

I2-3: Competency and competency assessment

Definitions

Competency is defined as the application of knowledge, skills and behaviours used in performing specific job tasks.¹ Accurate laboratory test results depend on staff being competent in performing a range of procedures that occur throughout the entire examination process.

Competency assessment is defined as any system for measuring and documenting personnel competency. The goal of competency assessment is to identify problems with employee performance and to correct these issues before they affect patient care.

Overview

An initial competency assessment may reveal the need for specific training of the employee. Competency assessment should be conducted at regular intervals during the employee's tenure.

Competency assessments conducted either initially or periodically help to identify or prevent performance problems that may be solved through task-specific training.

Competency assessment methods

Competency assessment methods include the following.

- Direct observation helps identify and prevent any performance problems:
 - The employee's techniques are watched during the examination process, which allows the observer to see if the employee is following the SOP.
 - To avoid subjectivity during a competency assessment, the observer uses a custom-designed checklist; checklists are used when there are specific, observable items, actions or attributes to be observed.

Observation is the most time-consuming way to assess employee competence, but this method is advised when assessing the areas that may have a higher impact on patient care.

- Monitor records (e.g. review worksheets and logs prepared by the employee).
- Review and analyze quality control records and results of proficiency tests performed by the employee being evaluated.
- Retest or recheck results to compare results among personnel; discrepancies should be resolved.
- Assess knowledge or problem-solving skills using case studies. Employees are asked to respond orally or in writing to simulated technical problems.

¹ ISO 10015:1999. *Quality management—guidelines for training*. Geneva, International Organization for Standardization, 1999.



Policies
and
processes

Methods for determining personnel competency may need to be adapted to local customs and concerns.

Policy writing for competency assessment is a critical quality systems issue and is the responsibility of the management. Each policy should be shared with everyone in the laboratory and assessments of all personnel should be documented.

An example of policy for competency assessment is “Every employee shall regularly be assessed for competency for the tasks defined in their job description”.

Processes describe how the policy will be enacted. For example, the following questions should be addressed.

- **Who** will conduct assessments? Responsibility for conducting the assessment should be assigned to someone who has previously demonstrated competency in the area to be assessed. The responsible person must document and evaluate the results of the assessment.
- **What** will be assessed? Which job task or tasks and procedure performed in the pre-examination, examination and post-examination testing process will be assessed? Critical competencies for each task should be identified. First-line supervisors should be involved in this step. Examples of critical competencies include
 - patient identification
 - sample collection
 - evaluation of adequacy of samples
 - use of equipment
 - application of quality control procedures
 - interpretation of results.
- **When** will assessments occur (annually or biannually)? It is important to develop a timeline for periodic assessment of each employee. A period of training and then assessment should be implemented for everyone as new procedures and equipment are introduced into the laboratory.



Policies and processes should be reviewed annually and modified when necessary.

Procedures

Procedures describe specifically how each element of the processes will be performed. An employee competency assessment would follow these procedures,

1. The assessor contacts the employee in advance to inform them that the assessment will be done at a prearranged time.
2. The assessment is done while the employee is performing tasks using routine samples.
3. The assessment is done by a specified method previously described and is recorded in a logbook.
4. The results of the assessment are shared with the employee.
5. A remedial action plan is developed defining required retraining. The plan should be written and the manager must ensure that the plan is understood by the employee. The plan should outline specific steps to be taken to resolve or correct the problem with related deadlines. Needed resources should be clearly outlined in the plan. For example, the employee may need an updated version of the SOP.
6. The employee is asked to acknowledge the assessment, related action plan, and reassessment.



If more than one person makes the same error even after training has occurred, consider the root cause of the error, such as equipment malfunction and operating procedure ambiguity.

Competency assessment documentation

Standard forms should be generated in advance and used so all employees are assessed the same way. This will prevent employees from thinking that the assessments are biased.

All competency assessments must be recorded, showing date and results, and should be kept in a place where they remain confidential. These records are part of a laboratory's quality documents, and should be periodically reviewed and used for continuous improvement.