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# Modernising Customs through competency-based human resource management

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Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2014

ISBN: 978-92-79-46033-3

doi: 10.2778/187635

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Heinz ZOUREK,  
Director General in the European Commission's  
Directorate-General  
for Taxation and Customs Union (DG TAXUD)

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*Today European customs is facing a rapidly changing environment: evolving production and consumption patterns, increasing international trade, climate change, and threats such as terrorism and organised crime. It is in this context that customs administrations must ensure the balance between protecting the interests of the European Union and its citizens, as well as facilitating legitimate trade. It is evident that only **continuous development and strategic investment in skills, competences and resources** can maintain and improve **customs efficiency and effectiveness**.*

*The EU Customs Competency Framework is one of the main drivers in the modernisation of customs administrations across Europe. By introducing competency-based HR management in European customs administrations, **we take the necessary steps together to ensure that we continue delivering world-leading customs services throughout the EU, now and in the future.***

*Overall, I believe that the EU Customs Competency Framework is an excellent window of opportunity for Member States to start modernising their HR processes using state-of-the-art competency management techniques and tools – let us start now to make best use of it.*

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### WHY SHOULD CUSTOMS ORGANISATIONS, BOTH **FROM PUBLIC & PRIVATE** SECTOR, MODERNISE **USING COMPETENCY-BASED** **HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT?**

More than any other industry, customs plays a vital role in the ever-changing international trade environment. European customs legislation and international trade policies are being updated and modernised to keep up with current events that affect trading patterns and behaviours. Customs administrations and those working in private sector organisations that interact with customs, have no alternative but to also modernise.

**The goal is for the European Union to remain a competitive place to do business, by delivering world leading customs services throughout the EU.** To do this, the European Commission, together with its Member State representatives, has developed the EU Customs Competency Framework, which is the foundation for implementing competency-based HR management.

A study on the evaluation of the European Customs Union conducted in 2013 found that the lack of uniformity and inconsistent treatment at the EU external border is resulting in an impact on costs and customer satisfaction for European businesses<sup>1</sup>. One way to tackle these issues is through the empowerment of the customs workforce and elevating the level of skills of the workforce to the highest common standard across the EU.

The EU Customs Competency Framework sets the basis for this; it lays down the required skills and competencies for those working in customs, both in public and private sector, which are applicable both now, and in the future. The framework is also flexible to cater for future challenges that may require new competencies to be added.

**Competency-based HR management is an HR vision focused on making optimal use of the competencies of individual employees to increase the performance of the entire organisation.**

Customs administrations and private sector organisations can reap the benefits of the EU Customs Competency Framework by integrating its usage into their HR management processes. From recruitment and selection to training and career development, when organisations place competencies at the core of their HR processes, only then can they truly maximise the rewards that the EU Customs Competency Framework can bring.

**Competency-based HR management can be the holistic solution to improve both public and private sector customs performance and to deliver better services across the European Union.**

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<sup>1</sup>[http://ec.europa.eu/taxation\\_customs/resources/documents/common/publications/studies/evaluation\\_customs\\_union\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/taxation_customs/resources/documents/common/publications/studies/evaluation_customs_union_en.pdf)

# WHAT IS IT?

The EU Customs Competency Framework is a **mechanism to consistently deliver high standards of service in customs** across all Member State administrations and private sector organisations. It is the foundation to elevate performance levels and harmonise the standards of skills across the European Union. It serves as a key tool to support modernisation of the customs workforce through training and development initiatives.

The key ingredient to delivering a high and consistent standard of customs service is to **empower employees with the competencies they need** to deliver these services. This means that employees need to be trained in customs specific competencies. And to do this, the required competencies first need to be identified. This complete set of required competencies, documented with a European-wide focus, is what constitutes this EU Customs Competency Framework.

