

L&D
Best Practice Guide

Capability at Work

How to find out what
stops people being
capable

“Capability comes down
to a simple question . . .
Can the worker do the task
at the point of work?”

Paul
Matthews



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Capability at Work

How to find out what stops people being capable

Capability is a slippery concept.

For some time now I have been discussing capability with people in HR, people in L&D, and people with chief executive responsibilities in both the public and private sectors. What I have found remarkable is the lack of consistency in how people use the word capability.

Given that any organisation has a purpose - and achieving that purpose is dependent on the people in the organisation being capable of doing all the tasks that need to be done - I would have thought that capability would be so fundamental to success

that people would have a handle on it. Or at least the successful people would.

In fact, I have been surprised at how little focus people put on capability in most organisations. What is even more interesting is how surprised they are when this is pointed out to them. I often do a little thought experiment with them, and it goes like this.

Imagine you are the chief executive of a new business, and I am supplying a team of people to you to work in the business. I give you a choice of two different teams. Team 1 is well-educated. The members

have been on lots of training courses, and they know lots of stuff. Team 2 is capable of doing the work that needs to be done in your new business.

Which team would you choose for your business?

99 per cent of people I ask this choose the capable team. We seem to know that in the moment when the job needs to be done, capability to do the task counts far more for business success than any amount of formal learning.

If capability is so important, what is it? How can we define it? How can we measure it? And how do we need to understand it so that we can improve it?

First, let's look at capability in a very simplistic way.

Let's consider whether someone can do the task that is in front of them. If they can, I would say they are capable and if they cannot, for whatever reason, I would say they are incapable.

This simplistic view can be incredibly helpful as a way to focus us on what matters most to the organisation: the task and its successful completion.

The simple question to ask is

“Can the worker do the task at the point of work?”

Many people would say they already do this, but what I have found is that the

question they are actually asking is ‘Could the worker do the task?’ This is a very different question, because it does not include the context within which the task needs to be done.

Consider this example. You take your car into the garage, and the mechanic tells you that he knows exactly what is wrong with the car, and that he can fix it, and that it is a ten minute job. You breathe a sigh of relief, and ask him to go ahead and fix the car.

He looks on his computer, and the computer says ‘NO’. The spare part required needs to come from the factory overseas and will take a week to arrive. You decide to go to a different garage where they have the spare part in stock.

As far as you are concerned as a customer, the first garage is not capable of fixing your car when you want it fixed. However, ask the mechanic if he is capable of fixing the car, he would say ‘yes’. Give the mechanic a test on fixing that fault in that car and he could pass with flying colours.

Ask some of the other stakeholders the capability question. What would the garage owner say, what would the garage shareholders say, and what would your children say now they cannot get a lift to football practice?

Notice that people on the HR or L&D side of the fence would tend to say the mechanic is capable. And yet people on the business side of the fence, such as customers and shareholders, would tend

to say that the mechanic is not capable, or certainly that the garage is not capable.

I think this difference in how capability as a concept is perceived and used by different parts of an organisation causes some of the dissatisfaction that shows up when business managers are surveyed about the effectiveness of learning and development functions.

I believe that HR and L&D need to expand their idea of capability so that it matches the wider perspective of how the business thinks of it. The capability agenda is far bigger than HR and L&D think it is, and they need to step up and address capability in the way the business would want them too, if only it knew how to ask.

In general the business does not know how to ask for what it needs from the people development functions of the organisation because they are seen as training providers with perhaps a bit of coaching and action learning thrown in around the edges. The people outside of L&D also need to become aware of what capability really is so they can talk about it and ask for it.

Let's go back to our nice and simple definition of capability. 'Can the worker do the task at the point of work . . . Yes or no?'

If the worker can do the task, all is well and good. If not, or they cannot do it to the required standard, why not?

As we look at what stops workers being capable at the point of work, some common themes emerge. That is to say, there are components of capability and each of

these components must be at or over a threshold in order for that worker to do that specific task at that specific time.

Here are the components . . .

1. Knowledge

2. Skill

3. Mind-set

4. Physiology

5. Environment

If a worker cannot do a task you need to look at each of these components and determine which one is preventing the task from being done at that time. And of course, there may well be more than one component below threshold.

