

The second principle relates to the individual's *career capital*, that is, their accumulated competences. This relates to potential resources they can develop by choosing certain activities or jobs likely to lead to the acquisition of new competences. The individual is thus continuously faced with the choice of continuing in their previous position or changing it in order to focus on more profitable investments.

The third principle relates to *employment arenas*, which can be defined as collective competences based in particular areas or in certain professional sectors. The accumulation of competences in individuals paves the way to a rise in collective competences and expertise in a particular sector, and fosters innovation.

The final principle refers to the idea of a career as a series of professional *experiences* over time. Every experience is a situation considered as a potential learning opportunity. Depending on the individual's previous learning and the way they experience the situation, they will be more or less exposed to new learning. It is suggested that a boundaryless career provides greater exposure to learning than an organisational career.

These four principles need to interact constantly in the context of new forms of career, and this can be achieved by creating a sense of meaning in one's professional career. Individuals need to seek a coherent relationship between their experiences on an ongoing basis. Careers therefore become less and less a matter of choice, but individuals, guided by their own success criteria, try to give them meaning and make them part of their own particular path. Individuals need to develop specific competences to manage their own careers independently.



## 6.3 Competence management practices and tools

As emphasised by Defélix, Klarsfeld, and Oiry (2006), competence management is never simply the sum of various instruments, but a process involving both organisations and individuals. Practices associated with competence management in firms and individuals are not determined once and for all, but are flexible and evolutive in order to try to adapt to unexpected socio-economic changes. Competence management is a process, and it is important to specify its boundaries, dynamics and effects on each separate occasion.

There are thus numerous practices aimed at making competence management for individuals easier. Some of these practices are used by firms and result in improvements to the way employees' competences are managed within the company in order to improve the overall performance of the business. One example is known as Strategic Workforce Planning. Other tools are used more at the instigation of European guidelines or by national governments and are designed to facilitate the development and management of their competences by individuals themselves, such as the portfolio or Euro-pass, or by innovative groups of researchers.

### 6.3.1 Strategic Workforce Planning (SWP)

SWP is a management tool which is designed to help firms to assess the impact of policy decisions on employees' jobs and competences. The need to anticipate is the main motivation which prompts certain businesses to adopt an approach of this kind. It enables individuals to plan possible developments of their competences on the basis of a likely future context. SWP therefore set out a framework, which can be used as the basis for organising various human resources management activities. According to Citeau (2002), this approach to SWP consists of a series of steps:

1. *Define development projects.* The first step is to analyse the firm's internal and external environment in technological, economic, and social terms in order to identify what is possible and what is desirable. Comparing internal capacities and external opportunities should help the firms to define its strategic choices.
2. *Break down objectives in terms of jobs and the competences required for projects.* It will be essential to define needs for jobs and competences according to the ways in which work is organised, identify key factors in job changes, and list key positions to be filled for the development of

certain activities, those which will change in terms of substance, and those where the number of employees will fall.

3. *List existing human resources and assess how these will change over time.* In addition to identifying needs, it is important to draw up an inventory of the jobs and competences currently available and the movements of people in different jobs (departure levels, staff turnover, etc.).
4. *Analyse any discrepancies between the existing situation and future needs and create possible scenarios.* Most of the time there will be gaps between the existing situation and what is desirable. It is therefore important to think about the resources needed to regulate the business's internal market. Scenarios should form part of this process.
5. *Define and implement action plans.* A set of action plans is agreed, specifying a timetable, the entities and key players concerned, and monitoring and evaluation methods.

SWP therefore consists of carrying out an analysis of the current state of competences within the business, thinking about what competences will be needed in the future and implementing strategies to move the situation in the desired direction. It is therefore an organisational practice which involves some or all of the workforce and aims to develop competences across the board. Another common practice today is vocational training, which seems to be a possible way of increasing the level of competences at both an individual and organisational level.

### *6.3.2 Continuing vocational training in firms*

Several European surveys help us analyse the role that vocational training plays in European firms (e.g. Cedefop, 2009, 2011). The Eurostat continuing monitoring survey helps monitor some basic trends in EU firms' training provision. The survey, conducted in 2005, shows that 60 per cent of all enterprises in the EU-27 countries provides training (Cedefop, 2009). Half of all firms (53% in 1999, 49% in 2005) provided continuing vocational training courses in different forms (job rotation, learning circles, quality circles, self-directed learning, and attendance at conferences, workshops, seminars, lectures, or trade fairs). Nevertheless, training at work and attendance at conferences, workshops, lectures, and seminars were the most frequent. 89 per cent of the firms used external courses, whereas 54 per cent used internal courses. 36 per cent provided continued vocational training in work situations; 36 per cent offered continued training at conferences, workshops, lectures, and

seminars; 12 per cent used job rotation, exchanges, or secondments; 15 per cent used learning and quality circles; and 15 per cent promoted self-learning.