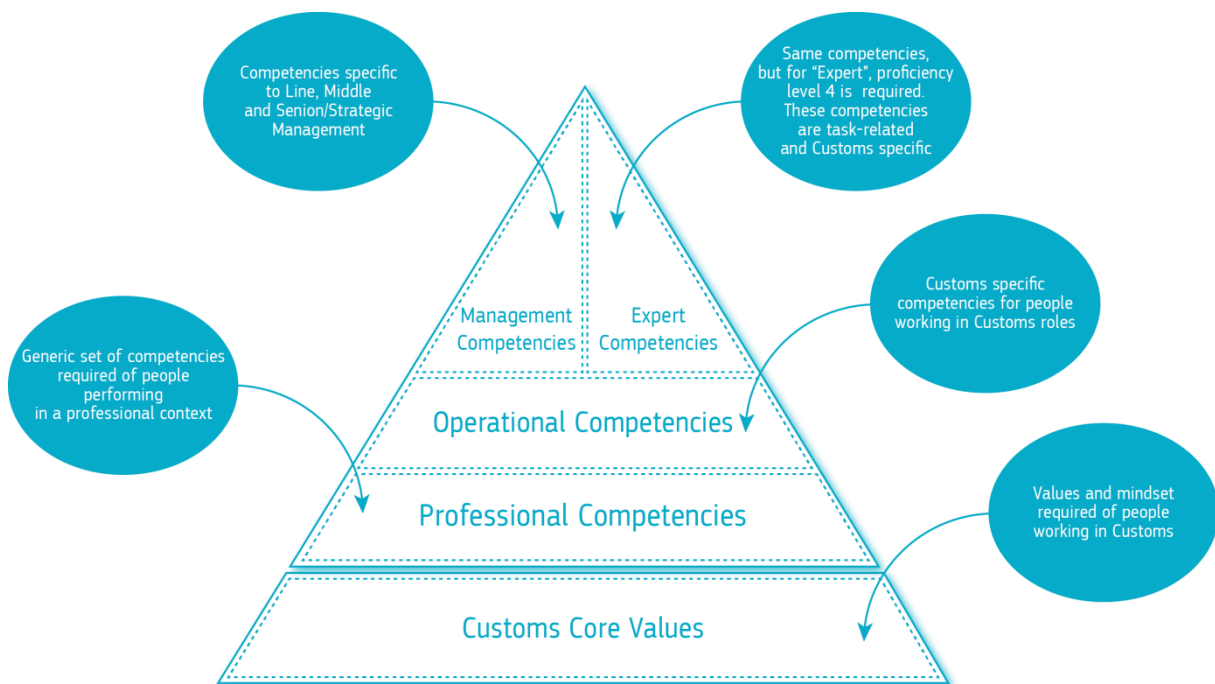


Figure 1 - Overview of competencies

To fully capture the meaning and to ensure consistent understanding of the EU Customs Competency Framework, a set of definitions was first agreed between members of the dedicated EU project group<sup>2</sup> that was set up for this purpose. When coming up with these definitions, a specific focus was put on the importance of the **application** of the skills and knowledge. It is not enough to simply possess skills and knowledge, but customs professionals must be-able to apply their skills and knowledge in their day-to-day role.

A **competency** is the application of knowledge, skills and behaviours in a professional context.  
A **competency framework** is the whole of skills, attitudes, insights and the application of knowledge that is required to perform successfully in a specific professional context.

In order to perform successfully in a customs role, it is not only the customs specific operational competencies that are important, but also a set of professional and managerial competencies. Therefore, the EU competencies that were identified were split into three categories – Customs **Professional** Competencies, Customs **Operational** Competencies and Customs **Management** Competencies.

Each category has its own purpose. The professional competencies are typically transferable between roles within customs and beyond, the management competencies are targeted to roles where there is a management or team-leading focus and the operational competencies are specific to roles where employees are working directly on customs related tasks.

All of these competencies are complemented by a set of **Customs Core Values**. These values are common principles that define the employee's work ethic and their alignment to the overall customs mission – these values are the definition of what it means to work in the field of European customs.

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<sup>2</sup> The EU project group was composed of experts from national public customs administrations and from private sector trade and customs organisations.

The following two diagrams show the overview of the EU Customs Competency Framework.