Next, consider how you can remove the barrier(s) to capability.

Then determine if the costs of enabling the capability, and therefore the productivity are worth the effort. Will there be an acceptable ROI?

Let's look at each of the components in turn . . .

But before we do that, it is worth pointing out that none of these components is truly independent of the others. They all interact as a system. The reason we separate them is to better understand the system, and although we can work on the components separately, we must never lose sight of the fact that they are interdependent, and a change in one is likely to change some of the others.

1. Knowledge

Knowledge consists of facts, figures, information, and data that the worker already knows prior to tackling the task in hand. This internal retained knowledge is the primary outcome for most formal training and people are subjected to exams and tests to try and measure how much of it they have.

When looking at the knowledge required to do a task, consider whether that knowledge needs to be available from memory or whether the knowledge could be sourced from the environment. For example, knowing what road signs mean is knowledge required for driving. However knowing how much air to put in the tyres is knowledge which could be looked up each time it is required. This kind of 'external' knowledge falls under the fifth component of capability, which is environment.

One of the unfortunate things about memorised knowledge is that it decays over time if it is not used. A worker who has sufficient knowledge today to do a task may well fail to do that task in six months' time if they have not had to recall or use that knowledge in the intervening period.

2. Skill

For our purposes here, we can consider a skill as some behaviour that requires practice in order to do well. All jobs require many skills such as walking, reading, typing, driving. For most jobs we can add in social and communication skills, and also specific skills such as mental arithmetic, driving a

JCB digger or mixing cocktails with a flourish. The range of skills required is huge and they only come with practice. A certain amount of practice is possible within a formal training environment, but most skills that are specific to a job are learned and developed on the job.

Unfortunately, skills also deteriorate over time. This is why pilots keep doing refresher courses in simulators to experience emergency and unusual flight conditions.

3. Mind-set

We have all seen the research reports on how important engagement and motivation are. It is worth noting that motivation to do a task in the moment is quite fluid. If a worker has a hangover, they may well feel less inclined to work today, even though they are normally well motivated. Conversely, if a sales person receives a good sales order, their demeanour changes and they approach their next calls with renewed spirit and motivation.

Mind-set is also somewhat at the mercy of the other factors affecting capability. If any of them are below the threshold - and thus the task is hard or impossible to do - it will put a damper on motivation. Conversely, if all the other capability components are above the threshold, the job is easy to do, and even fun to do. Results are easier to achieve, and engagement will rise.

Because of this, it is usually better to tackle other components of capability

first, and you may well find that if there is an mind-set problem it will automatically disappear when the other components of capability are brought up to threshold.

4. Physiology

There are many jobs that require certain physical characteristics such as strength, or height, or manual dexterity. This is not about being able-bodied or disabled. As a species we have a huge variability in our physiques, our motor responses and our intellectual capacity.

Although it might seem politically correct to say that anyone could do any task, we all know this isn't so. Only some of us would be able to carry bricks on a building site all day long. Only some of us have the IQ that is required to handle actuarial mathematics, and only some of us have the physical appearance that is required of a fashion model.

5. Environment

Notice that the above four components of capability are all 'attached' to the worker. They will vary from worker to worker. The fifth component, environment, is independent of the worker.

By environment we mean anything around the worker that affects their ability to do the job in front of them.

Let's go back to the earlier example of the mechanic who was unable to repair the car due to the unavailability of a spare

part. He was not capable of doing the job because there was something missing in his environment. Other things that may have stopped him repairing the car could have been the absence of a special tool, an electronic diagnostics machine that did not work with that model of car, or the spare parts store was locked and the foreman had taken the key with him on his lunch break.

“How many times do you have a task that you know you could do, and you want to do it, but you can't, because something is missing?”

Another possibility is that what you need to do the task is available, but difficult to get. So difficult in fact that your level of motivation to do the task is not sufficient to drive you to break down the barriers between you and what you need to do the task. We need to consider the barriers between the worker and what they need to access in order to be capable of doing a task.