Firm-based training tends to be strongly focused on the daily functioning of their employees in the workplace rather than on the acquisition of competences that can be transferred across different environments (Cedefop, 2011). Nevertheless, it has been shown that firm-based training opportunities are usually most likely to be offered to employees in higher status jobs who are often those with the highest levels of education and training achievement.

Low-skilled employees receive measurably less training, as do employees in small firms and in a number of sectors of the economy. Expecting high returns for investment in training, enterprises tend to concentrate on employees who are already highly qualified or those who may assume a technical or a supervisory role in the enterprise; at the same time, they neglect low-qualified, older employees and part-time or in temporary contracts workers. (Cedefop, 2011, p. 30)

Subsidies and exhortations to train more may not be sufficient to increase the share of enterprises providing training. Lack of awareness on training needs is at present a fundamental barrier to skill development in enterprises which will need to be counteracted by appropriate policy measures.

In such a context, trainers in on-the job learning situations may help transform the working organisation into one in which workers can develop their competences further while working, and in which opportunities for learning are embedded in working tasks and work organisations. The primary role of the trainers is no longer to convey vocational knowledge but to support workers in their learning and to stimulate their learning capacities.

What is the impact of training on firms? Several studies reported by Cedefop (2009) show that three main effects have been identified:

- Training appears to boost staff knowledge, and skills are a factor of innovation in processes and products.
- Training may improve economic growth.
- Training improves firms' productivity.

Another practice is becoming common in response to the increasingly chaotic situations encountered by individuals, namely a new form of career counselling focused on the development of individual competences.

### *6.3.3 Career counselling and the life designing new paradigm*

An international research group looking into how people construct their lives, with researchers from Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Switzerland, the

Netherlands, and the United States met for three years, starting in 2007, to reflect on new ways of supporting individual changes brought about by new contexts in the world of work (Savickas et al., 2009).

The starting point for the research was the observation that the career counselling tools and theories currently in use were developed in a context of stable work situations, which no longer reflects reality. New models based on flexibility, adaptation, malleability, and lifelong learning needed to be developed. Today, we need to think in terms of a 'life path' over which individuals plan their lives. Everyone, not just teenagers, is now faced with the question, 'What am I going to do with my life?' Individuals are now obliged to reflect on what is most important to them, insofar as they feel dispossessed and isolated in a world with no psychological support and a low level of security. It is therefore essential to take not only work but one's whole range of activities in different areas of life into consideration. Individuals therefore have to engage regularly in reflecting on themselves and their environment and imagine a number of possible selves. The notion of selfhood now needs to be reconstructed on an ongoing basis. Proposals for work with individuals are based on the epistemology of social constructionism, which recognises that

- identity is the product of psychosocial processes, which take place in a context of interactions and negotiations between individuals and groups.
- individuals give meaning to reality in a social, historical, and cultural context through the mediation of discourse and dialogue.

Work with individuals must contribute to the development of four competences: their adaptability, narrativity, activity, and intentionality.

### Professional adaptability

Support activities must seek to enhance the five 'Cs' of the career construction theory defined by Savickas et al. (2009):

- *concern* about one's career path: considering life from an optimistic angle and as a series of opportunities
- *control*: being convinced that it is necessary to adapt to environments but also believing in one's ability to influence these environments.
- *curiosity*: being prepared to explore different possible selves
- *confidence*: the ability to maintain one's aspirations and objectives in spite of obstacles.
- *commitment*: to one's life plans. Indecision in respect of career choices is not necessarily something to be fought, since it can be a source of new possibilities, allowing individuals to be active even in uncertain situations.



## Narrativity

The authors suggest that support work should be focused on a detailed dialogue between the counsellor and their client. This should allow the individual to identify the most important aspects of their lives, their professional personality, and their resources more accurately. The support professional should help their client to explain how they see themselves in different areas of their lives. Support work should help individuals to identify the different roles they play in their lives, and their relationships, and to reflect on both areas.

## Activity

Activities in every area of life are fundamental. Actions are a major element in changing in individual's discourse about their life. By engaging in various activities, individuals discover what abilities and interests they want to use. Through their activities, they construct new aspects of self-representation and feelings of personal effectiveness. They also interact with others, who provide them with feedback.

## Intentionality

The intentional process is essential to the process of 'life designing'. Support should consist of articulating intentions and expectations in relation to possible selves in the future. Career paths are interpretive constructions developed by the worker. Support professionals need to focus on the way the individual confers meaning on their activities by using intentional processes in constructing their life.

Support methods for individuals should result in greater reliance on narratives and activities than scores in psychotechnical tests. A method based on a six-stage interview is put forward to enable the individual to gradually develop new competences to manage unforeseen situations in their lives.

## 6.4 Conclusion

Competence management reflects a new type of relationship between the individual and their work. Individuals are expected to take control of their working lives and play their own role, rather than one which is prescribed for them. They need to demonstrate independence and initiative in a working en-

vironment which is changing rapidly. These new attitudes also generate more stress amongst employees. Although businesses want individuals to take their work more seriously, they are increasingly less able to offer their employees long-term career development and upward mobility. Individuals should therefore expect to have to develop new forms of activity (portfolio careers, self-employment, etc.). In these new types of career, individuals are responsible for managing their own competences and career paths. They need to develop specific competences to enable them to manage new work situations. Adult education professionals are seen as special mediators who can facilitate the relationship between an ever-more restrictive working environment and ever-more sought-after individuals.