Given the high level of interaction and the dependency between customs administrations and private sector organisations in the end-to-end supply chain, simply providing public officials with the competencies is not enough. To improve the overall efficiency of the customs service, a private sector version of the EU Customs Competency Framework was also developed. This private sector version is targeted at employees who work in roles such as customs brokers, freight forwarders and logistics managers in private sector organisations.

In consequence, two versions of the EU Customs Competency Framework exists today, one for the public sector (Figure 2) and one for the private sector (Figure 3).



Figure 2 - EU Customs Competency Framework for the public sector

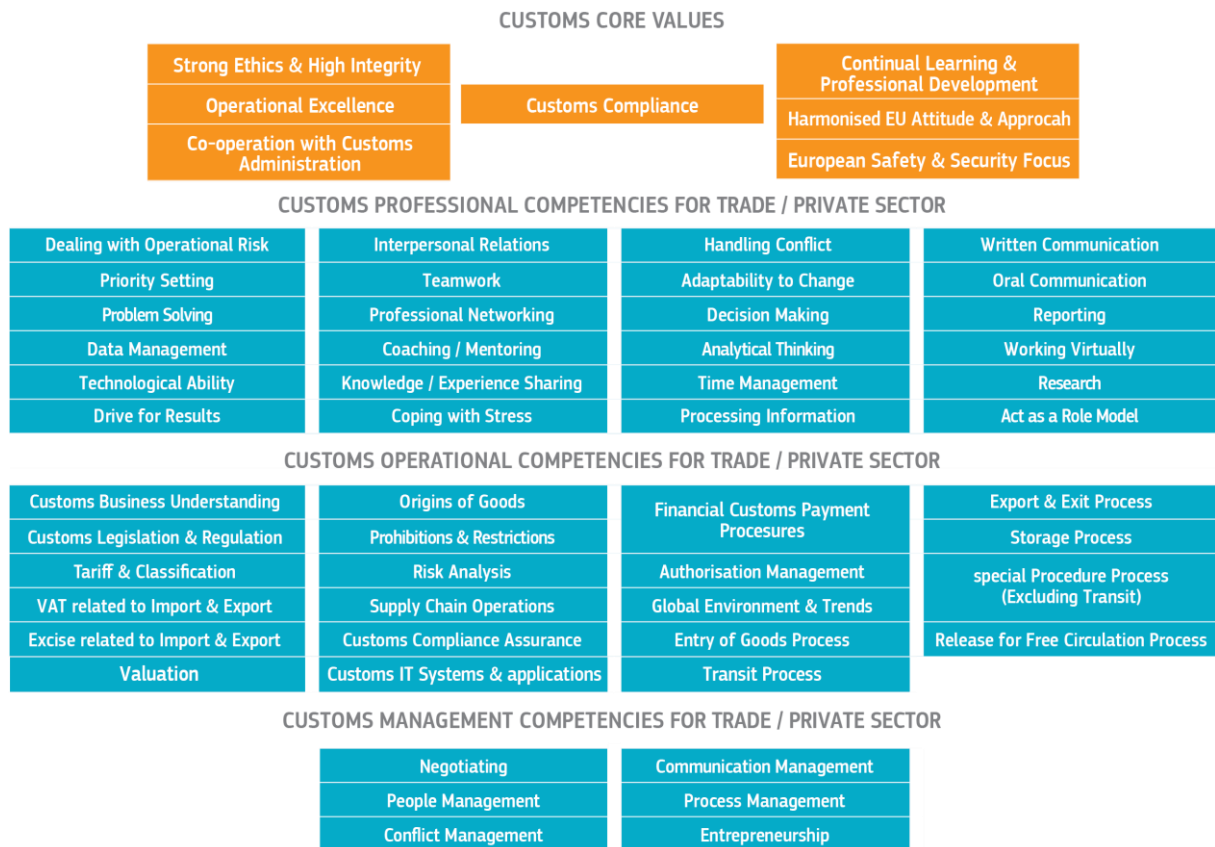


Figure 3 - EU Customs Competency Framework for the private sector

Supporting these overviews, the list of competencies is mapped out in the **EU Customs competency dictionary**. The dictionaries describe each individual competency to ensure a consistent understanding of each competency across all stakeholders.

