



## Ontario Public Service Employees Union

### Using competencies to achieve consistency and accountability

When the Ontario Public Service Employees Union was tasked with formalizing its talent-management processes, competencies gave them the solid foundation they needed.



## Challenge

With as many as 300 unionized staff members working to represent the interests of 130,000 union members across the province, OPSEU operates in an environment where accountability is key.

"We have two bargaining units here and in our job competition process, people have a right to grieve," says Nazlin Mohamed, OPSEU's Supervisor of Employee Relations, describing the union's complaint resolution or 'grievance' process for employees. "It was important that our job competition process was defensible as well as right."

But when OPSEU's HR department was mandated to bring greater consistency and accountability to its talent-management processes, they saw an opportunity to not only protect the organization, but also enhance its success.

### ABOUT OPSEU

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) is a trade union representing about 130,000 members across Ontario who work for the Ontario government, for community colleges, for the Ontario Liquor Board, and for a wide range of community agencies in the broader public service.

“Over the years, as we’ve grown, both in terms of our membership and the size of our staff, it became clear that we needed to think about creating consistent and reliable processes for our staff,” says Mohamed. “OPSEU is a good employer and we knew we could be even better.”

For OPSEU, the priority was to connect every HR function—including hiring, recruitment, training and development, and performance management—and ensure they reflected organizational values.

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“As an organization and as a union, we have some pretty clear values,” says Mohamed. “We wanted our employees to model our ethics and values as an organization, and we decided that using competencies would help us do that.”



## Solution

OPSEU began by identifying their core competencies—the values that need to be upheld by all employees, regardless of position or tenure. Unlike many corporate organizations, OPSEU didn’t have a mission statement in place, so they used membership

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materials and the insights of executive staff and subject-matter experts to identify the competencies that supported key organizational strengths.

OPSEU’s HR team selected core competencies from HRSG’s competency dictionaries, customizing them as needed to reflect the organization’s unique union environment and priorities.

“Our executive staff, supervisors, and subject matter experts were instrumental in the

process," says Mohamed. "They helped us create a really holistic, comprehensive vision of the core competencies. What's most important to us? What does everybody in this organization have to have in terms of skill and competency?"

With the right core competencies in place, the HR team began identifying the competencies shared across different job families as well as those that are specific to individual jobs. Mohamed estimates that it took about six months to create competency profiles for all 400 employees, after which the HR team took another six months to validate, adjust, and finalize each profile. With the competency profiles in place, OPSEU could begin applying competencies consistently and logically to their HR processes.

Because hiring the right people was a priority for OPSEU, they initially focused on hiring and recruitment activities.

"Our interviews now use competency-based behavioral questions, and we rarely find that we need to ask other types of questions," says Mohamed. "When we are looking at potential candidates, we are looking at our core competencies and determining whether these people fit the organization and fit our values. It's one of the most instrumental ways that we've used competencies."



## Result

When OPSEU adopted a competency-based talent management strategy, they became the first union in Canada to do so. While Mohamed, who has a legal background, admits that she and her team were initially hesitant to apply competencies to a unionized workplace, she says they have ended up being a natural fit. Because competencies are developed in

consultation with key stakeholders, validated, and applied consistently to everyone in the organization, they are ideal for supporting a fair and equitable workplace.

"There was lots of anxiety when we first started," Mohamed admits. But after successfully building a competency framework

and using it to strengthen the hiring and recruitment process, she says she's excited about what they've already put in place and is looking forward to applying the competencies to other HR activities.

While the main achievement was to connect various HR processes and create more consistency, it has also helped the department to focus on what's important.

"We're really starting to be clearer about who we are as an employer and what we expect of our staff," she explains. "It's helped us to determine the right kind of people. Then, when we have those people in place, it helps us to communicate with our staff in terms of what's expected."

OPSEU is already planning the next step—a competency-based performance development program. Mohamed says that although performance development can carry negative associations, the result of a system's review indicates that OPSEU's employees are actually looking forward to taking part.

"They want to know how they're doing in their jobs. They want feedback and we want to be able to provide that to them, but we needed to be sure it was based on something measurable and consistent. Now we have that foundation for all our HR activities."

For a closer look at HRSG's competency dictionaries, or to learn more about our range of product and services, please call 1-866-574-7041 ext. 600 or email [info@hrsg.ca](mailto:info@hrsg.ca).

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