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# Developing a Competency Framework for Labour Relations Professionals

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# **DEVELOPING A COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK FOR LABOUR RELATIONS PROFESSIONALS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this Queen's Industrial Relations Centre (IRC) research initiative was to identify and categorize competencies required by a successful Labour Relations Professional (LRP). A review of the literature and an analysis of the IRC's labour relations programming led to the development of a survey for experienced labour relations practitioners. The IRC conducted the LRP survey in June 2009. Aggregated data revealed subtle shifts in competencies required for LRPs. Drawing on the 154 survey responses, a LRP Competency Framework is proposed. The resulting framework informs the IRC's program planning and delivery, and is intended to be a practical tool for LRPs to plan their professional development activities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this Queen's Industrial Relations Centre (IRC) research initiative was to identify and categorize competencies required by a successful Labour Relations Professional (LRP). Recognising that there have been many changes in the role of the LR practitioner over the years, Queen's IRC sought to better understand the subtle shifts in required competencies for LRPs. As well, it was anticipated that an enhanced profile of the desired professional development track for LRPs would allow the IRC to deliver programs to meet the current and future learning needs of its clients. The present study is grounded in conversations with labour relations practitioners and a review of the IRC's labour relations programming; it is based largely on Sutcliffe's (2007) review of the literature. I begin this paper by reviewing the literature that undergirded the IRC's research. Then, I outline the study's methodology and provide a synopsis of the key findings. I conclude the article with a discussion of the data, including the development of a competency framework for labour relations professionals.

## **SETTING UP THE SURVEY**

The IRC's survey of labour relations professionals stems from two components: a review of the literature and a review of the IRC's programming. As background for the IRC's exploration of the competencies for labour relations professionals, I turned to two recent studies: Sutcliffe (2007) and the 2010 work of the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). Together, these two articles helped to frame the methodology for this study and the questions included in the survey.

## Review of the Literature

Sutcliffe's 2007 paper, *Developing Canada's Industrial Relations Leaders*, reviewed the literature on labour relations. The paper revealed that LRPs traditionally share a core set of competencies which include: mediation, arbitration, conflict resolution, negotiation, collective bargaining, and understanding of the history of labour relations in Canada. Sutcliffe's analysis also suggested that in future, successful LRPs would need the ability to:

- Build partnerships across the enterprise to support the best possible labour-management outcomes
- Plan and implement strategic communications
- Apply talent management practices
- Understand the strategic imperatives of the business
- Manage change
- Manage knowledge
- Facilitate
- Demonstrate leadership at an organizational level

In 2009, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducted an HR Leadership Competency poll and published an analysis titled, *What Senior HR Leaders Need to Know* (2010). This research included a sample of HR professionals in the United States, Canada, India, the Middle East, and North Africa. Participants were asked to cite what they perceived as the critical competencies—defined as knowledge, skills, abilities, and other qualities—for senior human resource (HR) leaders to succeed in their roles. SHRM partnered with the Canadian Council of Human Resources Associations (CCHRA) to collect data in Canada through eight of its nine provincial associations. In Canada, 1,137 HR leaders participated in the survey. Participants were presented with a list of 18 competencies for senior HR leaders, as identified through recent SHRM qualitative research with HR leaders and members of the academic community. From this list, respondents were asked to identify the top five competencies for senior HR leaders in general, to weigh in on how those competencies may change in importance five years into the future, and to share their opinions on the extent to which the top competencies can be cultivated. Further, respondents were asked about competencies needed for HR leadership roles within global organizations and during times of economic crisis.

According to this research, across all five countries/regions, the two most highly rated competencies were *effective communication* and *strategic thinking*, although the order varied by country/region. Canada, India and the Middle East, and North Africa also shared *leading change* as one of their top five selected competencies, and the United States, India, and the Middle East and North Africa shared *HR knowledge* as a top competency. India, the Middle East, and North Africa shared all five top-rated competencies, albeit not in the same order of importance, possibly indicating that senior HR professionals face similar demands in those regions. I contend that this research is significant to the IRC. In defining and identifying core competencies for HR Leaders, this research benchmarks a trend towards defining the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for specialized professionals, including the Labour

Relations Professional. In addition this research provides a framework for identifying such competencies.

## **Review of IRC's Labour Relations Programming**

In January 2009, I was commissioned to conduct a review of the IRC's Labour Relations Foundation (LRF) program. The objective of this review was four-fold:

- Examine and analyze the program as a whole, and the modules individually
- Unpack how the LRF program aligns with the other four programs in the LR certificate
- Consider the learning objectives and the overall goals of the program
- Make recommendations about refreshing, renewing, and/or revising aspects of the program in the short term and in the long term

The review revealed a need to validate/verify core competencies by:

- Conducting a survey of IRC alumni to ascertain and prioritize learning needs
- Determining what skills, knowledge, and abilities Labour Relations Professionals really need
- Identifying the areas in which current Labour Relations Professionals spend most of their time.