One way to find those barriers is to ask people first what frustrates them about their job, and then what it is that they are tolerating about their job that used to frustrate them. It could be something as simple as the way they have to login to access the intranet, or even that the font used for the intranet is too small. You won't know until you ask.

Let's consider a few other environmental factors that affect capability in the way that we have defined it. (This is in no way a complete list but it will give you a way to start thinking about the various factors that might be involved.)

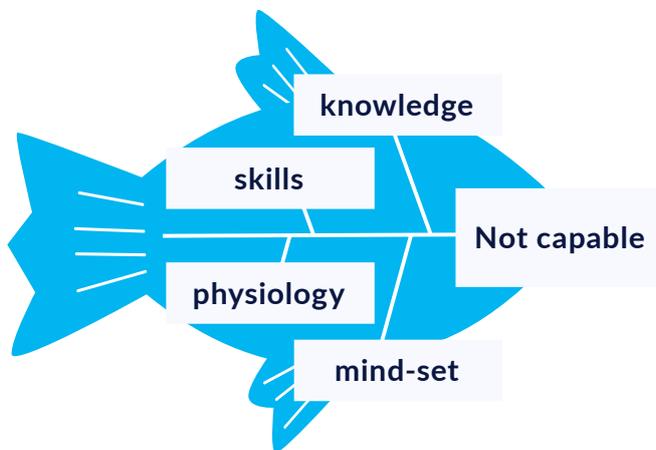
- **Performance support:**
What job aids and information can the worker call upon in the moment of need? How easy is it to do this? Is the performance support truly embedded into the workflow? Is the information accurate, relevant and practical?
- **Tools, software:**
Does the worker have access to the right tools to do the job? Is their computer fast enough and loaded with the right software?
- **Spare parts and other resources:**
Can the worker easily access the kinds of resources they need for their job, for example a meeting room or even an organisational resource like the accounts department?
- **Systems and processes:**
Does a mandated procedure stop people doing what they need to do to get the job done? Or slow them down so much that they lose the desire to do it?
- **Incentives:**
Are any incentive or bonus schemes aiding or hindering the work? Some incentive schemes cause unhealthy competition which can lead to lack of collaboration.

- **Feedback on what is required:**
Do the workers get sufficient feedback on what they are doing well and what could be done differently?
- **Culture:**
How does the culture impact upon capability? Is it a 'can-do' culture, or one where people wait to be told what to do?
- **Management style and effectiveness:**
How well is the worker managed? Although this is on the end of this list, it is probably one of the biggest factors of all to have an impact on capability because it is the manager who is responsible for the worker's environment, skills practice, mind-set, and to some extent knowledge.

There will be many more factors within the environment that could disrupt the capability of a worker, and many will be unique to specific jobs. You will need to make your own list, and a simple tool that will help you do this is a standard cause-effect diagram that was popularised by Kaoru Ishikawa, who was a quality manager in the Kawasaki shipyards. Although originally used for investigating quality issues, it also works well for investigating many other issues, including capability issues.

A useful side effect of using this tool is that it is well known and seen as a 'serious' business tool. Using it in collaboration with people outside of L&D will give them added comfort that you know what you are doing, and help them buy into the output you get from using the tool.

The cause-effect diagram is a way of breaking down in successive layers of detail the root causes that contribute to a particular effect. The effect we are interested in is a worker's lack of capability to do a specific task at the point of work. Use the cause-effect diagram twice; once for the first four factors, and then for the environmental factors. Here is a 'bare bones' diagram for the first four factors.



Because of the huge variability in environmental factors, you will need to create your own 'bare bones' diagram for the environment, and then fill it in with successive levels of cause until you reach a root cause that you can take action to fix.

We started by saying that capability is a slippery concept. And it is. But hopefully you now have a sufficient grasp of how capability, in the simple way we have defined it, is structured, and how to drill down into various factors to decide what needs to be done to change incapability into capability.



PEOPLE ALCHEMY

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Paul Matthews

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Thanks for reading this Best Practice Guide. I hope you found it useful. You picked up this Guide, which means you are keen to find new ideas and new ways of doing things to get better results. I can help you. Together we can look at what you want to achieve and then develop your strategy to make it happen. What is your L&D goal? What do you want to achieve? Let's talk about it :-)

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