## **Exercises and tasks**

### *Exercise 1*

After reading this chapter, make a list of the various new competences that adult education professionals have to develop with respect to this context. Compare your list with that of one of your fellow students. Then discuss the consequences of developing such competences with a group of students, and what they may mean for your future activity in adult education and training.

### *Exercise 2*

Write a paper summarising the main trends in the field of competence management in organisations.

### *Task 1*

Using what you have learnt in this chapter concerning competence management in enterprises, analyse the situation in the company CIGER below and answer the question.

(This case study is taken from Citeau, 2002)<sup>5</sup>

*The CIGER firm is specialised in the production of electronic and electro-technics equipment. Acquired in 1990 by the IEC group (International Electronic Components) after having filed for bankruptcy, this company today has 760 employees. Since its repurchase, it has seen strong growth, with production increases during this period from 150,000 units per year to 450,000 units in 2002. This exceptional growth, due to the penetration on overseas markets, required a doubling of staff between 1991 and 1995. In 2002, however, the period of boosted growth seems practically over, and the sourness of the competition on the international market obliges CIGER leaders to bend their rate of progress and to rethink seriously the management of their staff. Besides, CIGER, on one hand, plans to make decisive investments at the level of production to realise substantial productivity gains, and on the other hand, plans to focus its efforts on the quality of product maintenance in order to consolidate the distribution equipment.*

*The planned activity is summarised in the table below:*

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Units that have to be produced (x1000)	450	460	470	485	500
Productivity earnings		+ 6%	+8%	+ 10%	+ 7%

*The productivity earnings are evaluated regarding blue-collar staff.*

*For 2002, the company staff becomes established as follows:*

- 615 workers
- 58 first level managers
- 72 technicians and employees
- 15 executives

*Besides, they plan:*

- a departure rate of 5 per cent each year of the blue-collar staff
- a departure rate of 3 per cent each year of the other staff (except executives)

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5 Copyright Armand Colin Edition, Paris. Reprinted by permission.

- *the retirement of one executive in 2004 and of two others in 2005*
- *1 per cent of blue collar staff able to become first level managers.*

*Finally, the human resources manager wishes to avoid any drift of the payroll by keeping constant the ratio between blue-collar staff and other workers.*

Work with other students to analyse the situation, to elaborate a complete plan of staff evolution (needs, resources, promotions, relocations, recruitments, and layoffs) for the next four years and for every category of staff. What data or analysis should be used to complete this plan?

## *Task 2*

Read the 2009 Cedefop document listed below and identify the main trends in workforce and skills needs up to 2020. What can you conclude concerning the evolution of training needs?

Cedefop. (2009). *Future skills supply in Europe: Medium term forecast up to 2020. Synthesis report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available online at [www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/8016\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/8016_en.pdf)

## List of Abbreviations

CCEC:	Competences Elicitation Career Counseling
ECVET:	European Credit for Vocational Education and Training
EQF:	European Qualifications Framework
HR:	Human Resources
NCVER:	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
PISA:	Programme for International Student Assessment
SMEs:	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
TIMSS:	Third International Mathematics and Science Study
TTnet:	Training of Trainers Network
VET:	Vocational Education and Training

## Annotated Bibliography

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy. The exercise of control*. New York: Freeman

A key book by Albert Bandura, one of the world's leading researchers in social psychology working in the field of social learning and self-efficacy. This book develops the theory that forms the basis of the self-efficacy concept – that is, social cognitive theory – and summarises a set of convincing research results on different topics. It shows the impact of self-efficacy beliefs on the daily life of individuals. Self-efficacy emerges as a key psychological mechanism governing a variety of human activities. This approach suggests that it is possible in certain conditions to question social determinism.

Collin, A. & Young, R. A. (Eds.). (2000). *The future of career*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

The fragmented nature of modern working life has led to fundamental changes in our understanding of the term *career*. Few people now expect to have a lifetime of continuous employment, regardless of their qualifications or the sector they work in. This book presents a kaleidoscopic view of the concept of career, reviewing its past and considering its future. The chapters are wide-ranging, exploring topics such as the changing issues of career, individual career experiences, multicultural issues, women's careers, and the implications for practice and policy-making.

Savickas, M. L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J. P., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R., Van Vianen, A. E. M. (2009). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 3, 239–250.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a new social arrangement of work poses a series of questions and challenges to scholars who aim to help people develop their competences and working lives. In this article, the authors formulate potentially innovative responses in a kind of international forum. It presents a career counseling model: the life designing model for career interventions. The article offers an overview of different approaches of career counseling models and develops a framework for new methods and tools in career counseling.

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