Drawing on these three recommendations, a survey of Labour Relations Professionals was developed. Next, I outline the methodology that guided the IRC's survey of Labour Relations Professionals.

## **SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

The research approach taken was to survey active LRPs who had completed training at the IRC. In June 2009, the survey was sent to individuals who had completed the LR certificate. Given the considerable variance in the use of the term "competencies" in the literature, for the purposes of this study, competencies were defined as the "knowledge, skills, and ability to perform a function, occupation, or profession." The survey focused on teachable competencies and aimed to identify the framework of skills, knowledge, and abilities required by a competent LRP. While it was recognised that personal attributes, such as integrity, strategic thinking, effective communication, and/or ethical behaviour are also critical for success, the survey did not poll individuals about desired attributes. Instead, the study concentrated on distinguishing those competencies that could be acquired through education and experience. We chose to focus on "teachable competencies" in an attempt to delineate a core set of knowledge, skills, and abilities that LRPs could acquire in order to improve their efficacy on the job and advance in the field.

Participants were asked to report their estimated percentage of time spent performing a preselected list of LR functions. Then, participants indicated their perceived level of knowledge, skills, and ability required to perform a specific LR function. A three-point scale was provided, where participants were asked to rank the required level of knowledge, skill, or ability as

“Advanced,” “Intermediate,” or “Basic.” These three levels were not defined in the survey. Rather, participants were invited to use their own discretion to rank the required level of competency.

A total of 154 surveys were completed. The data were quantitatively aggregated and then the results were reviewed by subject matter experts in unions, management, and academia. An analysis of the 154 responses revealed that the majority of those surveyed work in organizations with more than 1,000 employees, in the public or quasi-public sector. Table 1, below, synthesizes the characteristics of survey participants.

**Table 1. Characteristics of Survey Participants**

EMPLOYMENT SECTOR		SIZE OF ORGANIZATION	
51%	public sector	68%	over 1,000 employees
35%	private sector	23%	less than 500 employees
13%	quasi-public sector	9%	employing between 500 & 1,000 employees

**SURVEY RESULTS**

This section provides a synopsis of the aggregated survey data, according to four broad categories: labour relations activities, knowledge, skills, and abilities.

**Labour Relations Activities**

Given the great diversity of labour relations practice across sectors and regions, it was important to the IRC to identify the activities in which LRPs spend most of their time. More than 90% of LRPs reported spending time managing and resolving conflict. Fact-finding and preparing for collective bargaining were identified by more than 70% as priority activities, followed by various grievance functions and attending union management meetings. Participants, however, responded that they spend less of their time on arbitration. Interest arbitration was not included in the summary table of the top activities, as 56% of those surveyed reported spending no time on this activity. Only 25% reported spending 5% to 20% percent of their time on interest arbitration. Table 2 provides a summary of the time participants indicated spending on ten activities.

**Table 2. Participants' Activity Summary**

ACTIVITIES	PERCENTAGE OF TIME SPENT
1. Conflict Resolution and Management	92% spent 5-30% of their time
2. Investigation/Fact-Finding	75% spent 5-20% of their time
3. Collective Bargaining Preparation	72% spent 5-20% of their time
4. Grievance Settlement	68% spent 5-20% of their time
5. Union Management Meetings	66% spent 5-20% of their time
6. Informal Pre-Grievance Counselling	64% spent 5-20% of their time
7. Coaching with regard to LR Best Practices	64% spent 5-20% of their time
8. Collective Bargaining at the Table	61% spent 5-20% of their time (21% spent 0 amount of time on this activity)
9. Grievance Management /Processing	60% spent 5-20% of their time
10. Rights Arbitration	53% spent 5-20% of their time (20% spent 0 time)

## Knowledge

With regard to knowledge acquisition, more than 71% of the participants said that labour relations professionals should hold intermediate or advanced knowledge in these subject areas. Consistent with the prioritization of LR activities (Table 2), 65% of those surveyed identified advanced-level knowledge of conflict resolution as optimal. Advanced knowledge of the union management perspective was identified by 60%, while intermediate knowledge of change management and dispute resolution (DR) systems was identified by approximately half of those surveyed. The respondents were split as to whether knowledge of labour statutes should be at an intermediate or advanced level. This finding was surprising, given the proliferation of increasingly complex labour statutes across Canada and recognition that labour relations practice is increasingly legislation-driven (Sutcliffe, 2007). Fewer than 19 percent of respondents considered basic knowledge in any of these six areas as sufficient. Table 3 reveals participants' perspectives on LRPs' required subject area knowledge.

