

Multinational ISO standard for HR competencies pushed by HRPAs

Working group around competency framework to be chaired by Bill Greenhalgh

BY SARAH DOBSON

THE Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA) saw success recently when its recommendation that the International Standards Organisation (ISO) mandate a working group to develop global standards in HR — integrating competency frameworks from various countries into a single global framework — was approved.

“We had a competency model, we thought that it was very important to have as a foundation for enhancing the profession around the world, we made a proposal to the Standards Council of Canada who then sent the documentation off to the ISO. The ISO group then said... ‘Tell us a bit more about it and we’ll vote at that meeting.’ So I went there, I made the pitch, proposal, they liked it and voted for it and said, ‘Yep, this is good, we’ll create a working group, we’d like you to chair it and anybody else interested, please sign up,’” said Bill Greenhalgh, CEO of the HRPAs.

There was recognition Canada was a leader in this area, said Robert Carlyle, senior director of strategic workforce management at RBC in Toronto, citing the initial discussions around a possible working group.

“As other standards have been built, there was recognition that those are one-offs but it’s not upskilling the profession to be able to do many of the things that were building other standards for global recognition,” said Carlyle, who was also a Canadian representative to the ISO.

“So... this is the next step to allow us better international recognition and understanding, and that’s par-

ticularly important for trade, joint ventures, working overseas, to have this easier way to recognize and understand if people are capable.”

It’s about coming up with a global competency framework that tells everybody what HR people should know and should be able to do, said Greenhalgh.

“Once we have that, it can lead to all kinds of things... At a minimum, anybody can pick it up and use it as a foundation, they can use it for discussions in academia to develop curricula, they can use it for training and education, and companies can use it for hiring because the beauty of having designations, and particularly at three different levels, is it validates exactly what those individuals can do.”

Standards process

The standards process is based on consensus, transparency and stakeholder needs, so the ISO consults with members to see if there’s interest or a need for standardization in a particular area, said Stephanie Vuicic, director of communications at the Standards Council of Canada (SCC) in Ottawa.

If yes, the ISO then establishes a committee to develop an international standard on a subject and the SCC — as the member body in Canada — does a national consultation in Canada to see if there’s enough support to establish a mirror committee, so basically a similar committee to the ISO committee, she said.

“Then, we gather the results of the consultations that that committee does and then we feed those back up to ISO on behalf of Canada. And

those mirror committees... represent all of the various stakeholder groups and interests in Canada, so every committee is different but they can come from academia, industry, government, standards development organizations, NGOs, labour — it really depends on the subject matter,” said Vuicic.

“These committees establish and identify what the Canadian interests are and then through the SCC, we feed those back to ISO so that Canada has a voice on the international playing field or in the international realm to ensure the interests of Canadian stakeholders are represented in the establishment of an international standard.”

Typically, the whole process takes anywhere from two to four years, and it’s a very exhaustive one, said Greenhalgh, adding that, so far, about 12 countries have signed up for his working group.

“What we need to then do is work with countries that have the competency framework and work with those that don’t and come to some agreement. So although we’re using our model as a foundation going forward, that will evolve in time, I’m sure, both to reflect what other countries need and also to reflect the evolution of the profession itself because it’s a multi-year project. So what HR will look like in three years, I imagine, there will be some significant differences to the way it is today.”

Typically, they’ll start with a couple of different capability models and look at best practices, said Carlyle.

“There’ll be research that gets done, and then through this struc-

tured process, a coming to a standard, and they’ll start to get global input. And we’ll find new things — I can guarantee you there’ll be some place in the world that’s doing something differently that people will go, ‘Wow, that’s really neat.’ And it’s a way to come to best practice and standardize around best practice.”

The working group will try to get as close to unanimity as possible, he said.

“They’re really looking for no sustained, substantive disagreement, so eventually you’ve got to let go of the little issues, and get to some agreement... and within a year or two, you can actually get to an agreement about ‘Here is a global standard.’”

In the past few years, through ISO’s HR committee, a number of standards have been developed around workforce planning, recruitment and corporate governance, said Carlyle.

Benefits of standards

Any standard helps establish a baseline or a benchmark for whatever issue is at stake, said Vuicic.

“Whether that’s performance, whether that’s sustainability, whether that’s something for the environment, it really depends what the objective is... so, in this case, it would help set that international benchmark for the HR profession.”

The standard is voluntary unless it becomes legislated or it becomes a norm or expectation in an industry, she said.

“Then it becomes almost a requirement for doing business or operating,” said Vuicic.

“Establishing an international benchmark for a profession is a

positive direction and anything that helps to streamline requirements and expectations and clarify those expectations both on a national level and international level just helps level the playing field for any players in the industry and ensures clarity for expectations in that industry for anyone operating in that field.”

Since many companies now operate on an international level, “the marketplace is really global and understanding what the requirements are on a global playing field can help, whether it’s in a bottling or packaging industry or as an HR professional. Just clarifying what the expectations are can help both in the front end in terms of helping someone do

business as well as clarifying uncertainties or disputes when dealing with different markets.”

The intent of that type of standardization is to have best practice available globally, said Carlyle, and to have a commonality for people working internationally.

“You have these global standards that you can rely on when you’re trying to work in other countries, with other organizations, whether its companies, government entities or whatever.”

It provides a baseline, said Carlyle.

“If you wanted to implement workforce planning or you wanted to have a better measurement process around certain HR functions or whatever standard is developed, you

literally can get these off the shelf and know that you could implement it and you would actually be pretty close to best in class. And you would know that if anybody is doing the same process elsewhere else in the world, you’d have pretty good comparables. So if you’re trying to partner with a company or you have a supplier and... for corporate responsibility, you wanted to audit their hiring practices, if they were ISO-compliant with the hiring standard, you’d have some assurance,” he said.

“It also gives you a best practice that you can go get. With the capabilities in particular around HR, I would expect there’ll be some type of mapping to the ISO standard so

that a Canadian certification will then have an equivalence in Australia, the U.S. or elsewhere. And there’ll be better portability of... our credentials.”

This is probably one of the most significant things that has happened in the human resources profession for some time, said Greenhalgh.

“It is a young profession, it’s developed at different rates and in different ways in different countries and this is the first step in bringing it altogether as a genuine profession. There’s a multiplicity of benefits that stem from that, not least of which is mutual recognition of designations around the world, which is very handy, particularly as we live in a global village.”