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Lessons learned from developing and applying self-assessment instruments for evaluating project management competences in two large organizations

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Abstract

The paper reports on lessons learned from developing and applying self-assessments instruments in two cases from Norway and Germany. The purpose of the self-assessment instruments has been to obtain an overall understanding of the competence level on both individual and organizational level. The most important lessons learned from developing the self-instrument suggest that following a systematic top-down process as well as involving respondents from various position are key factors to create an acceptance in the organization to the self-assessment instrument. Furthermore, the most important lessons learned from applying the instrument suggest that the properly designed self-assessment tool essentially contributes to the competence management and further resource planning of the organization. Both case studies presented in the paper provide the reader with several suggestions which can be implemented during the development or improvement of human resource management tools.

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1. Introduction

More organizations are moving to the project structure therefore it is fundamental that organizations must be able to assess the project management competences of their employees. The goal of such assessment is to address any competence gap and provide opportunities for learning and development. The concept of competence dates back to the 1950s rising from behavioral [1] and motivational studies [2]. There are mainly two definitions of competence in literature. One defines competence as a combination of knowledge, skills and personal characteristics [3]. The second definition has rather practical focus and looks at competence as what employees should be able to do based on a required performance level [4]. The concept of project management competences has been growing from the beginning of the twentieth century with the development of management theories and grabbed attention to the management competences categorization [5]. The increasing interest in project management competence led to the development of several standards and certification processes that can be used for assessment, improvement and recognition of project management competencies [6]. These competency standards describe the scope of the discipline by specifying the tasks and knowledge required by the project team to execute their roles [7]. Examples of these competencies standard include; Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK Guide) [8], IPMA Competence Baseline ICB [9] and Professional Competency Standards for Project Management[10].

A self-assessment is an important component for both the organization and for project managers to assess the level of competence using a set of evaluation criteria and an assessment scale. For the project managers, self-assessment allows them to become aware of their own shortcomings and motivates them for further learning [11]. Self-assessment is also important because it provides the organization with an overall view of the current competence state and provides directions for eventual development programs. In essence, the core idea of self-assessment is to actively involve individuals in the activity of assessing their competence. Through the formative aspects of assessment that selfassessment motivates further learning, encourage learners to take ownership for their learning. A selfassessment instrument is basically a questionnaire where individuals appraise their current level of knowledge and skills in different areas using some valid criteria. Self-assessment has been defined in numerous ways [12]. Gordon [13] defines self-assessment as "judging one's performance against appropriate and valid criteria." Key to this definition of self-assessment is the necessity of having criteria that are both appropriate and valid [12]. Cooper [14] suggests that the foundation for generating the items in the competence assessment instrument is the organizational information, and that the best way to develop the competence list is within a top-down approach, which means going from general to specific. Additionally, Braun, et al. [15] identified that special attention should be put in the order, categorization and grouping of items. Furthermore, a scale needs to be established for the assessment of the competences as this standardizes the answers and allows collecting information efficiently [16].

Most of the academic contributions focus on identifying the general competences required for a project manager, while this paper presents the lessons learned from a detailed process for the design and evaluation of a custom-tailored self-assessment instruments to assess project management competences in one project organization from Norway. The paper also summarizes the experiences gained from applying an already developed self-assessment in Germany. As underlined by Decius and Schaper [17] a competence assessment tool should have a reasonable theoretical background for providing a valid testing approach. The cases discussed further are designed in the way to bridge the theory and practice for establishing a well-founded instrument for project management competences assessment.

