

# Training: necessary but not sufficient

by David Hillson, The Risk Doctor

In these difficult times we're all being asked to do more with less. In fact we should be doing less with less – cutting out wasteful inefficiencies and using our limited resources for the activities that really add value. But that's another story. The challenge to maximise performance has led many organisations to re-examine the competences of their staff, in order to ensure that their people can deliver what is required. This in turn has resulted in a new look at recruitment and staff development.

Inevitably the training budget has come under scrutiny as part of this exercise. How can we maximise the return from our reducing training funds? Are there any realistic or better alternatives to training courses?

There are many elements that make up competence in any role, and most of these are not generated or improved by attending a training course. In fact deciding whether someone might be competent in a role requires us to answer five questions. The first two questions are at least as important as the last three, and possibly more so. We need to know whether they are the right kind of person, and how they think and respond to situations, as well as whether they know stuff, can do stuff, and have done stuff before.

These five questions are reflected in the PEAKS competence framework developed by Ruth Murray-Webster and I. The five PEAKS elements describe what makes up competence, namely:

- **Personal characteristics** ('Who am I?'). Personal characteristics are *natural preferences and traits*. They tend to form the basis of a person's natural reactions to situations. Some may change over time through personal development or gaining experience, but in general *they are not easily influenced by traditional training*.

- **Experience** ('What have I done?'). Experience must be *acquired* as the outcome of practising relevant tasks. It is not only acquired in formal paid jobs, but can be obtained in other life contexts. Experience does not simply equate to time spent at work, but should be measured by relevant achievements.

- **Attitudes** ('How shall I respond?'). Attitudes are *chosen responses* to particular situations. Some attitudes may be deeply rooted, reflecting an individual's core values, but they are always a choice. Other attitudes may be more malleable. Attitudes differ from personal characteristics in that they are situational responses rather than natural preferences or traits, and chosen attitudes may therefore differ depending on the context.

- **Knowledge** ('What do I know?'). Knowledge is *learned, often theoretically via traditional training*, or can be gained on the job. It includes familiarity with the widely-held principles about a particular subject, and the way those principles should be applied to best effect.

- **Skills** ('What can I do?'). Skills are learned, but must be *learned experientially*. They are more accurately described as being the skilful application of an individual's P, E, A and K within a specific role.

It is important to understand that formal training only addresses a very small part of the elements required for competence. Training can improve some aspects of Knowledge and Skills, but it is not much use for developing the Personal characteristics, Experience and Attitudes that a particular role might need. Instead an organization that is serious about developing fully competent people needs to deploy a balanced range of development strategies to cover all five areas, including the following:

- To develop Personal characteristics: Coaching to encourage consistently modified personal choices. [Note that some personal characteristics are inherent or innate, and may not be amenable to development.]

- To develop Experience: Working in a relevant project mode. Job rotation to give a wide range of different experiences. Structured career path.
- To develop Attitudes: Coaching or mentoring to support different personal choices, with suitable regular feedback and reinforcement.
- To develop Knowledge: Training courses (classroom or distance/electronic learning). Self-directed learning, including reading, discussion etc. On the job learning. Attending seminars, conferences etc. Participation in professional bodies.
- To develop Skills: Training courses with experiential learning. Coaching. Working with 'role models'.

The PEAKS framework is generic and can be applied to any role, including CEO, plumber, project manager or student. It works by defining specific attributes within each of the five elements that, together, combine to deliver competence in a particular role. For example for risk-related roles, 'Personal' characteristics might include an appetite for uncertainty and enjoyment of problem-solving, relevant 'Experience' would include spending time being responsible for managing risk in a comparable situation, suitable 'Attitudes' might include assertiveness and commitment to ethical behaviour, required 'Knowledge' could include an understanding of probability theory and Monte Carlo, and Skills should include workshop facilitation and report-writing.

This framework can also be used at a range of levels within an organization, by applying a maturity-model approach. For example, the same PEAKS attributes relating to risk are all relevant to a chief risk officer, a project risk coordinator and an internal auditor. However they may be needed at different levels of maturity depending on the position within the career path, and some extra attributes might also be required for specific risk roles.

The overall conclusion is that attending training courses is just a tiny part of the challenge of developing competence in any role, including those relating to project management or risk management. So next time you're asked to take on a new role and offered a simple training course as your only preparation, you might like to ask how your other needs will be met. Or if you recruit a new person into your team, don't be tempted just to send them on a training course and think that everything will be fine. Competence is a complex matter and it needs careful attention if we are to develop ourselves and others into the competent people needed to meet today's challenges.



## About the author

*Known globally as The Risk Doctor, Dr David Hillson PMP HonFAPM FIRM is director of Risk Doctor & Partners ([www.risk-doctor.com](http://www.risk-doctor.com)). David is recognised internationally as a leading thinker and expert practitioner in risk management at both strategic and project levels, and he writes and speaks widely on the topic. He is active in the Project Management Institute (PMI) and received the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award for his work in developing risk management over many years. He is also an Hon. Fellow of the UK Association for Project Management (APM), and a Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM).*

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