An example, the descriptions of the “Origin of Goods” operational competency area, is shown in Figure 4.

REF.	OPERATIONAL COMPETENCY	SCOPE	DESCRIPTION
<i>OC9</i>	<i>Origin of Goods</i>	The Origin of Goods competency refers to activities required of Customs professionals that have to determine the economic nationality of goods as a part of their daily operations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensures the correct and uniform application of the rules of origin;</li> <li>▪ Has knowledge of rules of origin for preferential and non-preferential origin;</li> <li>▪ Able to verify documents of origin;</li> <li>▪ Able to determine the origin of goods, in particular when goods have been processed in several countries;</li> <li>▪ Has knowledge of the arrangements that apply to specific non-EU countries;</li> <li>▪ Has knowledge of the legal basis on Binding Origin Information decisions (BOI);</li> <li>▪ Has knowledge of which authorities are responsible for issuing BOI;</li> <li>▪ Understands the political and economic aspects of rules of origin and harmonisation theories.</li> </ul>

Figure 4 - Example Competency Dictionary



This repository of competencies has been mapped against a set of **representative customs roles** that were identified and documented via a number of location visits and one-to-one interviews in various national customs administrations and companies across the EU. These were conducted with ‘on-the-ground’ customs officials in the public sector and professionals from the private sector. The result was two role-mapping matrices, one corresponding to the public sector competency framework and one for the private sector competency framework.

The **role descriptions and their associated competencies** is what make up an **individual competency profile**. This set of competency profiles is what should be at the centre of competency-based HR management. These profiles define the optimal combination of competencies and proficiency level (i.e. the skill level within a competency) for an employee executing a particular role in customs.

**A competency profile is the standard and baseline to which employees working in the role should adhere.** When placed at the centre of the HR management processes – it really becomes a very powerful tool.

The following diagram illustrates the **example of a Line Manager** who works in **Declaration Processing**, which has been taken from the public sector EU Custom role-mapping matrix. It includes a role description that describes typical tasks associated with that role and a list of competencies and associated proficiency level required to perform successfully in this role.