2. Background

2.1. Case 1. Developing a Self-assessment instrument for an engineering company in Norway

The department in the case company is responsible for providing cost forecasts, schedules, project status analysis and managing schedule risks in all the projects to ensure that the right targets have been established and that the projects are on track. The organizational structure is based on four different portfolios of projects, having five position types: project control manager, project control engineer, planner, cost control engineer and project economist. The development of the self-assessment instrument started with gathering and reviewing organizational information, specifically governing documents, work processes, flowcharts and descriptions of positions. Subsequently, a prototype instrument was developed by analyzing the processes and functions of the employees in case department, identifying

the knowledge and skills required, and linking these with the project management knowledge areas suggested in the theoretical framework. Furthermore, an evaluation scale was developed taking into consideration the recommendations from the literature, and the requirements for the different positions were assigned according to the job descriptions and responsibilities.

The second stage of the process focused on revising and evaluating the reliability and validity of the instrument. For this purpose, semi-structured interview was conducted with 22 respondents from the case company. The interviews were spanning all the five position types. The experience of the interviewee was between 5 to 35 years of experience in project control and analysis functions. The interviews were carried out either in person or by video-call using internal software depending on the location of the participant, and the duration was approximately one hour.

For the analysis of the data, thematic and comparative analyses were applied. In order to recognize the patterns in the answers of the participants, coding was implemented, which means labeling and categorizing data moving through the transcripts and notes from the interviews, tabulating this and then interpreting the results based on the literature and judgement of the researcher. After analyzing the results and based on the literature and on the convergence of the opinions from the participants, the final assessment instrument was created. In addition, various remarks and suggestions were made regarding the current competence development methods in the department.

2.2. Case 2. Applying a self-assessment. A case of a consulting company in Germany

The case company is a consulting company focusing on consulting services in organizational development and strategic human resources management. Among its customers are German small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from metal-, electro-industry, educational institutions, IT-companies, service providers and other domains.

A web-based self-assessment tool was developed in 2014 by the consulting company for the needs of competence evaluation of its customers [18]. The tool covers all fields of competence management including; assessment of competences, measuring the gap between the current competence profile and "ideal" state, training measures proposal and, finally the measurement of the progress of individual employees and / or the whole organization. A flexible design of the web-based tool helps the consulting company to provide the consulting service to the companies from any industry and business area and permanently assess the performance of the organization and its employees. The self-assessment take place individually.

Before the competences' assessment, the case company goes with its customer through traditional consulting process: analysis of "as-is" situation and design of "to-be" processes. In terms of competences assessment, "as-is" means the current competence profile required to perform the process, and "to-be" is the "ideal" state of the competence profile defined by the organization as the number of employees per every demanded competence on the certain, out of four, competence level.

The description of the competences on the level "what should be done" to perform the exact job allows to conduct a self-assessment by the employees. The tool defines four levels of competences: no knowledge, basic knowledge ("know-how" level), specialist ("can-do" level), expert ("can work-independently" level and able to transfer the knowledge further). As a result of this consulting process, the client company has in hands the set of described competences based on certain processes. All described competences are being put after into the tool and then the employees can run the assessment by their own. A flexibility of the tool, besides process-based competence allocation, provides the possibilities to describe the role-based competences, related to the job profile description. Furthermore, the evaluation can be done by the employee and / or their supervisor, and the assessment itself can reflect the competence profile of the individual employee, department or organization in general. After the assessment is done, the tool produces an overall competence matrix, or competence profile, and shows the distribution of the employees on the four competence levels. Furthermore, during the assessment employees are asked by the tool if they want to be trained in the current competence. This contributes to the resources planning by the organization since the tool puts together the competence profile with certain gaps, analysis of the employees' age and the number of workers who wants to be trained further into the full picture of the current human resources state.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Case 1: Engineering Company from Norway

3.1.1. Competences areas and scale description

During the review of the organizational information, it was noticed that the company's main governing document for project development and the subsequent documents and guidelines are based on the knowledge areas suggested by the PMBOK Guide. Therefore, it is considered appropriate to align the competence assessment instrument with the PMBOK Guide. Accordingly, the competence groups to be included in the instrument are suggested by the authors based on the tasks executed by the department and taking into account the knowledge areas and elements described in the [8], adding a competence group called "Management system" to identify the organizational knowledge since this is paramount for the execution of the functions, as well as a competence group related to the use of Information Technology (IT) tools. Hence, the competence groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Identified Competence Groups

management system	time management	stakeholder management,	integration management
scope management	cost management	IT-tools	quality management
human resource management	procurement management	risk management	

