



*Institute for Human Services*

## *What is Competency-Based Inservice Training?*

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When considering whether to attend inservice training, people typically ask two questions: "What must I know to do my job?" and, "What don't I know?" Sometimes this assessment is done alone, or sometimes with the help of a supervisor, training specialist, or a mentor. It may be done informally, perhaps a few minutes before selecting a workshop from a conference brochure, or it may be more rigorous, using a formal individual training needs assessment instrument. Still, the same two questions are always asked: "What knowledge and skills do I need to proficiently perform my job?" and "In which of these do I need further development?"

Unless these questions are correctly answered, participating in a training activity can waste valuable staff time and limited training resources. Without an accurate assessment of individual learning needs, training is more likely to be unrelated to learners' jobs and at an inappropriate developmental level. Frequently heard complaints about training include, "It was interesting, but it doesn't apply to my work;" "It was too basic – I didn't learn anything new;" and, "I'd have better spent my time in the office." In any case, the training will have done little to increase learners' competence, much less enhance services to children and their families.

Failure to accurately identify individual learning needs is one of several conditions that undermine the quality, effectiveness, and relevance of inservice training and that prevent training from positively affecting job performance and organizational outcomes. Others are as follows:

- 1) Many staff members hired to work in child welfare agencies are ill-prepared for the job, are largely unaware of its scope and complexity, and lack even basic knowledge of child welfare values, practice principles, or intervention strategies. Staff members hired into supervisory or management positions often have no prior training or experience in direct supervision or management technology.

- 2) Caseworkers are often assigned family cases as soon as they are hired, and they may provide services to families and children for many weeks – or even months – before ever receiving any job-related training. Supervisors and managers may receive no training at all.
- 3) The absence of standardized training content and curricula prevents establishing and communicating a consistent practice model and standards of practice, both of which are essential to the achievement of critical organizational outcomes.
- 4) Rigid standardization, or a "one size fits all" approach to training, fails to address the diversity of learning needs that exist in any complex organization. Individual needs will vary in response to differences in job and program assignments; the unique needs and attributes of the population of children and families being served; the social, geographic, and cultural composition of the local community; and staff members' previous education, training, and work experience.
- 5) The common practice of mandating training for all staff members without encouraging their participation in assessing their needs and planning their own development greatly increases resistance to training, decreases personal investment and participation, and increases the likelihood that new learning will be ignored when learners return to their jobs.
- 6) The absence of formal standards and quality control processes for trainers and training curricula can undermine the quality, effectiveness, and relevance of training activities, and also makes the valid evaluation of a trainer's performance very difficult.
- 7) Delivering training at sites far from learners' homes impedes their access to training, reduces attendance, and greatly increases the costs of travel and lodging.
- 8) Without formal systems and standardized activities to promote transfer of learning, most of what is learned in training will never be used on the job.

The Comprehensive, Competency-Based Inservice Training (CCBIT)<sup>™</sup> System was developed to address these and other child welfare training challenges. CCBIT<sup>™</sup> strives to provide the "right training to the right people at the right time," thus maximizing the relevance, timeliness, and availability of training while also insuring that training resources are expended to address the highest priority training needs in the service system.

## *Elements of a Competency-Based Inservice Training System*

The goal of a CCBIT™ system – getting the right people to the right training at the right time – appears fairly straightforward. However, the technology to achieve it is actually quite complex. CCBIT™ is a systematic, well-planned, and well-organized approach to training development and administration. Fully implementing a CCBIT™ system requires the development of a formal infrastructure that includes: both centralized and decentralized management components; designated training managers, developers, and trainers; a technology to assess, compile, update and prioritize training needs data; an ongoing mechanism to plan, manage, and evaluate program activities; a system to design, develop, and periodically update training curricula and resources; an efficient and easily accessible training delivery system; and formalized strategies to maximize transfer of learning. The specific steps necessary to develop and implement a CCBIT™ system are summarized below.

### *Define Targeted Learners*

The first task is to identify the staff members to be trained and the work groups to which they belong. A work group includes staff members who perform similar job responsibilities and are, therefore, likely to have similar learning needs. In child welfare, there are several distinct work groups – direct service caseworkers; direct practice supervisors; foster, kinship, and adoptive parents; mid-level and program managers; executives and upper level managers; residential childcare workers; service aides, and perhaps others, depending on the organizations to receive training. In complex community-based and multi-disciplinary service systems, community partners from other professional disciplines may also be targeted to receive training. The competencies, curricula, trainers, and training activities developed for each work group will vary, depending upon the particular requirements of their jobs.

