

## BEYOND VOCATIONAL TRAINING – COMPETENCE MANAGEMENT AT STATISTICS SWEDEN

### Invited paper submitted by Statistics Sweden

#### Summary

Traditional training is undoubtedly very important for the competence development at Statistics Sweden. Nevertheless probably more than 90 percent of all professional learning takes place in daily work situations. In consequence Statistics Sweden has launched a competence strategy with different measures for improving everyday learning in focus and becoming a learning organisation as a goal

#### Background

Statistic Sweden is a decentralized organisation with twelve relatively independent departments. It is a flat organisation with comparatively few hierarchies and managers, where employees are expected to take responsibility for their own work to a large extent. Commitment and involvement are keywords in this philosophy. Statistics Sweden is not a unique organisation in that respect in Sweden, where the process with empowerment of employees and flattening the hierarchic structure started in the late 70:ies.

Within ten years almost 50 percent of Statistics Sweden's current staff will have resigned, mainly because of age. At the same time requirements and challenges on Statistics Sweden are increasing: we are to be available 24 hours a day, more timely statistics should be produced, we will face increased competition and our unique position will no longer be clear and obvious.

For Statistics Sweden to continue as a competitive organization in the future, efforts at different levels and in different areas are required. In our Competence Development Policy we state:

*"We shall all contribute to creating a favourable learning environment since this is the basis for competence development. The largest part of competence development occurs during the daily work."*

Statistics Sweden has a staff with high qualifications. The share with a university degree or equivalent is almost 60 percent.

Applicants for more advanced positions should have a university degree including at least 40 points of statistics (40 points is equivalent to a full year of studies). In every organisational unit involved in statistical production there are methodologists available with no less than 60 points of statistics. They have an important role to assure the product quality and to implement quality thinking in the production processes.

#### Statistics Sweden as a learning organisation

In his book "The Fifth Discipline", Peter Senge writes that the basic meaning of a learning organisation is that it is continually expanding its capacity to create its own future - a future with the results it truly desires. Another central feature of a learning organisation is that managers and co-workers within it have the time and awareness to facilitate, encourage and support each other's learning. Managers have a key role to play here.

*"Evaluation discussions between manager and employee play a central role in the annual planning cycle. The discussion should result in an individual plan for development. The employee has a responsibility for seeing that the plan is carried out while the manager should provide time for*

*competence development and should follow up the plans*". (Extract from Statistics Sweden's Competence Development Policy)

Statistics Sweden tries to enable individuals to learn but they themselves should also have to take responsibility for their own learning. A prerequisite for learning is that employees may affect how their work tasks are performed to a large degree. Managers are encouraged to give their co-workers room for new ways of thinking and to take responsibility for planning their own work.

An annual staff survey is carried out in order to provide basis for improvements in the field of working environment. Important aspects of this are the employee's satisfaction with their influence on their own working situation and the possibilities for training and development. The results from the survey are discussed within the units and action plans are formed.

The learning organisation is based on an open climate where exchanges of experiences and communication between organisational units occur without hindrance. Operations are organised for both learning and performance.

A determining factor in meeting Statistics Sweden's requirements for the sound competence management supply is the building of a learning organisation. In addition to specific requirements and efforts, substantial involvement and commitment on behalf of all co-workers is required. It is very much the initiatives of the individual employees which will drive the process forward step by step.

#### **Building a learning organisation involves among other things:**

- To organise operations for learning as well as for performance purposes.
- To inventory and strengthen the desired and necessary know-how.
- To improve each employee's ability to resolve and perform their work tasks - to do the right things in the right way.
- To create meaningful opportunities for the transfer of know-how while carrying out the daily work.
- To make everyone aware about competence development in the daily work situation.

#### **Agents for change**

One step in competence management was taken in 2001 when 15 "agents for change" from Statistics Sweden took a university course on Learning Processes. These agents established a network with the task of piloting Statistics Sweden toward continuous learning. The intention is that they should work in a non-bureaucratic way and inspire others to act.

The studies provided important knowledge for the continuing implementation of learning organisations at Statistics Sweden. The resulting research papers have been presented at Management Seminars. The practical work involved in building a learning organisation was also initiated at these Seminars.

#### **Commitment, involvement and collaboration**

Collaboration also involves managers acting as leaders and demonstrating the ability to encourage and strengthen their co-workers capacity to be actively involved in the development of operations. Relations and the capacity to support become more important than going forth and showing the way. We must learn how to learn.