As emphasised above, the competence unites knowledge and skills, as well as personality characteristics to execute the project management related job. However, as indicated by Alam, et al. [19] these characteristics are more hidden and are difficult to assess, verify and develop; and since the scope of the work is directed to performance in the execution of the tasks in the case department, they are included in the instrument for competence assessment.

Considering the discussion of Cooper [14] and Braun, et al. [15], it was deemed appropriate to break down the general competence groups listed above into specific competence elements with a smaller span in order to categorize the knowledge and skills required. For further assessment of the competences a scale was proposed in compliance with the recommendations from Richardson [20] and Lucas and Baird [21] by using only positive numerical values both for actual and desired values in addition to verbal descriptors as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Final competence scale description

Scale	Competence level	Description
0	No knowledge	No knowledge or experience related to the competence.
1	Basic knowledge	Sufficient knowledge and skills to work under guidance and to take simple decisions. Limited experience related to the competence. Knowledge of where to find information. General practical and theoretical skills.
2	Qualified/can work independently	Good knowledge and skills to work independently and secure. Can take responsibility for decisions and performance. Able to provide guidance. Good practical and theoretical skills.
3	Expert	Excellent knowledge and skills in addition to extensive experience. Considered a resource person within the area. Could be used in training situations as an instructor.

3.1.2. Evaluation of the competence assessment instrument

After the initial design of the assessment instrument, it was important to guarantee the quality of the instrument developed by evaluating its reliability and validity. A semi-structured interview of approximately one hour was carried out with 22 employees of the case department with more than 5 years of experience and spanning all the different types of positions and portfolios. The interviews allowed eliciting the opinion and feedback from the experts, helping to improve the instrument and obtain the final instrument. There was a lot of controversy among the participants

related to the overall competence requirements for the Project control manager. Summarizing the opinions, it can be concluded that the Project control manager must be proficient either in cost management or time management (or in both), with extensive experience and leadership skills. Nevertheless, the specific requirements will highly depend on the type of project and on the availability of resources to support the manager. For example, as one of the participants stated:

"if it is a smaller project, the project control manager has less resources and needs to take care of more things, but in a bigger project he (the project control manager) has more people working for him and the most important is to know how to manage the contribution from everyone".

In addition, as another participant said,

"the leadership and management skills from the project control manager need to be higher in bigger projects comparing to smaller projects".

The interview process helped to evaluate the reliability, validity, clarity, unambiguity and comprehensiveness of the items in the tool, and to obtain recommendations for changes and additions that resulted in an improved final competence assessment tool. An extract from the assessment tool is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Final assessment tool showing examples of knowledge and skills needed for both Time management and risk management as well as the required competence level.

