



## Analysis of professional competencies in the Spanish public administration management



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### ARTICLE INFORMATION

Manuscript received: 15/07/2013

Revision received: 04/06/2014

Accepted: 24/06/2014

#### Keywords:

Competencies

Performance

Assessment

Management

Public administration

### ABSTRACT

The present study aims to analyse the degree of importance civil servants in the Spanish Public Administration (SPA) attach to a set of twenty professional competencies, as well as to compare the level of managers' self-assessed competency and that of a reference population of managers. For this purpose, a sample of 613 public servants in the SPA consisting of lower-ranking officials and managers was chosen and a survey methodology was used for data collection and analysis. The results indicate first that the most relevant competencies for both groups are self-confidence and self-assurance, communication, and teamwork. Secondly, the level of relevance attached by lower-ranking officials is in many cases greater than the level attached by managers. Finally, managers in the SPA show a self-assessed level of competency far below that of the reference population of managers. This set of results provides valuable information for the creation of a competency-based Comprehensive Human Resources Integrated Management System in the SPA.

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## Análisis de las competencias profesionales en las jefaturas de la Administración pública española

### RESUMEN

El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar el grado de importancia que otorgan los funcionarios de la Administración Pública Española (APE) a un conjunto de veinte competencias profesionales así como comparar el nivel competencial autoevaluado por sus jefaturas con el de la población de directivos de referencia. Para ello se ha trabajado con una muestra de 613 empleados públicos de la APE compuesta por puestos base y jefaturas y se ha aplicado una metodología de encuestas para la recogida y análisis de datos. Los resultados obtenidos indican, en primer lugar, que las competencias más relevantes para ambos colectivos son la confianza y seguridad en sí mismo, la comunicación y el trabajo en equipo. En segundo lugar, el nivel de relevancia otorgado por los puestos base es, en muchos casos, superior al nivel otorgado por las jefaturas. Finalmente, las jefaturas de la APE muestran un nivel competencial autoevaluado muy por debajo del de la población de directivos de referencia. Este conjunto de resultados aporta información valiosa para la creación de un sistema de gestión integral de los recursos humanos por competencias en la APE.

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#### Palabras clave:

Competencias

Desempeño

Evaluación

Dirección

Administración pública

Times of economic and political crisis and vertiginous changes in the European and international stage mean that the commitment of the Spanish Public Administration (SPA) to citizen-customer satisfaction faces numerous complex challenges on a daily basis.

Faced with this situation, it is necessary to respond with speed, professionalism, and efficiency. Even with greatly diminished budgets and fewer resources, it is absolutely essential to be equipped with competency-based comprehensive human resources integrated management technologies which will enable us to provide increasingly more and better services to an ever growing number of citizens who need the proximity, effectiveness, and efficiency of the SPA more than ever. Each public organization must find the best way of making this special, unique contribution that gives meaning to its institutional existence. In other words, each public organization

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must define, based on its *raison d'être*, what the competencies of its public servants are and should be (Ministerio de Administraciones Públicas, 2000); therefore, human resource management in the public sector has a key role in the future ability of governments to generate efficiency and competitiveness in public administrations and in the general economic framework (CEOE, 2011).

Since McClelland (1973) referred explicitly to the term of *competency* as that which really causes superior on-the-job performance – that is, the elements that positively affect initially expected results – there has been a long debate concerning its interpretation (Olaz, 2009). Professional competency is a topic that has been the object of many debates, countless interpretations, and practical applications in different fields for over 30 years (Fernández-Saliner, 2006).

While the concept of competency has been characterised by a large variety of definitions to be found in specialised literature, based on all of these it is possible to extract the essential elements that make up the concept of competency (Galindo, 2010): all competency involves knowledge, procedure, and attitudes combined towards one goal, head knowledge (understanding), know-how (skills, abilities, aptitudes, and capabilities), knowing how to be (attitudes), knowing what to be like (beliefs and values), and being able to do (means and resources) – these are the elements that make up the range of competency; and what stands out most among these characteristics is the fact that one may be very capable but not competent.

In this context we can understand by competency not only the ability to be able to perform specific on-the-job tasks successfully but also to function in many less programmed situations in an unstable environment (De Ansorena, 1996; Levy-Leboyer, 1997).

Strategic plans and defined aims must set the direction inside public organizations (Ministerio de Administraciones Públicas [Ministry of Public Administration], 2000); but competency-based management systems can make it possible to achieve these.