ROLE TITLE					
Line Manager in the Declaration Processing Department					
LEVEL			FUNCTIONAL DOMAIN		
Line Manager			Declaration Processing		
ROLE DESCRIPTION					
<p>A person holding a line management role typically leads (an) operational team(s). The team members of his or her team do not fulfil an official management role themselves. A Line Manager is the link between the Middle Management and the Customs Officers of his/her Team(s).</p> <p>He or she, and the team(s) under his or her management will typically be involved in:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1) Processing of Goods and Cargo Declaration:</b> Ensuring that all the particulars for the goods as required by the requested Customs procedures and other related authorities are completed correctly.</li> <li><b>2) Application of Correct Trade Measures:</b> Ensuring both non-fiscal Customs obligations (e.g. verification of required permits, licenses related to the Customs declaration) and fiscal Customs obligations (e.g. checking that the correct Customs tariff and duties are applied based on classification, origin and valuation) are met.</li> <li><b>3) Operational Risk Analysis:</b> Identification of risks and potential threats at the premises where the goods are presented, which might lead to immediate inspections, post-clearance audit, etc.</li> <li><b>4) Release of Goods:</b> Upon the completion of the required controls, and where no discrepancies exist, release of the goods for their intended purpose.</li> </ol> <p>The main responsibilities of a Line Manager within a Declaration Processing Department are focused on <b>guaranteeing a good cooperation between the operational teams, ensuring the realisation of the operational objectives and closely following up the performance of his operational team(s)</b>. He/she will deliver on their responsibilities based on <b>the Customs Core Values</b> which are Strong Ethics and High Integrity, Public Service Commitment, Customer &amp; Service Orientation, Continual Learning &amp; Professional Development, Operational Excellence, Harmonised EU Attitude &amp; Approach and European Safety and Security Focus. A Line Manager will focus on these core values by performing the following tasks:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensures the realisation of the operational objectives based on the guidelines received from his/her Middle Manager. He/she will also capture feedback of his/her operational team(s) and share this feedback with his/her upper management, in particular, with the Middle Management.</li> <li>Directly manages a team of operational people working in Declaration Processing.</li> <li>Maximises his or her team's performance by organising &amp; dividing the work.</li> <li>Supports and develops team members and ensures that they continue to develop strong technical knowledge.</li> <li>Provides flexibility and adequate conditions to team members to maximise efficiency.</li> <li>Ensures that team members operate and communicate with appropriate political awareness &amp; sensitivity.</li> <li>Verifies the quantity and quality of the work products delivered by his or her team.</li> <li>Reports performance and progress related to operational objectives to his or her manager.</li> <li>Captures reflections and suggestions for potential process improvements to increase operational efficiency.</li> <li>Ensures effective cooperation with other departments within the Customs Administration e.g. Control Department, Audit Department, etc.</li> <li>Offers first line support regarding special cases for his or her team members.</li> <li>Builds a network with other Customs Managers and employees within the European Union.</li> </ol>					
PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES	PROFICIENCY LEVEL	OPERATIONAL COMPETENCIES	PROFICIENCY LEVEL	MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES	PROFICIENCY LEVEL
Dealing with Operational Risk	3	Customs Business Understanding	2	Act as a Role Model	2
Drive for Results	4	Customs Legislation	3	Entrepreneurship	2
Teamwork	3	Customs Procedures	3	People Management	2
Professional Networking	1	Customs Declaration Processing	3	Conflict Management	3
Knowledge/experience sharing	2	Tariff and Classification	3	Change Management	2
Coping with Stress	2	Origin of Goods	3	Communication Management	2
Handling Conflict	2	Valuation	3	Customs Trends	1
Adaptability to Change	2	Debt and Guarantee Management	2	Managerial Courage	2
Decision Making	3	Prohibitions and Restrictions	3	Process Management	2
Analytical Thinking	3	Customs Supervision	2	Visionary leadership	1
Interpersonal Relations	3			Negotiating	1
Time Management	2			Political Awareness	2
Priority Setting	2				
Processing Information	2				
Written Communication	2				
Oral Communication	2				
Reporting	2				
Creativity	1				
Technological Ability	2				
Problem Solving	2				

Figure 5 - Example Competency Profile

# ADDING VALUE AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

The EU Customs Competency Framework drives customs organisations towards increased customs performance and enables employees to feel engaged with their work, to feel empowered to contribute to the customs profession and deliver the highest common level of service across the European Union.

## Value at European Level

HOW THE EU CUSTOMS COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK BRINGS IMPROVED AND HARMONISED CUSTOMS PERFORMANCE THROUGHOUT THE EU



### One common understanding

The comprehensive common role descriptions and competency profiles represent the optimal combination of skills, knowledge and behaviours required for a particular role in customs across the European Union. They have been developed from best practices, examples from real-life situations and thorough analysis of the current and future needs in customs. The use of these competencies and competency descriptions will ensure compatibility and facilitate a common understanding between Member States, the European Commission and private sector organisations that interact with customs. It ensures that the same terms are used when referring to the same aspects of the customs profession – leading to better and efficient communication between all stakeholders.

### Flexibility of the workforce

The common understanding and harmonised performance across the European Union will result in an increased mobility of the intra-European customs workforce. It will allow customs officers working in the public sector to detach temporarily from their home customs administration to work in another Member State, if such a need would arise. This will allow an efficient pooling of resources across the Member State customs administrations, and also increase the opportunities to share knowledge and expertise across the European Union.

This sharing of resources and expertise is not limited to public sector customs administrations. International companies with offices across the European Union who interact with European customs administrations can also benefit via exchange of resources to pool and maximise these customs skills across borders.

### Improved targeting of common training

Using the EU Customs Competency Framework to identify gaps in the competency profiles of those working in customs will significantly aid the European Commission and Member States to target specific common learning requirements. It will help to **shape training strategies** and enable the prioritisation of the most urgent needs when investing in common training initiatives.

