

Text exploration

sub·tle *adjective* BrE /'sʌtl/ ; NAmE /'sɑtl/ (**sub·tler**, **sub·tlest**)

more subtle is also common

1 (*often approving*) not very noticeable or obvious: *subtle colours/flavours/smells, etc.*

There are subtle differences between the two versions

Ref: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 9th edition © Oxford University Press, 2015

As a consultant, specializing in competency-based management, I often encounter clients who use the terms skills, competencies and capabilities interchangeably. Often, the difference is simply a function of different clients preferring to use different terms; however, there are subtle differences that should be understood especially when deciding how to develop and use these concepts.

Competencies were traditionally used by organizations to define, in behavioral terms, what *people need to do to produce the results that the organization desires*. For competencies to be effective, they need to be demonstrable so that they could be measured against some type of organizational goal. These types of competencies are commonly referred to as “behavioural”. Let’s use the example of the competency for *Adaptability*. *Adaptability* is broadly defined as “*working effectively in ambiguous or changing situations, and with diverse individuals and groups.*” A behaviour associated with Adaptability is “*responds quickly to shifting opportunities and risks.*” Note that this behaviour is not linked to a particular job or function. So in order to observe this behaviour, an employee or his/her manager would need to think about “how” this behaviour is demonstrated relative to a specific job. For example, a marketing manager needed to quickly shift her campaign focus from one product campaign to another due to a change in organizational priorities; whereas an HR manager needed to quickly shift her priorities from succession(=series) planning to recruitment and selection to fill an organizational gap. *Behavioural competencies* and their associated behaviours are therefore meant to be quite flexible and not necessarily job dependent.

Capabilities is a term that is often used interchangeably with competencies. Historically capabilities described something that has the capacity of being realized, but that has not yet been realized. For example, someone can be capable of becoming a manager, but has not yet developed the competencies needed to be a manager. Hence, using the term capabilities is good in instances where someone may be considered for a new role. They have the capability to function in that role, but still need to obtain the necessary competencies to be fully effective.

Where competencies start getting confused with skills is often in the realm of “technical” competencies. Technical competencies are usually linked to a professional domain, like Human Resources, Finance or IT, and their associated behaviours are much more skill-based. *A skill is an ability to do something, or “what” needs to be done.* Let’s use the example of the Succession Management competency, which is broadly defined as “identifying and developing employees to fill key positions throughout the organization.” A behaviour related to Succession Management is “researches activities, tools, processes and systems that contribute to the development of high potential employees.” There is no question that this behaviour, or in this case, skill is directly related to a role dealing with Succession Management. Hence, a *technical competency can really be defined as a collection of skills.*

What I see in many *technical competencies is a mix of knowledge and skill statements*. Knowledge statements are usually used to highlight what a person needs to know in order to function in his/her role. A knowledge statement could be “understands the role of management in contributing to HR objectives”. While this is perfectly valid as a role requirement, it is impossible to assess against. Hence, my recommendation would always be to rewrite these in observable terms such as “works with managers to translate HR objectives into key performance indicators.”

shifting opportunities: instable opportunities

ambiguous: unclear

am·bigu·ous *adjective*

BrE /æm'bigjuəs/ ; NAmE /æm'bigjuəs/

1 that can be understood in more than one way; having different meanings *an ambiguous word/term/statement*

Her account was deliberately ambiguous.

2 not clearly stated or defined

Organization's adapt·abil·ity *noun* BrE /ə,dæptə'bɪləti/ ; NAmE /ə,dæptə'bɪləti/

[uncountable]

The organization's quality of being able to change or be changed in order to deal successfully with new situations of the environment

Capability vs. Competency

“Competency” and “capability” are two terms that pertain(=to exist or to apply in..) to human ability. They are often mentioned in many Human Resources related materials, as well as in [career](#) and job communications.

“Capability” is the term that describes the quality of being capable. It is the condition that permits an individual to acquire the power and ability to learn and do something within their capacity. “Capability” is also known as implied abilities, or abilities that are not yet developed.

A person with a capability has the potential to acquire a specific ability or skill that will be helpful in a task. The learned skill or ability adds to a person's knowledge bank or skillset. Capabilities also improve the functions of a person, which can [lead](#) to more productivity. New skills and abilities make a person more capable to complete a certain [task](#), which in turn makes them a more suitable candidate for certain job positions.

With time and practice, capabilities can develop into competence. Capabilities serve as the starting point of being able to do something and gradually becoming more adept in performing the task.

“Capability” is derived from the Middle French word “capabilité” and Late Latin word “capābili”. The word was first used in 1587; however, its meaning in today’s usage (underdeveloped skill or faculty) only evolved and was used starting in 1778.

On the other hand, “competence” is the [state](#) or quality of an individual’s work. A person and their work can be evaluated as competent if the performance is considered “satisfactory” but not “outstanding.” Competence can also be applied to the improvement or development of one’s abilities and skills for the benefit of the person and the group or institution they represent. The improved skills and abilities are applied to tasks or jobs.

per·tain *verb*

BrE /pə'teɪn/ ; NAmE /pər'teɪn/

[intransitive] (*formal*)

- VERB FORMS

Verb Forms

present simple I / you / we / they pertain BrE /pə'teɪn/ ; NAmE /pər'teɪn/

he / she / it pertains BrE /pə'teɪnz/ ; NAmE /pər'teɪnz/

past simple pertained BrE /pə'teɪnd/ ; NAmE /pər'teɪnd/

past participle pertained BrE /pə'teɪnd/ ; NAmE /pər'teɪnd/

-ing form pertaining BrE /pə'teɪnɪŋ/ ; NAmE /pər'teɪnɪŋ/

to exist or to apply in a particular situation or at a particular time *Living conditions are vastly different from those pertaining in their country of origin.*

Those laws no longer pertain.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 9th edition © Oxford University Press, 2015

Summary:

1. “Capability” and “competence” are two manifestations of human abilities and skills. Both [words](#) are often met in job advertisements or personnel assessments.
2. “Capability” is the condition of having the capacity to do something. Within this condition there is a potential for improvement of skills. On the other hand, “competence” is the improved version of “capability,” and means the degree of skill in the task’s performance.

3. Capabilities lead to competence. An individual with capabilities can acquire a new skillset or knowledge by learning and practicing. Competence serves as a result of the application of capabilities.
4. Capabilities are seen as “generic,” while competence is more in the field of “specialist.”
5. Both “capability” and “competence” are derived from French and Latin roots. Another interesting similarity is that both words have earlier meanings distinct from their current, modern meanings; competence’s modern meaning only evolved in 1790, but the word was already in usage since 1632. “Capability” has been used since 1587, but it took almost 197 years to come to its new and modern meaning.

Ref: <http://www.differencebetween.net/language/words-language/difference-between-capability-and-competency/>