CBT is nothing new. There has long been a recognition that some people really do not need training in all aspects of a trade because of the individual life experiences and transferable skills that they bring with them. This is the basis of competency-based training (CBT).

Most people have experienced traditional training through attendance at school in Australia or through attending a training workshop or course. (More progressive schools are moving towards CBT today.)

CBT is upon us. Many people don't know where it came from or why. Many managers and HR people shudder and duck for cover at its mere mention, so we thought it a good idea to try and explain it from the ground up. So here goes. In this, the first of two articles, we look at how to get started with competency-based training.

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A beginners guide to CBT

**Traditional time is fixed**
In traditional training, the time is fixed: everyone spends the same time studying the same subject (content based). The ‘class’ starts at a particular time and has a known duration and is directed or controlled by the teacher/facilitator/trainer. Learning is completed when the allocated time elapses.

**Traditional outcome is variable**
People enter training with varying exposure to the skill or topic. They also have differing learning needs, learning styles, and personal issues (they get sick etc.). Some will pass, some will fail, some become experts, others just scrape through. The outcome varies.

**CBT’s time is variable**
The time taken to learn can vary. People keep learning until they can demonstrate the specific competency.

Classroom type ‘lectures’ do not lend themselves easily to this need for variable time and entry (learning) levels and thus most CBT is undertaken using self directed study modules, projects, and individual learning situations and experiences, (reading, watching a video, interviewing an expert etc.)

**CBT’s outcome is fixed**
In CBT the desired competencies are carefully identified and published. Everyone knows clearly what they are expected to be able to do and they know how they will be expected to ‘prove’ that they can do it.

A competency is another way of saying exactly what the person will be able to do at the end of the training: to what standard and under what conditions they will do it.

For example, a keyboard operator has demonstrated competency when he/she can enter a minimum of 60 wmp. with at least 98% accuracy, using Word for Windows 2.0 software at a standard workstation.

Training continues until the competency is achieved (or the individual receives some sorely needed career guidance). The learning outcomes are fixed.

So CBT means that the learner, not the trainer, is in control. Learners take as long as
they need to achieve the predetermined performance standards, or competency. They can study as much or as little as they need to. They can study when they need to. And they can study in a way that suits their learning style.

Most of us have experienced CBT and not realised it.

If you hold a current driving licence, you experienced CBT.

First you had to pass a test of competency for the rules of the road.

To do this, you probably bought a highway code handbook, complete with test examples (published competencies) and studied in a manner that suited you.

You couldn’t progress to Module II, actually driving a car, until you had demonstrated competency in Module I, Parts A (min. 60% pass) and Part B (100% accuracy). (Remember they part about give way at intersections? Get one question wrong in this section and you had to spend some more time to reach the required competency.)

You could take as long as you liked to reach competency in Module I before moving into Module II, acquiring your Learner’s Permit. You could then learn the necessary skills of driving a car in a manner best suited to you (e.g. driving school, relative, in a farm paddock, etc.) but you didn’t get your licence until you could demonstrate the desired competency. You displayed your competency by actually driving a car on a public highway under test conditions without losing more than eight demerit points.

To get your driving licence in Australia, you know what you have to do and how well you have to do it. Learning takes as long as you, the learner, need it to in order to demonstrate your competency.

### So what’s all the fuss about?

The example given here is of course a relatively simply one. For those organisations wishing to embark on the path of CBT there are both benefits and costs.

**Learning takes as long as you, the learner, need it to in order to demonstrate your competency.**

The major benefit from CBT to the organisation is the fixed outcomes: a guarantee of an agreed minimum standard following the learning. (Then all you have to do is work to ensure that people apply what they have learned.)

The major drawback of CBT is the initial cost (time, people, money) of getting the system up and running.

### Getting started

1. The starting point for CBT has to be the understanding and commitment of the executive. If you don’t have this you are unlikely to get the resources to be effective.

2. Once a decision to move to CBT is made, you must gain support from interest groups including relevant trade unions, middle management etc. One critical success indicator is acceptance by the workforce.

3. If competencies gained are to be transferable (e.g. if an apprenticeship served in SA is to be recognised throughout Australia) it is essential that you develop competency standards in line with the National Training Board Framework. Subsidies may be available to assist you.

4. Start in a small way.

5. Establish a plan with critical success indicators.

6. Train your people in how to do CBT or engage external assistance.

7. Identify the jobs/tasks/etc. that you want to start on.

8. Identify the specific competencies for that job/task. A competency may be made up of many elements e.g. driving a car: reversing, three-point turns, hill starts.

9. Competencies focus on what individuals actually do. They offer a clear and integrated set of dimensions and criteria against which performance can be measured. Excellent basis for training, promotion, recruitment, reward systems and disciplines etc. isn’t it?

10. Ensure stakeholders are involved in the whole process.

11. Verify the identified competencies.

12. Develop learning strategies/systems that meet the requirements for CBT.

13. Pilot and validate CBT systems.

14. Develop supporting mechanisms, coaches, assessors, facilitators, co-ordinators etc.


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(Next issue we cover how to keep it all simple, assessment and explaining all the jargon.)