Quickly changeable requirements from the surrounding world also affect learning. The majority of all learning involves improving and refining our ways of performing different tasks within the bounds of current understanding. There is all the more often reason to seek completely new ways which may involve abandoning ingrained patterns of thinking. This requires another way of learn-

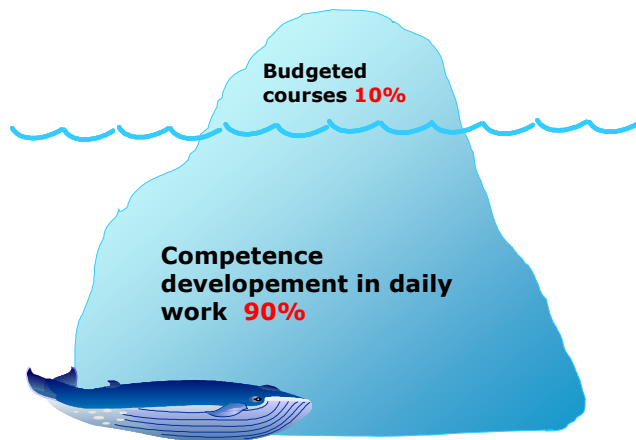
ing - something that we must also learn. Managers are therefore systematically trained to use a “Solution focused leadership”, which helps us to avoid obstacles and to easier realize new ideas.

### **Creating learning opportunities**

In a learning organisation, a steady transfer of knowledge occurs between co-workers through dialogue and the exchange of experiences. Therefore we strive to have at least one inexperienced employee in every project and that all those given new tasks are also assigned a coach. Other efforts involve assessing what is needed in each recruiting effort rather than simply setting, unnecessarily high requirements for formal education out of habit.

### **Everyday learning**

Courses and training are without doubt important for our competence development. It is easy, however, to forget that the greatest part of our professional role is learnt by carrying out the daily work. We should therefore improve our ability to consciously exploit the learning situations we encounter in the course of doing our job. It is about learning to learn.



*We often associate the concept of competence development with courses and training. It is easy to overlook that we are actually continually learning – not least of all at work.*

In order to learn from our everyday work, we must take the time to stand and reflect over what has happened. It is not always easy to discover what has been learnt since learning often occurs in small, barely noticeable steps. It is only when we are involved in some dramatic event that a clear trace memory is created. We can nevertheless establish that these small steps gradually bring us a good way toward a new and deeper level of understanding. This is the learning that we need to strengthen and become aware of.

We must exercise our ability to understand what and how learning occurs beyond the usual venue of a course. This requires time for reflection and consideration: What did I do? How did it go?

Several units at Statistics Sweden have developed their way of communication on weekly staff meetings. Recently it has become more common for one employee to explain his/her current assignment in greater detail. In this way, such meetings have become more learning intensive.

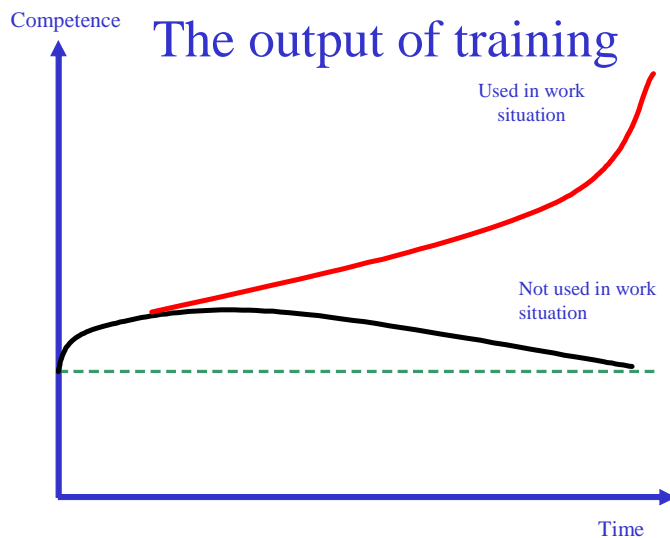
Everyday learning occurs in networks, via mentors and coaches, in projects or with work rotation and training programmes. Learning also takes place during daily discussions with the users of statistics and the survey respondents.