Most child welfare training systems prioritize the development of training for work groups whose activities have the most direct and immediate impact on children and families – i.e., direct service caseworkers, and their supervisors. However, when CCBIT™ is fully operational, training should be provided for all staff in the organization on the premise that any staff member who lacks the ability to perform his/her job will negatively impact mission achievement in some manner.

### *Conduct Job-Task Analysis*

Since the primary objective of CCBIT™ is to promote "best practice," it is necessary to first define and compile performance standards that reflect best practice and identify the work activities necessary to achieve them. This requires first defining and formalizing the organization's mission, then

delineating the standards that underlie practice, and ultimately establishing desired organizational performance goals, or outcomes. Once these elements are in place, it is possible to compile a list of all the work activities necessary to achieve the organization's desired ends. In a CCBIT™ system, compilation of activities is called the Universe of Work Activities. The term, "universe," is used here in its mathematical context to represent a set, which is a finite, comprehensive, closed grouping of related objects or elements. A Universe of Work Activities therefore incorporates all the activities that must be performed if the organization is to achieve its desired outcomes, while simultaneously excluding activities that are not essential to outcome achievement.

The Universe of Work Activities provides the foundation for the development of formal job or position descriptions for all staff members in the organization. Job descriptions are the source document for the development of the competencies, which will drive all training. Therefore, the job / task analysis and Universe of Work Activities must delineate what staff members *should* be doing to achieve desired outcomes, which in many organizations, is not necessarily the same as what they *are* doing. A Universe of Work Activities cannot simply be an inventory of everyone's current job activities, even though this is an all too common means of updating position descriptions in many organizations.

When position descriptions have been properly formulated, they can be used to manage the job performance of individual staff members. They not only accurately define job expectations, but they can also be used to help evaluate the degree to which these job expectations have been met.

All child protection organizations must evolve over time to remain relevant and effective. They must respond to changes in the knowledge base that underlies the profession, integrate more effective practices and technologies, and adapt to changes in the client population, evolving client needs, and political and social change. These external shifts often prompt changes in the organization's mission, in desired performance outcomes, and in best practice standards or technologies. Therefore, the Universe of Work Activities must be periodically reviewed and updated to remain relevant. However, because of fundamental similarities in the field of child protection across jurisdictions, a well-formulated Universe of Work Activities can often be adopted and adapted by other organizations performing these functions in their own communities.

### *Competencies*

A competency can be defined as a grouping of elements of knowledge and skill necessary for the effective performance of a job task. By definition, competent staff have mastered the ability – that is, the requisite knowledge and skills – to proficiently perform their jobs.

Once the job/task analysis is complete and position descriptions have been finalized, we can identify the prerequisite knowledge and skills necessary to perform all of the assigned job responsibilities in the Universe of Work Activities. The resulting statements of knowledge and skills are then grouped, hierarchically organized, and sequenced, creating a Universe of Competencies. A separate Universe of Competencies is generally developed for each work group targeted to receive training, and includes all the knowledge and skills potentially needed by staff members in that work group to perform their assigned job tasks. The Universe of Competencies is another "set," and therefore, knowledge and skills that are not essential to completing the compiled job tasks are excluded from the Universe of Competencies.

The defining characteristic of competency-based inservice training is that the Universe of Competencies drives all components of the training system, including the individual training needs assessment, the identification and selection of training curricula, the assessment and selection of trainers, the development of the training plan, the design of transfer of learning activities, and the allocation of training resources. As is true for the Universe of Work Activities, the Universe of Competencies must be periodically reviewed and revised to reflect changes in practice standards and job requirements over time.

#### *Individual Training Needs Assessment (ITNA)*

The Individual Training Needs Assessment formalizes the process of answering the two essential questions posed at the beginning of this discussion – "What knowledge and skills do I need to proficiently perform my job?" and, "In which of these do I need further development?"

The Universe of Competencies provides standardized criteria on which to base a determination of training needs, and also structures the assessment process to maximize the likelihood of reaching valid conclusions from this assessment. Simply stated, a training need exists when a competency is important to the performance of a staff member's job, and, when the staff member needs further development in that competency to achieve job proficiency.

The Universe of Competencies is a compilation of all the knowledge and skills potentially needed by all staff members in a work group, and thus also represents the universe of potential training need for that work group. The relevant competencies for any individual employee will be a subset of these competencies. This subset is determined by first evaluating the importance of each competency in the Universe of Competencies to the performance of the staff member's particular job. The more critical a knowledge or skill to performing the job, and the more often the staff member must use the knowledge or skill, the greater the level of importance. Conversely, a competency for a peripheral and rarely

implemented job activity will be of little or no importance. As an example, the skills to conduct a risk assessment for a child would be extremely important to an intake caseworker but less important to a caseworker whose job is assessing applicants as potential adoptive families.