			Comp	etence	leve	el requ	ired
Competence group	Competence element	Knowledge and skills	Project Control Manager	Project Control Engineer	Planner	Cost Control Engineer	Project Economist
	Schedule	Plan specific activities in a network considering their estimated duration, logical dependencies and resource availability, by using the Critical Path Method (CPM).	1	1	2	1	0
	planning	Determine the project duration.				1	0
1		l'an the interfaces between major deliveries/installations and critical elements, sub-projects nd contracts.		1	2	1	0
me	Schedule	Establish interface milestones.	1	1	2	1	0
ınage	interfaces	Manage the interfaces ensuring interface alignment, consistency and harmonization.	1	1	2	1	0
Time management	1	Monitor the status of project activities to update project progress and all schedule documents, by using Earned Value Management (EVM) and time phasing.	1	1	2	1	0
I	control, analysis and reporting	Manage changes to the schedule baseline ensuring that deliverables are developed and aligned with planning requirements and best practice.	1	1	2	1	0
		Verify and monitor critical path(s) and float development.	1	1	2	1	0
		Schedule benchmarking.	1	1	2	1	0
	Risk control	Be familiar with the established work process for risk management, ensuring that threats and opportunities are identified, analyzed and handled.	3	2	2	2	2
ent		Identify cost and schedule impact of risks	3	3	3	2	2
Risk management	analysis/	Evaluate risks and mitigation actions to accomplish the plan and secure timely deliverables. Schedule risk analysis: quantitative simulation (Monte Carlo technique). Schedule risk assessment: based on elements in the risk register.	2	2	3	2	2
Risk	Cost risk analysis/ assessment	Evaluate the probability and consequences of threats and opportunities in the cost, evaluate the cost effects of mitigating actions and identify trends of key indicators. Cost risk analysis: quantitative simulation (Monte Carlo technique). Cost risk assessment: based on elements in the risk register.	2	2	2	3	2

3.2. Case 2: Consulting company from Germany

3.2.1. Basic applicability areas of the self-assessment tools

On the one hand, the web-based assessment tool allows to assess the competence profile of any organization. On the other hand, the description of the competences varies from the case to case and depends on the specific of the organization. That means, that during workshops the employees together with the consulting company rely only on relevant experience and group competences based on processes in a logical manner.

Table 4 presents such a practical approach for the case of competence allocation and results of further assessment in the German IT-company.

Competence	Competence element	Evaluation Wish for further training					raining	
category		Experts	Specialist	Basic knowledge	No knowledge	Yes	Not sure	No
"Hotline" group	- Firewalls	3	5	3	1	6	4	2
of processes	- networks	2	5	3	2	4	5	3
	- special operating systems	1	6	5	0	5	4	3
"Tickets	- receipt confirmation	3	7	2	0	0	3	9
system" group	- classification	2	4	5	1	5	4	3
of processes	nrocessing	1	5	2	0	5	5	2

Table 4. Part of results showing the competence profile of the department concerning process-based competences allocation and its evaluation

As can be seen from the Table 4, twelve employees of the company were evaluated concerning their knowledge and skills to run certain processes. The employees chose the processes, allocated to them and described the competences in terms of knowledge and skills required to run these groups of processes. This self-assessment would not be so precise and valuable if the employees were not taking part in the workshops to analyze the processes and related competences. Based on this assessment the organization is given further the competence matrix with the competence gaps, age of the employees taking part in assessment and the number of people who wants to be trained further. This information serves then as an input for the future resource planning:

- in case if the responsible for the process employee cannot perform this job anymore the organization knows exactly who has the required competences and, hence, can replace this employee,
 - organization can already evaluate the costs related to the training measures,
- company can calculate the costs related with hiring the new employees to fill the future gaps in the number of "experts" close to the retirement age.

In case the consulted SME has a clear competence description and / or responsible for human resource management employee, the tool can be autonomously used by the client organization without additional workshops and related to that costs.

3.2.2. Additional enabled areas of applicability

Mentioned above consulting process of analyzing the "as-is" and "to-be" situations are usually extended by the consulting company and this process is applied for client's business model improvement or reorganization. That means, that the consulting company runs the workshops with employees to work together on redesigning the business processes and define which competences will be needed to perform "today's" and "future" processes. A self-assessment tool provides then the calculation of the competence gaps which is required to be filled to shift the organization to the next maturity level [22].

Below presented Table 5 reflects such a case of an international industrial manufacturing company, which took a part in the project of digital transformation management for German SMEs.

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Table 5. Results of competence profile description for the case of management of digital transformation [22].

