

A Guide to SHL's Universal Competency Framework (UCF)

Science, Structure and Best Practices

This guide explains the science and structure behind SHL's Universal Competency Framework (UCF) and Global Skills Taxonomy, shares best practices for designing robust competency frameworks, and provides key questions to help you assess their effectiveness.

SHL's Universal Competency Framework (UCF)

SHL's Universal Competency Framework (UCF) provides a rational, consistent, and practical basis for understanding performance at work. The evidence-based framework is an articulated set of relationships that specifies how the competencies and skills relate to each other and other constructs. The content reflects the whole domain of competencies in the world of work and can be applied at all job levels, from entry level to senior leader. The framework is like the 'grammar' of a language, with the content providing the basic propositional meanings languages work from.

The UCF defines **Competencies** clearly and objectively, in terms of observable behaviors that are instrumental in the delivery of desired results (Bartram, 2005). Competencies are complementary to skills. They focus more broadly on generic behaviors, often aligned to the organization's values, vision, or strategy, that are transferable across roles, job-levels, and organizations. Competencies are not as specific as skills, but provide organizations with a common language to define general expectations of their employees. In other words, competencies allow organizations to broadly identify what their people need to do to achieve the organization's goals.

Competencies are not:

- Related to performance standards for a specific role
- Job-specific knowledge or skills
- Dynamic concepts specific to a context (e.g., organization, region, or time period)
- Attributes that are neither psychological nor cognitive, such as strength, stamina, or other physical abilities

Competencies are clusters of behaviors that are underpinned by skills. A clearly defined skills taxonomy gives a definitive view of what matters within the broader competencies. Behavioral skills link to competencies, but define expectations in a more granular way, to illustrate how each competency is exhibited in a specific role.

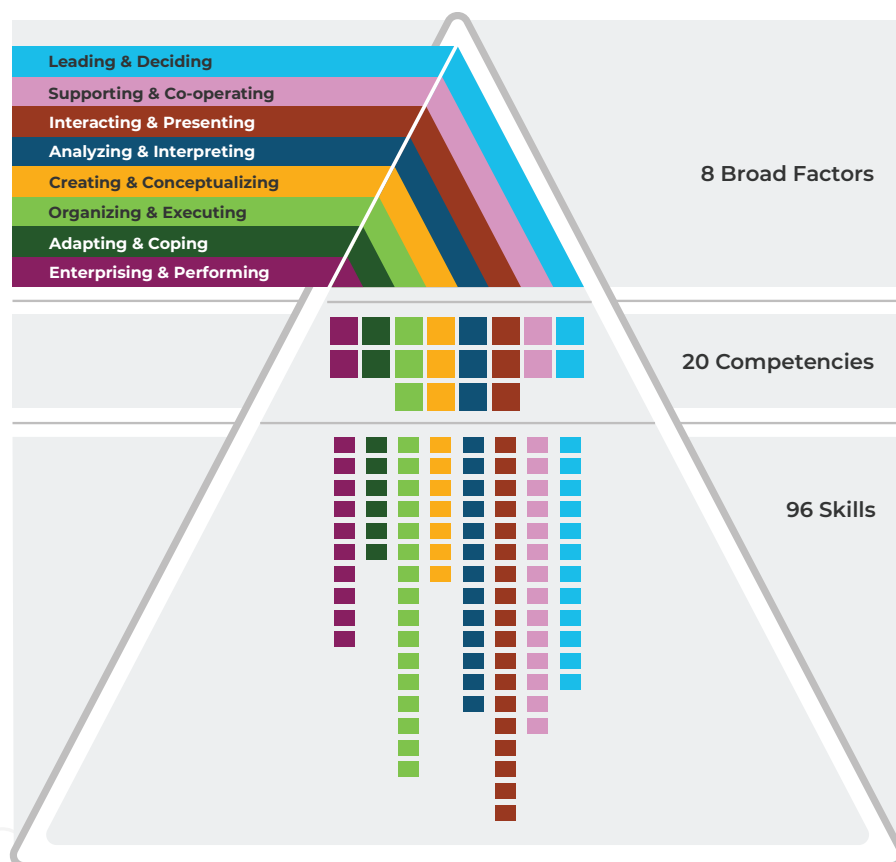
A given competency may be required across multiple roles, but the skills that underpin it provide a more definitive view of what matters in a specific role. Different facets of broad competencies are represented differently across roles, because different skills are often necessary to represent success. Skills are a powerful tool to understand how broader competencies translate to successful performance at work.

