

The HSE places great emphasis on competence (Approved Code of Practice, L8, paragraphs 48 to 52). The LCA Code of Conduct also emphasises the need for employers to ensure that their staff and contractors are competent to carry out each task assigned to them (Service Provider Commitment 2. Training and Competence of Personnel). This guidance note provides information to help the Service Provider to understand competence and what to do to develop and assess it.

1. Service Provider's Duty

As an employer you have a duty to ensure that any person who carries out a task as part of their employment is competent. An employee in training must be supervised by a competent person until they can carry out their work effectively and safely. This duty extends to those who employ sub-contractors.

You must also be able to show that your organisation has done enough to reassure itself that any sub-contractors it has engaged are competent. This might involve assessing the sub-contractors' own competence assessment records, or in some cases, conducting your own assessment.

2. What is Competence?

Competence is defined as having the ability, knowledge, understanding and skill to complete a task successfully, effectively and safely. A competent person requires not only the ability to carry out and complete tasks effectively and to work safely alone and / or with others, but also the knowledge of their limitations, and for many tasks, the ability to communicate well, both verbally and in writing. Additional qualities that might be required for some tasks include the ability to work successfully, effectively and safely in unusual situations, and the ability to manage time efficiently and to meet deadlines without compromising safety.

3. What is the difference between Competence and Training?

Many companies consider that all they have to do is provide training to their staff in a classroom environment. This alone does not make someone competent.

The best approach to developing a person's competence is to:

- i) provide them with the theoretical knowledge and understanding by classroom training provided either in-house or by the appointment of an external training provider and by training on-the-job
- ii) provide details/copies of all relevant operating procedures and record keeping systems to be used and ensure they are understood
- iii) show them what to do and how to do it
- iv) let them practise the tasks under supervision
- v) provide constructive coaching and answer questions
- vi) check progress throughout by observation, discussion, questioning, etc.

In order to assess ability to carry out a task successfully, effectively and in a safe manner, and to assess ability to communicate well, practical 'on-the-job' assessment is essential.

4. Training and Competence Procedures

The LCA expects companies to have a procedure whereby each member of the team has comprehensive and appropriate training, which is recorded and regularly updated.

In addition to this, the LCA also expects companies to have a procedure for assessing an individual's competence whereby line managers (if suitably competent), or external assessors check the efficacy of the individual's work on site and maintain records to demonstrate that this has been done.

5. Guidance on how to conduct a Competence Assessment

The first step in assessing a person's competence is to define the elements required for the task being assessed.

The questions that need to be asked are:

- i) What knowledge and understanding is required to complete the task?
- ii) What operating procedures, forms, instructions, etc., are required?
- iii) What practical skills and abilities are required?
- iv) What are the criteria indicating the successful completion of each element of the task?

Once the elements have been defined, the next step is to conduct the competence assessment. Each element will have its own success criteria and the work done by the person being assessed will need to be measured against each success criterion. Having done this, it is vital to keep records to demonstrate that the assessment has been carried out and then to maintain and update these records to demonstrate that competence is being reviewed on a regular basis.

6. What records should be kept?

The records of competence assessments that should be kept might vary from task to task, but the following is an indication to give guidance:

- i) Who was assessed and their position in the company?
- ii) Where were they assessed?
- iii) Date of assessment.
- iv) What task was being assessed?
- v) The successful (or otherwise) completion of each step of the process against all identified knowledge, understanding and skill elements.
- vi) An assessment conclusion, e.g., in the form of an assessment mark or level.
- vii) Identification of any further training and /or skill development needs.
- viii) The assessor's name and position and their signature.
- ix) The signature of the person being assessed.
- x) An indication of when the assessment is to be reviewed.
- xi) The outcome of the assessment.

7. How frequently should Competence Assessments be conducted?

Each individual should have a detailed initial competence assessment for each task they are required to complete.

A competent supervisor / line manager should then verify regularly, e.g., annually, that the original assessment remains valid and identify whenever there are changes to operating procedures, published guides, personnel, or the tasks that the person is being asked to complete, etc. If and when changes have occurred, then a reassessment of competence will be required.

8. Are there any other ways in which individuals can demonstrate competence?

If you are a small company or perhaps a sub-contractor wishing to demonstrate your competence to your principal, you might consider approaching your customers. It is good practice to develop a habit of asking for references. You should hold a portfolio of evidence that gives credence to your competence. In addition you can reference your CV, provide details of qualifications, training courses and seminars attended, examples of previous work output, etc.

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