When it comes to statistical skills one of the most important way of learning at Statistics Sweden is the transfer of knowledge from more experienced specialists to younger employees. The supply of in-house training courses in this field is deliberately quite limited although seminars on statistical methodology are quite frequently arranged

Very much knowledge and information is more or less readily available in our systems and databases. We get more and more smart solutions through systems that eliminate the need for (unnecessary) human competence. This provides us with more time for learning and development work.

### Should we discard courses?

No, courses are required in several situations in order to get started with the development of new capabilities. However, courses in themselves seldom increase competence dramatically. It is not until we apply newly gained knowledge to our work when the actual growth in competence occurs. This means that we must ensure that conditions in the workplace are ripe for the application of new knowledge to the usual work. There are many good examples of how this is applied at Statistics Sweden in the IT-area.



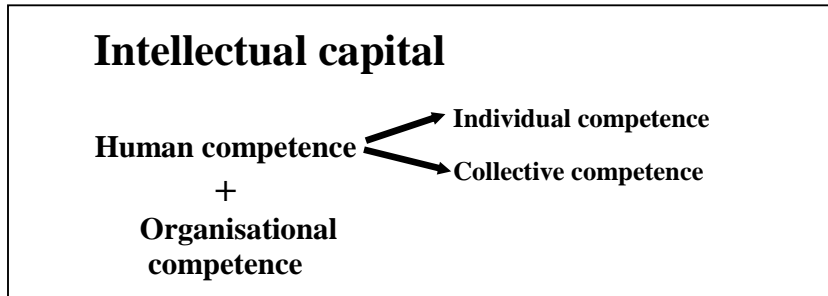
*We soon forget what we have learned in a course unless we have the opportunity to transform the knowledge into reality. It is the combination of courses with the application of the new knowledge in the performance of the daily work what makes the biggest difference to competence development.*

### The competence concept

Statistics Sweden defines competence as the capability to perform of work tasks in a desirable way. Important building blocks related to this capability are knowledge, skills, experience and networking abilities. Competence emerges only when the volition and desire to use it are present. Therefore Statistics Sweden has tried to create the preconditions, rewarding systems, etc. that encourage and support this volition.

### Human and organisational competence

Every organisation needs access to know-how as well as money and other resources. Know-how consists of both human and organisational competence. Human competence consists of individual skills and collective skills where the latter represent our capacity to solve problems together with colleagues or customers. Organisational competence consists of the knowledge found within the systems, equipment, software, network, culture, etc.



The sum of human and organisational competence - the intellectual capital, is the potential competence of the organisation. Lack of human competence may be compensated by organisational competence and vice versa.



*It takes human brain work to fill up the organisational competence*

It is through building up organisational competence, among other things, that we can facilitate the transfer of competence to new employees. In addition, it is by creating user-friendly systems which eliminate the need for unnecessary competence that we can create room for learning and development.

### **More and better documentation**

One way to accomplish this is to document processes and work methods so that they are available to all. Statistics Sweden is continually improving documentation, tools and methods of working. In this way, our competence and know-how is converted into organisational and lasting competence - a means of ensuring quality in the processes. Well documented processes simplify the induction of new employees and diminish the vulnerability of the organisation by enabling more people to perform critical tasks. Up till now, about a third of the statistical processes and products are thoroughly documented, not always without some difficulties due to situations with scarce resources.

The documentation in itself may occur in different forms. At Statistics Sweden we have started producing web distributed information with the help of authoring tools for multimedia purposes. This information comes with moving pictures as well as sound, which in most cases makes it much more easy to understand compared to just a text.

### **Intangible/tacit knowledge**

A great deal of our competence and skill is not so easy to document or describe. We usually refer to intangible, implicit or tacit competence - that competence which is built up of accumulated experiences over long periods of time. To describe the ways in which a skilled professional differs

from a middling one can be difficult. It is, in other words, through observation and study of the experienced ones' ways of working that we can attain tacit knowledge.

The transfer of tacit knowledge requires that we actively consider involving new colleagues when such work as customer visits are carried out. Also in the field of international consulting work we find good opportunities to practice these principles of learning. Statistics Sweden strives to create opportunities for junior staff to absorb our ways of working, methods and culture. This is something that is stressed in the management training programme.