The second ITNA criteria, the degree to which an employee needs further development, is measured by determining the employee's current level of proficiency. If an employee has sufficient proficiency in a competency to effectively perform the job, training is of low priority. If an employee has little or no proficiency in the competency, training is of high priority.

The ITNA process ranks the combined effects of these two criteria to determine and prioritize individual training needs. Both criteria – level of importance and level of proficiency – can be ranked on a Likert scale. The highest priority training needs occur when employees need considerable development in competencies that are essential to job performance. By contrast, competencies that are unimportant to the job or in which employees are already proficient are never considered training needs. By rank ordering ratings of individual competencies, we create a prioritized training needs profile, which enables the employee to attend learning activities that address the specific competencies in which further development is most needed.

The ITNA process is most valid when completed collaboratively by the staff member whose needs are being assessed and his or her supervisor. The ITNA promotes a constructive dialogue about performance expectations and current levels of job proficiency, and it facilitates development of an individual learning plan. ITNA data should be reviewed periodically to check the learner's progress in mastering needed knowledge and skills, as well as to identify additional learning needs. In this manner, in the context of a supportive supervisory relationship that focuses on educational supervision, the ITNA process plays a fundamental role in continuing performance improvement.

Data from the ITNA also drives the development and delivery of training for the service system. The compiled needs assessment data from all staff in a work group is used by CCBIT™ training managers to identify the highest priority needs in the service system and to ensure that training is developed and provided to meet those needs. The needs assessment process is dynamic. As training is delivered, training needs change, and new assessment data will produce different training priorities for the system, and the training system must have the capacity to re-identify and address continually evolving training priorities.

### *Identification and Selection of Training Curricula*

The Universe of Competencies is also used to define appropriate content for inclusion in training curricula. When a curriculum is being

developed in response to identified training needs, the curriculum content must effectively address the competencies needed by the targeted learners. This holds true when we are reviewing existing curricula to determine their appropriateness for use in the system. Training content that does not target some portion of the Universe of Competencies cannot be legitimately included in any curriculum for that work group.

The Universe of Competencies also promotes the standardization of training curricula, where this is needed. Standardized curricula ensure that the knowledge and skills necessary for consistent and uniform practice are routinely imparted to staff members throughout the service system, regardless of when, where, or from whom they receive the training. This is especially critical when training in Core-level competencies – the fundamental and essential knowledge and skills for all members of a targeted work group (see below.)

For the CCBIT™ system to be comprehensive, it must ultimately be able to provide training, as needed, in all the competencies in a Universe of Competencies. However, this is beyond the resource capacity of most child welfare training systems. By enabling training managers to prioritize training needs, the ITNA assures using limited developmental resources on curricula that address the highest priority needs first.

#### *Selection and Preparation of Trainers*

In a CCBIT™ system, trainers are evaluated on a variety of criteria, including: their presentation and group facilitation skills; their knowledge of child welfare practice; their prior work experience in child welfare or a related field; and their particular areas of knowledge and practice expertise. Then, in a second level of assessment, the trainer and training manager jointly identify the specific competencies the trainer is best suited to train. Trainers must demonstrate high levels of knowledge and skill proficiency in a competency area before they can be approved to train it.

#### *Development of Training Plan*

Developing the training plan for an organization involves reviewing ITNA data, identifying the highest priority training needs in the system, selecting the most appropriate curricula and trainers to address these needs, and determining where to hold the training so it is easily accessible to targeted trainees. CCBIT™ training managers develop and publish the schedule of training events for staff in their catchment area. Since training needs in any dynamic organization are continually evolving, training plans should optimally be developed and disseminated, at minimum, quarterly, assuring that training is timely and responsive to changing needs.

### *Implement Training Activities*

Training occurs only after the steps described above have been completed. The rigorous planning, preparation, and management of pre-training activities is essential to getting the right people (with the identified learning need), to the right training (the most appropriate curriculum and trainer to address the needed competencies) at the right time (as soon as possible after the need is identified.)

### *Implement Transfer of Learning (TOL) Activities*

Transfer of Learning (TOL) refers to a staff member's "transfer" or use of new learning back on the job. TOL activities should be planned, designed, and integrated into all training curricula, and all trainers should incorporate a variety of TOL into all their training programs. CCBIT™ training managers have a responsibility to promote TOL by working with agency supervisors and managers before, during, and after training to help them understand how to promote their staff's use of newly acquired knowledge and skills on the job. Only with effective planning and implementation of TOL strategies will training have any noticeable impact on job performance or agency outcomes. (See resource paper on Transfer of Learning.)