The Structure of the UCF

The structure of the UCF was determined through alignment of data-driven research and rational judgments from expert psychologists. The UCF is arranged in a three-tier hierarchical structure (Figure 1), with each tier serving a unique purpose.

The top tier, called the “**8 Broad Factors**,” provides a useful packaging of the high-level individual differences that drive performance at work. Factors provide a high-level perspective of general categories of competencies that influence performance across jobs.

Figure 1: SHL’s Universal Competency Framework (UCF) and Global Skills Taxonomy



The middle tier, called the “**UCF 20 Competencies**” consists of dimensions which are collections of related skills at a broader level of detail that is more operationally manageable than skills, but also more detailed than the 8 Broad Factors. This is the level most often used for describing broad areas of competence for successful performance at work. Below these competencies, in the bottom tier, are the “**UCF 96 Skills**,” which together comprise SHL’s Global Skills Taxonomy. Each of these skills is a comprehensive set of narrow, discrete behaviors that cannot be broken down any further and act as building blocks for the framework. This hierarchical framework provides the benefits of a universally relevant model, as well as the freedom to tailor custom competency models using the underlying skills in SHL’s Global Skills Taxonomy.

The Science Behind SHL's UCF and Global Skills Taxonomy

Backed by decades of research and validated through empirical data, SHL's UCF and Global Skills Taxonomy provide an evidence-based foundation for understanding performance at work. The UCF has been instrumental in shaping SHL's products, tools, and services since its original release in 2001, with major updates in 2019 to define specific behaviors that drive performance in the modern world of work.

The development of the UCF is based on extensive literature reviews, workplace behavior research, analyses of empirical data, surveys of workplace trends, and validation with organizations from around the world. This research has been published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (Bartram, 2005), one of the most influential peer-reviewed journals in the field of Industrial/Organizational Psychology. The UCF model has been influential in the industry as it shapes a universal understanding of performance at work, and how to measure and predict it using skills and competencies.

In an era of unprecedented workplace transformation, the ability to identify, measure, and apply skills effectively is the key to high-performing organizations. By embracing SHL's Global Skills Taxonomy and using the Global Skills Assessment to measure it, organizations can unlock the true potential of their workforce, drive talent mobility, and build a future-ready organization.

The UCF is a framework organizations can use to map all job requirements across levels, job families, and roles. Organizations can realize the value of the Universal Competency Framework (UCF) through many different applications across the employee lifecycle.

For example:

Example Applications	
Attraction & Recruitment The UCF provides a structured skills taxonomy which can help to define the competencies and skills that are most relevant for success in each role and ensure job descriptions are accurate and aligned with job requirements.	<p>What skills should I highlight in job descriptions where Leadership is important?</p> <p>What are example skills related to Strategic Thinking for a job description?</p>
Hiring By using competencies and skills to define the requirements of a role, organizations can select appropriate candidate assessments and interview questions to measure the things that matter most to predict success on-the-job. Structured, competency-based hiring helps to objectively and fairly assess candidates which reducing bias in the hiring process.	<p>What types of skills should I assess when hiring candidates for roles where Relationship Building is important?</p> <p>What skills should I evaluate candidates on for jobs where Critical Thinking is important?</p>
Onboarding The UCF can help to define the competencies and skills that contribute to successful assimilation of new employees into the work environment and identify skill gaps or learning opportunities for new hires to fully meet the expectations of the role.	<p>What skills are important for building relationships with new hires during the onboarding process?</p> <p>What are the behaviors related to effectively fostering team cohesion?</p> <p>What are the behaviors related to defining roles and responsibilities for new employees?</p>
Development The UCF competencies define the broad characteristics which are desirable for success. Skills provide detailed behaviors which employees can focus on developing in order to demonstrate those competencies in ways that are relevant to their jobs. The UCF provides a roadmap for the trainable proficiencies which should be prioritized in professional development and training contexts.	<p>What skills are important to focus on in a personal development plan for roles where Commercial Thinking is important for success?</p> <p>What skill development should be prioritized for career mobility for an employee who is moving from a position which requires Critical Thinking to a position which requires Decision Making?</p>
Retention The UCF provides leaders with specific behavioral skills they can use and develop to improve the employee experience, contributing to greater satisfaction, motivation, and perceived support.	<p>What behaviors will help me effectively recognize others?</p> <p>What behaviors will help me effectively motivate and empower others?</p>