### Competence analysis

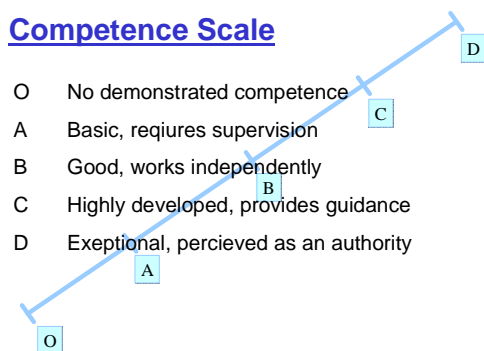
In 2002 Statistics Sweden implemented a thorough competence analysis process including mapping of the existing competence as well as making forecasts of the expected future needs. The work occurs at the different units and all employees take part in the process. This way of working was experienced as dynamic and creative and yielded much in the way of new thinking and reflection on both the personal and collective planes. The work was led by specially trained moderators.

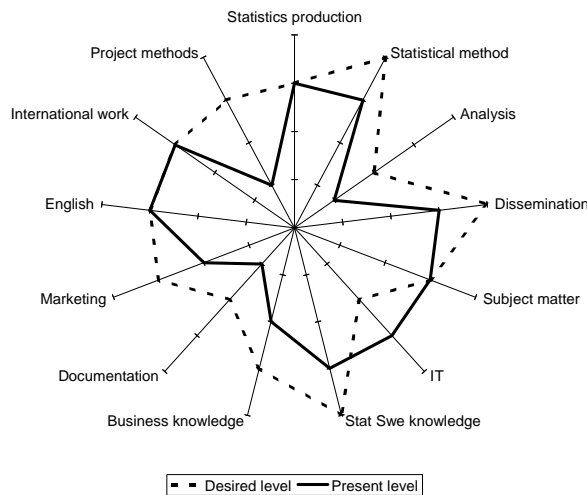
#### The mapping process

The work itself begins with managers presenting their views of coming needs, development and the future. Then, all members of the group work further through the following steps:

1. **SWOT-analysis of operations.** With the managers' vision for the future as a starting point, a closer look is taken at the unit's existing Strengths (S), Weaknesses (W), Opportunities (O) and Threats (T). This is the first step in competence mapping required in order to identify the pre-requisites for coming work assignments.
2. **Our desired position in 3 to 5 years.** What will distinguish us then? What measures has to be taken to achieve our goals?
3. **Inventory of work assignments.** This is a brainstorming phase during which participants with similar work assignments work together to list all the tasks that they can think of without any value judgment.
4. **Identification of competence areas.** Work tasks are sorted into different competence areas which are important to operations, for example statistics, subject matter, IT, language skills, etc.
5. **Estimation of desirable and existing competence levels.** In order to indicate how much know-how is required for a certain work task, a five point scale is used. Future required competences are estimated as well as the present competence situation. In this way, competence profiles can be created for both organisational units and individuals. Competence gaps, the difference between desired and existing competence, are visualised using polar diagrams.

#### Competence Scale





*An example of a gap analysis made at one of the units*

6. **Analysis and action plan.** The competence gap is analysed from the organisational as well as from the individual's perspective. The unit has a foundation for an action plan including competence development plans. The gap analysis also provides a basis for further discussions during appraisal/development interviews.

Up to 2004 almost all organisational units have gone through these steps. They have also started to fill the gaps by attending courses, work in other parts of Statistics Sweden, studies of user work and so on.

### **Competence database**

All employees are encouraged to register their competence in a web based competence database system. There are mainly four good reasons for having such a register:

- Statistics for strategic decisions
- Finding specific competences i.e. for projects
- Individual competence- and career planning
- Finding unused competences

The intention is that everyone should register their education, training and job experiences but and in addition to this language skills and other competences that may be valuable in different job situations. A limited number of persons can search the whole database for a specific competence profile. All managers have access to information about their own staff members. Individuals can only see their own record.

### **Future perspective**

The rapid generation change will affect Statistics Sweden in different ways and we will face considerable risks of losing advanced and important core competences. On the other hand there is a golden opportunity for improvements if the organisation is ready to handle necessary transfer of knowledge in a clever way. One aspect of this is to really choose which competences to transfer. Not all knowledge is good knowledge and it is not worth while to transfer bad habits. It is a matter of forming an organisational culture where coordination and standardisation can live hand in hand with possibilities for creativity and individual initiatives in the daily work situation.