# Value for customs administrations and private sector organisations

HOW THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMPETENCY-BASED HR MANAGEMENT CAN BRING DIRECT ADVANTAGES TO THOSE WHO EMBRACE IT

## Improved customs performance

The identification and communication of what it means to be high performing in a particular customs role will positively impact the day-to-day productivity of each and every individual employee. The role descriptions and competency profiles can be used to **improve the overall process of performance measurement** and can be used by employees to set their baseline performance objectives. The optimal competency profiles can then be used to compare and evaluate the employees at the end of the performance period.



Figure 6 - The Competency Wheel

## Recruitment and selection

Customs administrations and private sector organisations can use the role mapping matrices for their recruitment and selection processes. Using role descriptions will **make recruitment more efficient**, as HR departments can use these descriptions as a basis for job openings. The potential candidates can be evaluated based on the optimal competency profiles. Moreover, the use of the competency framework can increase the effectiveness of the people hired, leading to lower turnover in customs staff.

## Development and career planning

The availability of a competency profile per role will **improve the transparency of career tracks** in the organisation. All employees will have a clear view on the competency requirements related to each role. People willing to take the next step in their career can develop and train themselves to meet the respective competency requirements of the aspired role.

## Improved gap analysis leading to more effective training and development initiatives

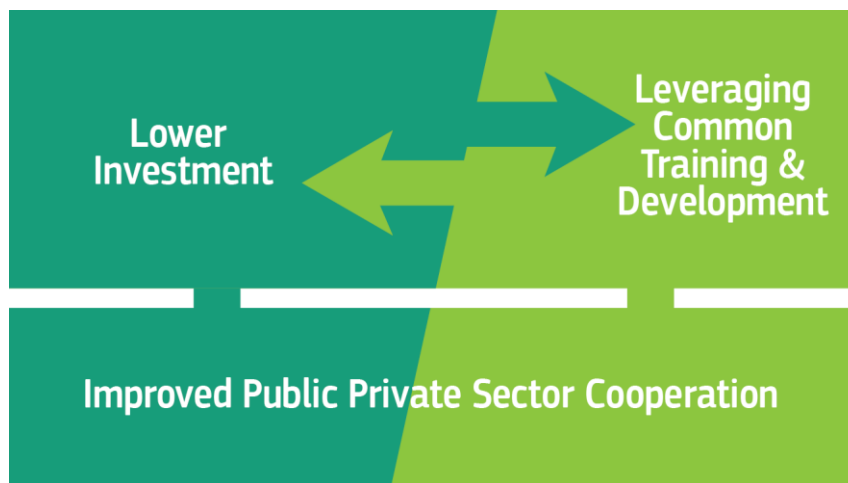
Competency assessments can be conducted per employee or for specific groups in the workforce, which provide a clear view on the current competency profiles of the employees being assessed. These profiles can be compared with the defined optimal competency profile. The overall gap between the current profiles and the optimal competency profiles will provide valuable **insights into where training and development efforts should be targeted**. The optimal competency profiles and role descriptions can also be used to prepare comprehensive training programmes which in turn can be used to improve the performance of specific groups of employees via training.

## Succession and strategic workforce planning

The customs profession demands a range of specific niche skills that are typically difficult to source. Customs has also historically been a very hands-on profession where many skills are acquired on the job. As a result, many customs administrations and private sector organisations are dealing with a nearing retirement wave whereby this niche skills set that has been built over the years, will soon leave the organisation. By implementing the usage of the EU Customs Competency Framework into the HR processes, it can help to identify the competencies that will leave with the retirement wave and help leadership to take measures to counter this wave.

In the long term, by having this overview of the competencies, customs administrations and private sector organisations can **bring their workforce in line with their overall mission and strategy**. The organisation's strategy will be used to identify the future competency requirements and to ensure the competency framework is always kept up to date.

Why the EU Customs Competency Framework delivers immediate and long-term value for you



### Lower investment

Both public and private sector organisations often go to market to buy ‘off-the-shelf’ competency frameworks. However, these competency frameworks are usually expensive and are not targeted specifically to the customs profession. The **EU Customs Competency Framework is not only ‘for free’ but it is also directly relevant to customs** and comprises best practices and real world data from customs administrations and private sector organisations. The recent publication and distribution of the EU Customs Competency Framework constitutes a unique opportunity to modernise your HR practices – and to do so in a very cost effective way.