Competency Framework Best Practice Guide

When thoughtfully designed and implemented, competency frameworks create clarity around performance expectations. When underpinned by skills, competencies define how individuals contribute to organizational success. In this guide, we use “skills” to refer to the specific, observable behaviors that bring broader competencies to life, and “framework” to describe the structured model that organizes these skills into a coherent architecture.

As the business strategy organically evolves, it is important to review the adequacy of the framework that will support its implementation. To guide this process, consider seven key questions and practical tips to put them into action.

Key Question

1. Is your framework aligned with your current strategy?

Practical Tips

- Review your skills profiles regularly (ideally every two years or following any strategic or transformation change) to ensure they reflect the capabilities needed to execute your current strategy and those required for future growth.

Ask: Do we currently have the right skills to deliver on our strategy, and what new skills will we need to succeed in the future?

- Engage senior leaders to validate which skills and behaviors drive performance, agility, and innovation.

2. Does your framework have the right structure and granularity for your organization?

Practical Tips

- Ensure a clear and intuitive structure that clusters skills into domains.
- Consider complexity: a framework that is too large can feel overwhelming and lead to low adoption, while one that is too small may not provide sufficient coverage.
- Consider hierarchies: identify a core set of skills that reflect your culture and values, a subset of domain- or role-specific skills, and the skills required for current and future leaders.

3. Are your skills and competencies discrete and clearly defined?

Practical Tips

- Avoid overlapping skills or behaviors: each skill or competency should capture a single, distinct capability.
- Focus on skills that are observable and measurable, and split or refine any that are too broad or ambiguous.

4. Are your skills relevant and connected to the business context?

Practical Tips

- Engage employees, managers, and leaders to ensure the framework reflects real-world role requirements.
- Use a language that resonates with your organization and clearly links skills to outcomes.
- Include emerging and future-focused skills to ensure the organization can stay agile.

5. Are your skills measurable and supported by behavioral indicators?

Practical Tips

- Include only skills that can be observed, measured, and assessed consistently.
- Support each skill with positive and negative behavioral indicators to give concrete targets for performance and development.

6. Is your framework benchmarked and designed to identify future capability?

Practical Tips

- Compare with global, research-based frameworks (e.g., SHL's Universal Competency Framework) to uncover gaps.
- Ensure the framework includes leadership and high-potential skills, so you can identify and develop future leaders based on demonstrable capability.

7. Is your framework embedded and applied consistently across people processes?

Practical Tips

- Embed the framework across all people processes so that skills become the common language for talent decisions.
- Reinforce adoption through communication, manager training, and role modeling.
- Monitor usage: managers and employees should naturally reference the framework's skills and behaviors in performance conversations and across all talent practices.