### *Training Evaluation*

The evaluation of training effectiveness is an important part of the ongoing management of a CCBIT™ system. Two primary types of evaluation – formative and summative – play equally important roles. Formative evaluation assesses the quality and effectiveness of training activities, processes, and resources. The data is best gathered directly from training participants, as well as from skilled and objective observers. Criteria for formative evaluation can focus on the trainer's overall performance in the learning environment, including mastery of the competencies being trained, presentation and facilitation skills, ability to engage and involve learners, ability to relate training concepts to direct practice, and use of time. Participants can also be asked to evaluate the relevance of the training to their jobs and skill levels and how well the training addressed their learning needs. This data is compiled and used to monitor trainer performance on an ongoing basis and to identify when a trainer may need coaching, technical assistance, or corrective action. This data also highlights needed changes in curriculum materials and other training resources, in training methodologies, and in the way the system assesses the training needs and skill levels of learners.

Summative evaluations are designed to assess training outcomes at several levels: the degree to which learners acquired new knowledge and skills as a result of the training; the degree to which training resulted in changed behavior on the job; and the degree to which training affected organizational outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 1987.) A

variety of evaluation methodologies are utilized, depending upon the criteria to be evaluated, the group to be sampled, and the level of depth and scope of the intended evaluation. The evaluation of training outcomes is very challenging. This is particularly true when trying to determine the effects of training on client or agency outcomes. In child protection systems, since many other variables have a much stronger effect on client and agency outcomes than does training, it is nearly impossible to isolate the effects of training on any observed changes in outcomes.

Training evaluation is a complicated endeavor. Doing it well requires sampling large numbers of learners over extended periods of time, and using a variety of methods to evaluate not only what was learned from the training, but skill mastery and transfer of learning as well. Appropriate evaluation methods can include pre- and post-testing, evaluation of learner performance by their supervisors, learners' self-report of changes over time, objective assessment of case records and documentation, and direct observation of learners' performance in the work environment. Since there are intervening variables at all phases of evaluation, building a "chain of evidence" that can document improvements all along the continuum can be the strongest evidence that training is, in fact, having a positive effect on job performance.

However, we must remember a fundamental premise related to all inservice training – training is *necessary* but not *sufficient* to ensure improved job performance or improved services to children and families. Training programs are often encouraged by evaluation findings that indicate positive changes in agency or client outcomes subsequent to training, and there are strong incentives, such as continued fiscal support, to claim training's responsibility for this achievement. However, the same training programs do not want to be blamed should an outcome evaluation fail to find the hoped-for changes. Training does not have, on its own, the power to produce significant changes in job performance or client and agency outcomes. Training is only one component of a total agency management system designed to achieve these goals. Training's unique contribution is to help eliminate knowledge and skill barriers to effective job performance by all staff in the agency. It cannot, it should not try, nor should it be expected to do more than that.

### ***The Hierarchical Sequencing of Competencies***

A fully operational CCBIT™ system provides staff with relevant learning opportunities for as long as they work in the service system. Building competence in highly complex competency areas often takes repeated exposures to the concepts and principles, at increasing levels of depth and specificity, over extended periods of time. A sequenced approach to

training not only builds staff competence but can also support career ladders and promote staff retention. This process is facilitated by hierarchically organizing the competencies in the Universe of Competencies.

### *What is Core Training?*

Certain competencies are essential to all members of an identified work group, regardless of their unique job requirements or placement in the organization. These foundation-level knowledge and skills are referred to as "Core". Training in Core competencies is usually mandated for all new staff members shortly after they are hired. By standardizing curricula to train these Core competencies, we can assure that newly hired staff acquire the fundamental skills to do their jobs, while promoting a common philosophy, a consistent standard of practice, and the use of "best practice" methodologies throughout the service system.

For child welfare caseworkers, training in Core competencies provides the framework for "best practice" by imparting the underlying philosophy, values, and principles of effective child protection work and by introducing the fundamental and essential social work skills of relationship development, family assessment, case planning, and interviewing. They also introduce more specific fundamental child-welfare specific skills, such as recognizing and identifying maltreatment, assessing risk and safety, family-centered in-home services, the technology of child placement, promoting permanence for children in out-of-home care, and working with foster, adoptive, and kinship caregivers.