**Table 3. Perceived Level of Knowledge Required by LRPs, by Subject Area**

SUBJECT AREA	PERCEIVED LEVEL OF KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED		
	BASIC	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
Conflict Resolution	8%	27%	65%
Union/Management Perspective	6%	34%	60%
Change Management	8%	57%	21%
DR Systems Management and Design	19%	53%	27%
Human Rights	11%	42%	47%
Labour Statutes	13%	44%	43%

## Skills

Negotiation and dispute resolution were identified as requiring advanced skill by over 70% of those surveyed, followed closely by the need for advanced skill in grievance settlement. Some 55% of respondents indicated that advanced proficiency in collective bargaining was ideal, while nearly half identified a need for advanced conflict analysis skills. Fifty-three percent identified a need for intermediate skills in change management and arbitration advocacy; 44% identified a need for intermediate skills to draft contract language; and fewer than 22% considered basic skills in any of these areas as sufficient. Table 4 illustrates the perceived level of skill required by LRPs in seven key functions.

**Table 4. Perceived Level of Skill Required by LRPs**

SKILL	PERCEIVED LEVEL OF SKILL REQUIRED		
	BASIC	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
Negotiation/Dispute Resolution	5%	23%	71%
Grievance Settlement	3%	28%	69%
Collective Bargaining	12%	32%	55%
Conflict Analysis	10%	43%	47%
Change Management	22%	53%	24%
Arbitration Advocacy	21%	53%	24%
Drafting Contract Language	13%	44%	42%

## Ability

Another hallmark of the successful LRP is the ability to understand and apply labour relations processes as well as key elements of specialised functions. More than 50% of those surveyed identified a need for advanced abilities in each of the following areas: grievance handling, processing, and mediation, as well as collective bargaining and fact-finding/investigations. Approximately 50% of the respondents identified the need for intermediate ability in the area of rights arbitration (54%), interest arbitration (51%), union management relations (51%), and models of negotiation (53%). Fewer than 20% considered a basic ability to understand and apply labour relations processes as sufficient. Table 5, provides an overview of the participants' perspectives on LRPs' required abilities.

**Table 5. Perceived Level of Ability Required to Manage LR Processes**

LABOUR RELATIONS PROCESS	PERCEIVED LEVEL OF ABILITY REQUIRED		
	BASIC	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
Strategic Grievance Handling	8%	30%	<b>62%</b>
Fact-Finding/Investigation	4%	36%	<b>60%</b>
Collective Bargaining	8%	31%	<b>60%</b>
Grievance Processing	7%	37%	<b>56%</b>
Grievance Mediation	8%	40%	<b>51%</b>
Union Management Relations	8%	<b>51%</b>	40%
Rights Arbitration	14%	<b>54%</b>	31%
Models of Negotiation	18%	<b>53%</b>	29%
Interest Arbitration	20%	<b>51%</b>	29%

## DISCUSSION

In summary, the survey revealed that labour relations specialists must have more than a basic understanding and basic skill set in the traditional LR competencies of conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and collective bargaining. A competency framework was developed by analyzing the survey data and drawing on Sutcliffe’s (2007) work regarding the shifting industrial relations landscape (see Appendix A). The teachable competencies—skills, knowledge, and abilities—were reviewed and validated by a panel of experts working in academic, management, and union roles.

Recognising the central role of the contract or collective agreement to labour relations practice, the competencies are organized under five practical headings

1. Relevant Legislation/Jurisprudence
2. Labour Management Relations
3. Day-to-Day Management of the Collective Agreement
4. Collective Bargaining
5. Enforcing the Collective Agreement

The competency framework was designed to incorporate the identified knowledge, skills, and abilities contextually under practical functions. Although the five areas are numbered, this is not a priority ranking system. Rather, all the competencies need to be considered together as a dynamic series of activities and functions cycling within a backdrop of increasing complex legislation and jurisprudence.

Table 7 presents the LRP Competency Framework. In this framework, the traditional competencies, or subject areas, have been teased out to more accurately reflect the required skills, knowledge, and abilities of a labour relations professional, suggesting the level of competency that is required to facilitate success in the field.