Competence category	Requirements for "as-is"-process	Requirements for "to-be"-process
Technical product competence	Technical detailed knowledge according to software programs, basic knowledge of physics and engineering terms	Knowledge about product range and services, control & measurement technologies
Foreign language skills	Skills to manage E-mails and telephone calls in English; English technical terms knowledge	Relevant English electrical engineering terms knowledge

During the workshop by the German industrial service provider the consulting company together with the SME's employees defined the required competences to perform a current process and a future, digitally transformed process. This part of competence description was put afterwards into the self-assessment tool to enable employees to evaluate their knowledge and skills. As a result, the difference between current and required competence profile uncovered the competence gap, which needs to be overcome to perform the digital transformation process through training measures.

Worth mentioning that another applicability area of the self-assessment tool is performed due to the database of the tool. In case if the company went through assessment, detected the gaps and trained their personnel, the next round of the self-assessment can take place to evaluate the new state of the competence profile of the organization or individual employee. That is to say, the tool also enables the permanent progress tracking, as well as, the organization can always put the new competences into the instrument and analyse possible areas of overall performance improvement.

4. Lessons-Learned and conclusions

4.1. Lessons Learned from developing an assessment tool Case 1

For the design of the instrument it is appropriate to apply a top-down approach, meaning to develop the list of competences by going from general to specific. It is also important to organize and categorize the items in a structured and familiar way for the respondents, and to create a competence scale with well-defined levels. Then, the requirements in each competence can be established depending on the responsibilities of the position.

After the prototype-instrument has been designed it is essential to evaluate its quality in terms of reliability and validity, and the interview method offers a suitable solution to elicit the opinions and suggestions from the experts in order to ensure that the competence assessment instrument is understandable, consistent and that it reflects the organizational functions and requirements.

The competence assessment process allows diagnosing the gaps between the available and the required competence level to be able to address the competence needs through suitable development plans. The competence development methods should include a combination between formal and informal learning, and it is suggested for the case department to integrate courses, on-the-job training, mentoring and coaching, use of collaborative IT tools and networking as a comprehensive competence development strategy.

The competence assessment instrument developed in the Case 1 of this paper identifies the required competence for the different roles in the department and it will help to determine the competence strengths and weaknesses based on the individual's self-assessment. This in turn should help to obtain an overall picture of the competence level in the organization.

4.2. Case 2. Lessons Learned from Applying an Assessment Tool

The tool described in the Case 2 has the same patterns as the tool from the Case 1 and has clear areas of applicability. The practice of the tool application showed that the more employees are involved in the workshops to analyze the processes and related competences, the more interest, motivation and awareness will be performed by them during the self-assessment.

Talking further about the motivation, important, that the employees are being asked if they want to be trained further. People should not be forced to obtain new competences, as well as motivated and trained employees will contribute way much better to the overall performance of the organization.

A certain attention in terms of usability and accessibility should be given to the platform on which a self-assessment tool is performed. The tool described in the Case 2 switched from Microsoft Excel to the web-platform cause of a huge amount of data and its exchange between the customer and consulting company. Another room for improvement can be seen in reusability of the tool and its capacities to track the progress of employee with time, for that certain key performance indicators should be determined.

The cases discussed in the paper uncover certain steps in the self-assessment tool creation for project management competences evaluation (Case 1) as well as the implementation of the tool to assess any competences, which has been used for five years and three years after announcement in the market won a German IT-prize (Case 2).

Both tools discussed have different areas of applicability but the same scales to evaluate the competences, the same approaches to build the competences' sets for evaluation through interviewing and the same roots since they are / were based on Microsoft Excel. Hence the authors recommend looking in the direction of combining both approaches, theoretical and practical, to meet a synergy effect and benefit from the lessons learned discussed in the paper.

Different business fields and specifics of the organization make difficult to define the entire framework of competences' sets to be evaluated and, in general, require a tailored approach for every organization. As it is shown in the paper, that could be done through standards definition, series of interviews and knowledge base of the consulting entities. Further research in the topic could explore the possibility of including the personality characteristics within the competence assessment instrument and how to do so, considering that these aspects are more difficult to evaluate.

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