



Questions Regarding Competency

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Introduction

Health Informatics professionalism is on the rise, and buzz about professional certification and competencies is in the halls. Over the years a number of my articles have addressed the topic of competencies (refs), but there is now a reason to touch on this again.

Those of you who are members may have noticed that COACH has published a document (Health Informatics Professional Core Competencies, Version 1.0, November 14, 2007) to support its certification initiative. If you have not read this yet, please do! It can be found at <https://secure.coachorg.com/default.asp?id=8&p=822>. You will need to provide your email address and password.

Some Terminology

Most working in this area indicate that competencies include the following:

1. The Knowledge needed to understand, think about, and thoughtfully execute one's work.
2. The Skills needed to use tools, methods and processes in performing one's work.
3. The Experience needed to think and act appropriately, confidently and proficiently.
4. The Attitudes needed to perform in a way consistent with a role, in a quality manner, in the environment in which one works.

Certification refers to formally recognizing an individual as competent in some area of practice, based on explicit, well-defined and recognized criteria. Usually, being certified is dependent on satisfying some sort of testing process developed by peers in the field of interest. Accreditation is done to organizations, such as educational programs and usually involves the application of a review process by recognized peers, based on well-defined criteria.

Ethics is the science of human duty and describes the body of rules of duty drawn from this science. Ethics

can also refer to a particular system of principles and rules concerning duty, or the rules of practice in respect to a single class of human actions, such as medical ethics. A principle is a comprehensive and fundamental law, doctrine, or assumption, a rule or code of conduct, or the laws or facts of nature underlying something (adapted from Merriam-Webster and Webster's 1913 Dictionaries). Codes of ethics are based on ethical principles regarding which there would be common agreement.

Why Read "Health Informatics Professional Core Competencies"?

The document is only 22 pages long, but we're all busy, busy little bees. Why is it important that you read it?

Well, first of all, the document may help you to understand better our field of endeavor. But, can you take that to the store and buy something with it? Maybe. It could be that "your next job" might be an answer.

You could ask: "But does this really affect me"? My answer here would be that the reason for focusing on professionalism is to focus on defining what it really means to be a Health Informatician. In the long term, not possessing the capabilities that have been defined in the document could mean you are excluded from a job that someone gets to jump in ahead of you, or you get to "report to" instead of "lead".

So, defining the field makes recruiters and employers better able to define the types of people they want, as well as helping all of us understand what we need to know and be able to do in order to fill the roles to which we aspire. That seems important to me. What about you?

Consequently, I'd be very concerned that COACH is getting this right...and if it isn't, that I got a shot at fixing it. Wouldn't you?

So, read it to protect all of us and our progeny, won't you?

After Reading it through Once

Let's assume you've now carefully read the Core Competencies document and understand pretty much what it's about. Now I'd suggest reading it again, with a highlighter in hand and a number of questions in mind:

1. Is the document about all of Health Informatics, including the researchers and teachers, or does it mainly apply to what we call Applied Health Informatics? No doubt all Health Informaticians need to have the types of knowledge described, but do the "behaviours" described mostly apply to those who define, deploy, maintain, enable use and evaluate eHealth systems and methods (they're called Applied Health Informaticians)?
2. Does the document describe competencies (see the definitions above) or what you need to be able to do? What knowledge, skills, etc. do you need to learn to do the things listed? It may be that the document doesn't go deeply enough to really describe competencies, and maybe that's a step you can suggest.

5. In "COACH Ethical Principles", ethical principles have also been expressed as rules of behavior. Are there any underlying principles which we all accept and that should these be articulated so it can be seen if there are other behaviours that are implied by them but not yet articulated? I'm not at all sure of this one, but ethical principles have cultural roots and we are not all of the same culture. Also, how can I "...address ethical questions...?" (page 18, bullet 2) without a stated set of underlying principles? Tell me what you think.
6. Also in "Ethical Principles" where is plagiarism addressed or the personal assumption of another's intellectual property? What about my ethical responsibilities to my students or others in similar relationships with me? What about how I handle the finding of fraud or other malfeasance? Is anything else missing or not adequately expressed?

COACH has begun an important initiative and delivered a document that deserves careful attention, critical reading, and thoughtful feedback. It is recognized as "Version 1"...and that means there can be other versions.

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3. What are "Core Competencies" anyway? Is this properly defined? On page 2, "Core" is defined as a "shared set of skills, knowledge, attitudes and capabilities necessary for each of us to effectively perform as a health informatics professional, regardless of the practice context..." Does this apply to researchers in Health Informatics? Or, again should the document focus on Applied Health informatics? Should they be called "Key Competencies"?
4. Using the document's approach of describing behaviours one needs to exhibit, are any important ones missing in the categories? Are there any categories missing? For example, in "Information Management" is the understanding and application of the nature and structure of data, information and knowledge addressed adequately? What about topics such as usability, and information systems assurance? Does the document need to go deeper to really define what we need to know and be able to do?

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Interestingly, if you don't at least read the document, you are in violation of one of the standards of ethical behaviour, to wit: "I will strive continually to maintain and improve my professional competence and knowledge-base..."

Besides, how can I claim to be competent, if I do not really know what my peers say competence is?

I would welcome receiving your answers, comments, etc. and, with your permission, I would include these in a future article recognizing your contribution. ●