### Improved public private cooperation

The public sector and private sector versions of the EU Customs Competency Framework were developed closely together. It was recognised during their development that specific profiles in the public sector customs administrations would have direct contact and specific tasks in dealing with their counterparts in the private sector organisations. By taking on these European competency frameworks, organisations and employees will gain visibility and understanding of each other’s roles and responsibilities for their respective organisations. It will lead to fewer miscommunications between public and private sector employees when dealing with customs matters. It will **smoothen the interactions and ultimately lead to a more efficient end-to-end process** when it comes to moving goods through customs, into and out of the EU.

### Leveraging common training and development

As many Member States will use and implement the EU Customs Competency Framework, there is ample room for intensified collaboration when it comes to training and development initiatives. Administrations can **pool resources** together, common training materials can be leveraged by other Member States and in the long term this will reduce overall costs.

In addition, the European Commission plans a number of initiatives to help Member States with their implementation projects. These initiatives will facilitate the sharing of best practices and lessons learned both between Member States administrations and with their private sector counterparts.

**The integration of the EU Customs Competency Framework into competency-based HR management and processes will lead to improved performance** of the customs employees and as a result, of the entire organisation.

**It allows leadership to:**

- Clarify and communicate key competencies to all employees
- Define a common approach and comparison method for measuring on-the-job performance
- Identify possible competency gaps at the employee level and organisational level and take targeted actions
- Set the foundation for the development of training material and training curricula
- Select and recruit the right people for the right roles

**Overall, the publication of the EU Customs Competency Framework is a unique window of opportunity for Member States and their private sector counterparts to start modernising their HR processes using state-of-the-art competency management tools.**



### **BUILDING ON THE EU CUSTOMS COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT TO MEMBER STATES CUSTOMS ADMINISTRATION**

Following the successful development of the EU Customs Competency Framework, **the next step now is start implementing it at the operational level**. Only then will the full benefits be truly realised. The European Commission has already supported Member State customs administrations to begin this journey by developing a set of detailed guidelines for national implementation projects, as well as a set of easy-to-use templates for developing a business case and implementation planning.

Since the launch of the EU Customs Competency Framework, many European Member State public administrations have taken the opportunity to leverage the framework for the modernisation of their HR processes. At the EU Customs Competency Framework launch event, held in Vienna in October 2013, many of the Member State public administrations representatives highlighted that more support would be needed from the European Commission to implement it fully, in all national administrations.

The European Commission followed up on this request with providing the **EU Customs Competency Framework in 22 languages** to help Member States with their national implementation projects, followed by the creation of **a number of supporting tools and templates**:

- **Business Case template**: this template provides national project managers and project sponsors with an easy-to-follow layout and key sections that should be filled in, to create a compelling business case. It articulates the value that implementing a competency framework would bring to the organisation and explains the benefits it would achieve with an associated estimation of effort.
- **Strategic Implementation Plan template**: a straightforward template to develop a high level strategic planning for the implementation and the roll-out of the competency framework. It serves as the guide throughout the implementation project to ensure sufficient progress is being made and to steer to the project to its success.

In addition, a **step-by-step guide** with hands-on advice for the national implementation of the EU Customs Competency Framework was also created and is available to the Member State public administrations.

**Today,** Member State customs administrations are at different stages of implementing the EU Customs Competency Framework. Some administrations have already started, whilst others are still in the planning phase.

**As all Member States have to undergo similar project phases, there is great potential for collaboration and experience sharing.** Going forward, Member States will be invited to share their lessons learned and useful tools, as well as feedback on the templates and general findings.

