

Minimising workforce risk through effective competence management

October 19, 2022



David Brough, director at Rail Competence and Compliance Ltd, explains the importance of competence and how it benefits the rail industry

What is competence? Many people have different views on this, however, there is only one view that counts in the rail industry: that of the Office of Rail and Road (ORR).

In an extract from the ORR guidance on developing and maintaining staff competence, the regulator defines competence as: “competent people performing activities consistently and within their competencies.”

This may not be the Oxford English Dictionary definition, but it is the view of the governing body over Britain’s railway. Competence is a fundamental practice that must be embedded in companies to ensure risk is minimised to its lowest possible level at all times.

So, how do you ensure this is the case for your organisation?

Following industry advice and guidance

The ORR has produced a document that has been in place for over 10 years and which was last revised in 2016 as ‘Developing and Maintaining Staff Competence’ (RSP1).

This document gives good guidance on how this process should be carried out and recognises that every business is different and has different needs, so it isn’t just applicable to passenger operators and freight operators, it also recognises that the supply chain has a duty under the Rail and Other Guided Systems regulations (ROGS) to be compliant.

So, to each business, the question is – is your Competence Management System (CMS) good enough, or is it there just to pass an audit?

Many senior people in the rail sector are not familiar with this document and do not understand the nature of a robust CMS, how to check compliance with it or know how to review and develop it. A CMS is not a database that records all your records and training, this is just one part of the bigger system.

The RSP1 document summary states: “This guidance is primarily aimed at those who are responsible for managing and assuring the competence of individuals and teams in the railway and other guided transport systems industry, and whose work may have an impact on operational safety and on occupational health and safety.



“However, anyone with an interest in competence management will also find useful advice in this guidance. Directors and senior managers responsible for the overall policy of the company need to be aware of the general objectives and benefits that may result from the use of this guidance.” The document doesn’t represent just train operators, it addresses the whole industry, supply chain, overhead line companies, permanent way, signalling, telecoms, T&RS maintainers, T&RS operators, OTMs etc. If your business poses a risk to the infrastructure, then you need to have a robust CMS in place.

Continuous improvement

A lot of these parts of the industry rely on their initial training and professional body registrations to imply competence, however this is a one-off check to see if the bar has been met to allow the individuals to carry the accreditation of that body; ongoing competence is down to the individual company to make sure it meets the requirements.

The guidance says that either a national occupational standard can be utilised, or you can derive your own.

If a national occupational standard is used, another question to ask is: do you use it all for your sections, or do you pick and choose the elements you want?

If you do the latter, how have you selected these over the other areas? Has the impact of this been part of the risk assessment principle? Principle 1 – identify tasks and assess the risks.

So, what is a CMS? It is initially a suite of documents that in any system, such as ISO, tells you how you

comply and, in this case, with the RSP1 document from the ORR. There are 15 principles as guidance to assist you in the development of your bespoke CMS. The ORR suggests that as a first step, you utilise Principle 15 – ‘Review and feedback’ on your current system.

Quality assurance

Too many people rely on flooding their paperwork with signatures, dates and references to national standards as a benchmark. Having true meaning and added value to your CMS is vital, to reduce your risk profile, increasing staff development and maintaining skill levels.



The sharp end of the CMS is the assessor, and this role needs support in the form of an Internal Quality Assurer (IQA). The IQA provides a reporting line in terms of assessment functions and not necessarily direct line report. It is in place to standardise the role of the assessor and ensure a fair and even balance of checks and evidence gathering, and recording is undertaken.

Preventing workforce skill fade

Regular monitoring of staff by interim checks is also required to prevent skill fade between the assessment endpoints and this may take the form of managerial checks, unannounced monitoring, in-process evaluations by production staff.

The IQA will RAG rate each assessor and provide a supporting framework to ensure consistency of decisions made.

Accurate reporting of the IQA function to the senior teams in a business will provide valuable information on the state of the workforce and highlight any areas that are a potential threat in terms of skill fade risk.

Early intervention here will allow the business to stabilise and ensure corrective measures are implemented through the IQA and assessment teams.

A full, open, honest review of what you have is your first step, independent, if necessary, to see the one version of the truth, providing a baseline to work from.

As senior people in your business it is your role to support them. Invest in the people passionate about developing your staff and you will see the rewards in staff development, motivation, devotion and loyalty.

Any issues highlighted are then used to ensure the candidate is given the right skills and opportunity to develop to ensure they can meet the required standards of the assessment and the business, driving it forward, building credibility and quality work delivered.