The adoption of competencies as a basis for human resource management in an organization entails a series of advantages. Pereda and Berrocal (2011) point out some of these advantages. Among others, it enables us to use a common language that is accessible to all the members of the organization, as this includes observable behaviours that people are familiar with and not psychological traits; it focuses all people's efforts towards attaining results; it contributes to predicting the future behaviour of people based on their past behaviour; and it enables a comparison between the profile of job requirements and people's competency profile (Gil, 2007).

Performance evaluation of public servants is one of the fundamental challenges the SPA will have to face in this decade, since the Civil Service Basic Statute (CSBS) was passed, making it a legal obligation. Thus, the Spanish administration, sooner or later, will have to begin to carry it out. Moreover, the administration has a second problem stemming from the lack of a tradition of performance evaluation: the absence of tools and performance evaluation models that are specific to public administrations (Salgado & Cabal, 2011).

Along the same lines, a thorough review of training plans ought to be carried out in order to avoid actions that are merely continuations or routine, by linking improvement projects to the strategic planning for each field, and targeting the skills and aptitudes of staff in order to enable progress to be made in competency-based management systems (Ministerio de Hacienda y Administraciones Públicas [Ministry of Finance and Public Administration], 2013).

The present study aims to ascertain, first of all, whether the degree of importance attached to a series of key competencies by lower-ranking civil servants and civil servants in management positions has statistically significant differences. Secondly, it aims to find out whether the degree of competency self-assessed by the managers analysed is the same as that of a reference population of managers.

The resulting information can be of great value at the present time and of special relevance for the decision making of those in

charge of organizing and managing human resources at a local, autonomic, and state level of the SPA.

## Method

### Participants

A sample of 613 civil servants took part – representing 46.05% of the total population working in the City Council of Palma de Mallorca ( $N = 1,331$ ) – 487 of whom correspond to lower-ranking officials and 126 to managers.

In terms of gender, the sample has 225 women and 388 men, while the age of the sample ranges between 25 and 70 years, with a mean age of 44 years (standard deviation of 9.57) and with an average tenure of 14 years (standard deviation of 10.54).

### Procedure

The participants were divided into groups of 15 people. At these meetings the aim of the study was explained and people were asked to participate voluntarily. Subsequently, the participants, after the corresponding instructions and clarifications, aimed at eliminating problems in understanding the competencies to be assessed, answered the questionnaire in the presence of one of the authors of this article, who finally proceeded to collect the questionnaires.

All the questionnaires were applied between the months of October 2010 and April 2011.

### Instruments

In order to evaluate and measure the competencies of public servants, we used the *Cuestionario CompeTEA* by Arribas and Pereña, (2009), which consists of 20 competencies grouped in five subject areas: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Task development, Setting, and Managerial, and were self-assessed only by those in direction and management positions.

There are a number of instruments to assess competencies, most of which entail an adaptation of personality traits to the language of competency. However, one of the main aims in the construction of *CompeTEA* was to create a test specifically designed to assess competencies and not personality traits (Arribas, 2009).

The final and main objective of the tool was to cover as large a range as possible of professional competencies whilst ensuring the psychometric quality of the measure. This aim involved a characteristic process of construction, which meant starting from a wide set of initial elements and competencies in order to obtain a final refined set of items.

The use of *CompeTEA* and not other instruments such as the FB 360 (Marmolar, Bustillo, Arribas, & Minguijón, 2007), the *Sosia* (Gordon, 1990) or the *Bip* (Hossiep & Parchen, 1998), is motivated by the fact that the former has been widely proven over a long time of application, is made in Spain, is more straightforward in its use, and covers a wide range of professional competencies (Arribas, 2009).

The Intrapersonal and Interpersonal areas correspond to the framework of emotional competencies defined as the way in which we relate to ourselves and to others (Goleman, 1996). The area of Task development includes the key competencies and factors for performing on-the-job activities and problem solving. The domain of Setting heightens the projection and purposes of the organization and includes customer's perspective and change management as a driving force for innovation and organizational progress. Lastly, the Managerial area is represented by the abilities and competencies involved in resource management and direction (Direction, Planning and Organization) and talent management (Leadership).

The answers subjects can give to each of the items are coded according to the levels A = *always or nearly always*, B = *often*, C =

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