“

*The European Commission is committed to continue supporting you and your partners on your implementation journey - the blueprint is ready, the roadmap laid down and the tools have been provided. The time has come now for you to start building.*

”

A **SUCCESS** STORY...  
COMPETENCY **MANAGEMENT** IN  
**FINNISH** CUSTOMS



Riitta Paalanen

As head of the Finnish Customs Training Division, Riitta Paalanen has been involved in the development of the EU Customs Competency Framework for quite some time. Since 2013, she has been the driver of the implementation of this EU Customs Competency Framework at the national level in Finland. We take an opportunity to connect with Riitta to see how the implementation is going.

***"We used the EU Customs Competency Framework to create a national competency dictionary (list of competencies and associated definitions) applicable to the entire customs administration."***

“

*"Riitta, was there a Customs Competency Framework in place in Finland before the EU Customs Competency Framework was developed?"*

*"There were already a number of initiatives in the area of competency management, although a consolidated view on competency building in customs was missing. For instance, we have built the first competency framework to define our basic vocational training programme already in 1998. Since 2012, we also started to implement the first programmes of the Qualification in Customs Operations, which is an official qualification in the Finnish national education structure. This program is open both to private and public participants who work in the customs area and it has attracted many students. There are currently more than 100 students enrolled in the programme. Similarly, in another initiative, we defined the competencies needed by staff performing tasks related to crime prevention. Also, when we founded the "Electronic Service Centre" for customs in 2011, we analysed and evaluated the competencies of all staff that would be employed in this centre. The competency profiles were then compared to "ideal" competency profiles. This allowed us to design and develop targeted training programmes to close the knowledge and skills gap."*

*"Can you explain how your administration has evolved, in terms of competency management since the EU Customs Competency Framework was officially launched?"*

*"The EU Customs Competency Framework launch event in Vienna was very valuable, in the sense that it made us realise that a joint effort was needed to implement a holistic CFW in Finland. I started working closely together with the person responsible for Human Resources Management. **We used the EU Customs***

*"On top of that, we plan to use the framework for performance management."*

*"Our people will know the 'requirements' related to each role, which will help them in planning their career."*

*"Our Director-General expressed his full support for the initiative."*

*"One must also ensure that the project keeps its momentum"*

*Competency Framework to create a national competency dictionary (list of competencies and associated definitions) applicable to the entire customs administration. So, rather than many different frameworks and initiatives we really seized the opportunity to have one unified framework for Finnish Customs. For the development of the list of competencies, we based ourselves largely on the EU CFW. In a second step, we will now analyse our organisation and connect the competencies with the identified 117 customs roles within our administration to further align them to the 72 EU profiles. Step by step, we are now creating competency profiles for these roles, i.e. linking competencies and proficiency levels to each role."*

*"How do you plan to use the national Competency Framework in the future?"*

*"Training, of course! We are already using it for some training programmes, and we want to create more tailored training programmes for each of the profiles. On top of that, we plan to use the framework for performance management. Our staff has yearly evaluations with their supervisor. In this meeting, the performance of the past year is evaluated, but also objectives for the coming year are set. The competency profile will be an important guide in these discussions. Personally, I feel that one of the main benefits is that it increases the transparency of the career tracks in customs. Our people will know the 'requirements' related to each role, which will help them in planning their career."*

*"You clearly have built considerable experience, what advice would you give to colleagues that still need to start this journey towards competency-based HR management?"*

*"There are a number of things to consider. One of the most important ones is that you need to ensure sufficient support, both top-down and bottom-up. After the meeting in Vienna, our Director-General expressed his full support for the initiative. On the other hand, we immediately involved the trade unions and clearly explained to them the goal and purpose of this project. They were very appreciative and have been supporting the initiative and promoting it towards their members. Furthermore, one must also ensure that the project keeps its momentum. Clear communication and transparency about the progress are vital here. In our case, the status of the project is discussed regularly in our Training Steering Group meetings and the minutes of these meetings can be consulted by anyone in the*

*administration. This ensures that everyone clearly sees the added value of the framework, which in turn increases the engagement. Another advice would be to start with a limited scope and work incrementally. For example, for mapping the required competencies to the defined roles, we started a pilot for a limited number of roles. This allows us to continuously improve the process along the way.”*

*Thank you Riitta! We will keep in touch to follow up on further progress of the Finnish implementation project.*



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