**Table 7. LRP Competency Framework**

COMPETENCY	REQUIRED COMPETENCY LEVEL		
	BASIC	INTER-MEDIATE	ADVANCED
<b>1. Relevant Legislation/Jurisprudence</b>			
a. Knowledge of Labour Relations Legislation including but not limited to; labour codes, employment standards, human rights codes and health and safety legislation			X
b. Ability to understand and apply labour relations statutes			X
c. Ability to understand and apply Human Rights concepts		X	
d. Ability to oversee/conduct fact-finding and investigations			X
<b>2. Labour Management Relations</b>			
a. Knowledge of union/management perspectives			X
b. Ability to understand and apply key elements and best practices with regard to labour/management committees and meetings			X
c. Knowledge of change management		X	
d. change management skills		X	
<b>3. Day-to-Day Management of the Collective Agreement</b>			
a. Knowledge of conflict resolution			X
b. Negotiation and dispute resolution skills			X
c. Ability to utilize models of negotiation		X	
d. Skills to settle grievances			X
e. Ability to strategically handle grievances			X
f. Ability to process grievances			X
g. Ability to utilize grievance mediation			X
h. Knowledge to manage and design dispute resolution processes		X	
<b>4. Collective Bargaining</b>			
a. Skills to prepare and participate in collective bargaining			X
b. Skills to draft contract language		X	
c. Ability to understand key elements of interest		X	

COMPETENCY	REQUIRED COMPETENCY LEVEL		
	BASIC	INTER-MEDIATE	ADVANCED
arbitration and best practices, as applicable			
<b>5. Enforcing the Collective Agreement</b>			
a. Knowledge and ability to interpret collective agreements			X
b. Knowledge and ability to apply principles and best practices with regard to progressive discipline			X
c. Skills in arbitration preparation/advocacy		X	
d. Ability to understand and apply key concepts and best practices in rights arbitration		X	

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this Queen’s Industrial Relations Centre (IRC) research initiative was to identify and categorize competencies required by a successful Labour Relations Professional (LRP). A review of the literature and the survey of experienced labour relations practitioners showed subtle shifts in competencies required for LRPs. The resulting framework informs the IRC’s program planning and delivery as well as providing a tool for LRPs to plan their professional development activities.

The proposed competency framework demonstrates an evolution from the traditional core expectations for labour relations practitioners. Simple labels for subject matter, such as “mediation” and “conflict resolution” have been expanded to include: skills to settle grievances, ability to strategically handle grievances, process grievances and utilize grievance mediation, as well as knowledge to manage and design dispute resolutions processes. There is a much greater emphasis on collaborative and strategic settlement options rather than the more adversarial arbitration. In the past, negotiation was seen primarily as a tool for collective bargaining which utilized a traditional win/lose model. The evolved practitioner is now expected to understand various models of negotiation, and apply these skills beyond the bargaining table. Fact-finding was not included as a desired competency in the past, but is now seen as a key skillset for the LRP.

Practitioners were identified as requiring intermediate to advanced knowledge, skill, and ability as well as additional knowledge and skills such as change management, strategic grievance handling, investigation, and union management relations. The competency framework illustrates that the field of labour relations today has become more sophisticated and strategic, shifting towards a more collaborative approach. Sutcliffe’s (2007) illustration of the shifting labour relations landscape as well as insights from practitioners and academics demonstrate a

greater emphasis on building and maintaining relationships and addressing problems cooperatively.

There is very little discussion in the literature of what skills, knowledge, and abilities (beyond the traditional ones) will contribute to the effectiveness of industrial relations practitioners in the present and future business environment. This survey was designed to build on traditional competencies and explore the level of proficiency required in today’s labour relations environment.

Queen’s IRC will use this new framework as a blueprint for renewing its labour relations programming to better meet the current and future needs of the labour relations practitioner. These expanded competencies will inform the expansion of the LR programming to include advanced certification, and guide individual practitioners to make informed choices about their professional development needs.

## Appendix A

### *The Shifting Industrial Relations Landscape*

Past Landscape	→	Present and Future Landscape
Canadian ownership, operations within North America, focus on individual rights and unions		Foreign ownership, multi-national operations, focus on organizational productivity and customers
Baby-boomers in the prime of their working career, the skilled trades are highly valued		An aging workforce, a booming economy and more university graduates than skilled trade workers
Manufacturing economy and healthy labour market		Knowledge economy and tight labour market
Healthy unions with bargaining power		Vulnerable unions under pressure from a competitive economy
Many gains still to be made on protecting the rights and well-being of the worker		Diminishing returns from bargaining due to clearly defined legislation supporting and protecting the rights and the well-being of the employee
Homogeneous workforce, diversity is marginalized		Supporting and encouraging diversity takes centre-stage
Limited attention on communication (technology-enabled or otherwise) as a critical organizational tool		Communication becomes strategic, used as the primary tool to influence stakeholders

Source: Sutcliffe (2007, p. 7).

## REFERENCES

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