However, while Core competencies are both fundamental and essential, they are far from simple. Core-level skills are sufficiently complex to require multiple exposures to the same content in different contexts, enhanced by considerable practice, preferably with feedback and coaching over time if learners are to achieve mastery and proficiency. Further, due to differences in the specific job responsibilities of staff in any targeted training group, Core-level competencies can address only about 50% of the competencies needed by any individual staff member. The remaining competencies must be acquired in post-Core training, selected to address the individual needs of each learner. Thus, to achieve job proficiency, learners must be provided with ongoing and properly sequenced follow-up training with structured opportunities for supervised practice, coaching, and feedback on the job for as long as they are employed in the organization. (See resource papers on Levels of Learning and Transfer of Learning.)

### *Specialized Practice and Related Skills Competencies*

The Universe of Competencies is hierarchically organized to promote the most effective sequencing of post-Core training. Post-Core

competencies fall into two categories; Specialized Practice competencies, and Related Skills competencies.

Specialized Practice competencies are child-welfare specific and include the knowledge and skills needed to work in child welfare program areas such as intake and investigation, child sexual abuse, foster care, services to adolescents, independent living, adoption, family-based neighborhood programs, and residential child care.

Related Skills competencies include advanced level social work knowledge, skills, and technologies such as family interviewing, behavior management, crisis intervention, and group work. Related Skills competencies also incorporate knowledge and skills from other practice fields and disciplines that can refine and enhance child welfare practice. These include substance abuse, mental health, family violence, health care, mental retardation and other developmental disabilities, psychological assessment, and direct therapeutic interventions. Since many Related Skills competencies reflect knowledge and skills from other practice disciplines, they are a principal resource to guide development of cross-system or interdisciplinary training.

#### *Accreted and Discrete Competencies*

Training curricula for Specialized Practice and Related Skills competencies may vary considerably in their scope and depth, depending on the particular competencies they are designed to address. "Accreted" competencies are broad in scope and cover a wide range of integrated knowledge and skills. Training in accreted competencies generally provides a broad overview of multiple aspects of the topic. It is most appropriate when introducing new content, creating awareness, imparting basic principles, and promoting a general understanding of the topic – that is, training to Levels I and II of the Levels of Learning. (See Resource Paper on Levels of Learning.) An accreted competency related to sexual abuse investigation might be:

"Worker knows the components of an effective sexual abuse investigation; the respective roles and responsibilities of child welfare and law enforcement; and strategies for collaborative investigative interviewing."

By contrast, discrete competencies are usually quite narrow in scope and focus on one or two very specific areas of knowledge or skill to considerable depth and proficiency.. Discrete competencies are generally used to develop advanced level training, or training that focuses on application and skill development (Levels III and IV of the Levels of Learning.) A very discrete competency would be:

"Worker knows interviewing strategies to investigate child sexual abuse in children mental retardation."

The depth and breadth of Specialized Practice and Related Skills competencies can provide relevant training opportunities as long as staff are employed in the child welfare system. A staff member's particular job assignment will determine the need for training in both Specialized Practice and Related Skills competencies. Therefore, completion of an Individual Training Needs Assessment should determine attendance at training in these competency areas. Discrete competencies are also useful in identifying knowledge and skill areas where staff would benefit from intensive on-the-job coaching, mentoring, or self-directed learning activities to promote skill mastery.

#### *What is a Skill Set?*

A skill set is a grouping of competencies needed to perform a particular job activity. It is essentially a very "accreted" statement that incorporates many competencies. Skill sets are too broad to be useful in directly assessing learning needs, but they are very useful in a first level screening to identify the general skill areas in which a learner needs additional development. Once a skill set has been selected, the individual competencies included under that skill set are used to assess learning needs, allowing us to pinpoint the specific areas to address, including the proper Level of Learning to meet the staff member's needs. An example of a skill set would be:

"Ability to determine the level of imminent and future risk of abuse or neglect to children."

In our Universe of Competencies, this skill set includes 14 individual competencies.

#### *Competency-Based Training As a System-Change Intervention*

When a CCBIT™ System is fully implemented, it forms an integral part of the management structure of the organization. While the most immediate outcome of training is the competence of staff, the ultimate goal is really implementation of "best practice" on behalf of children and families. While training can never, by itself, assure that the organization will achieve its outcomes, any organization that lacks well-trained, competent staff is almost certain to fail. CCBIT™ was designed to drive system change by defining outcomes and "best practice" principles and by promoting development of the staff competence necessary to achieve them. In this context, when fully integrated with other management strategies and interventions, CCBIT™ can be a powerful tool to promote and support large-scale organizational change.