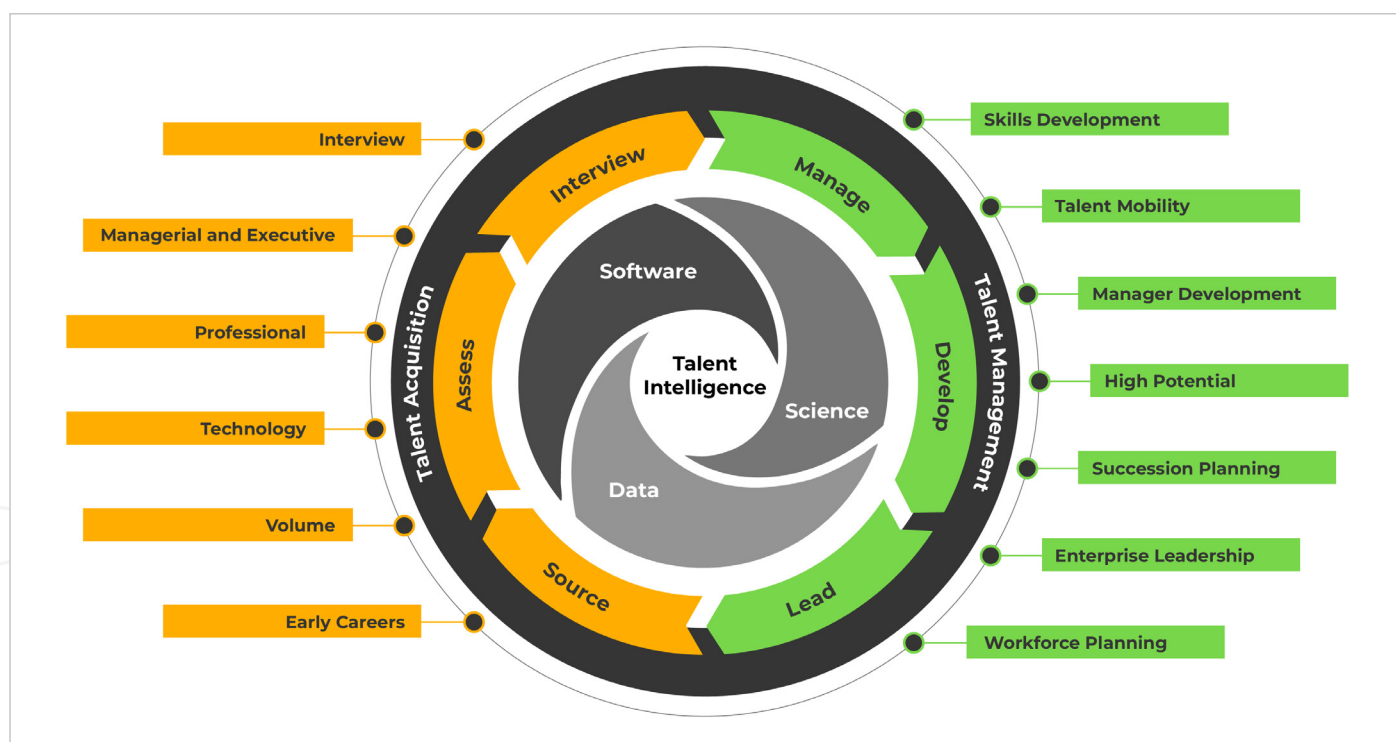
Whether you already have a competency framework that you are reviewing or you are creating one from scratch, SHL's UCF can help you benchmark and refine your approach. The UCF has supported thousands of organizations in building integrated, evidence-based frameworks that are objective, predictive, and linked to 96 behavioral skills and real-world business results. It is applicable across all roles, levels, sectors, and organization sizes, global or single-site.

A strong competency framework is most effective when supported by a detailed, evidence-based skills taxonomy. Many organizations use SHL's Universal Competency Framework (UCF) for this purpose: mapping their internal framework to SHL's UCF Global Skills Taxonomy to ensure consistency, measurability, and a clear link to performance outcomes.

Using the Global Skills Assessment (GSA) to measure these skills provide organizations with the tools to not only define and measure skills effectively but to do so with confidence and accuracy.

These underpin SHL's Assessment Solutions to ensure that every talent decision (see fig 2 below), whether in hiring, promotion, or workforce planning—is backed by robust data and aligned with business needs.

Figure 2: SHL's interconnected assessment solutions address organizational needs across the lifecycle



To learn more about SHL, our UCF or how we can help you on your skills journey, visit shl.com.



SHL provides trusted Talent Intelligence that empowers organizations to make confident data-driven people decisions. Built on 45+ years of expertise, our innovative assessment solutions combine proven behavioral science, predictive analytics, and transparent AI to deliver objective, actionable insights across the talent lifecycle – from hiring and development to internal mobility. We help leaders measure skills and potential, unlock performance, and mobilize talent to drive transformation.