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-EUPAN - Human Resources Working Group-

*COMPETENCY MANAGEMENT IN EU PUBLIC  
ADMINISTRATIONS*

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## **SUMMARY**

This report presents the major findings regarding competency management in European Union public administrations. The study was carried out during the Portuguese EU-Presidency. This research project was designed to know the current status and the development perspectives of competency-based management (CBM) in the European Union public administrations. Based on 24 member states responses to a survey we can arrive at the following conclusions:

- CBM, aiming to improve HR systems, is one of the change strategies used by some member states. The initial experiences started in the 1980's (Sweden and UK) and even now some countries are developing their competence frameworks (for example Portugal).
- The competence movement is complex and multifaceted. So, as expected, the 13 European Union member states that revealed the adoption of CBM programmes are using their own definitions. In spite of the differences, the central themes of CBM are covered by national definitions: focus on people instead of the job, the concern for performance, the need of behavioural evidence, the work as the context in which competencies are revealed, and the existence of several types of competencies.
- State members are introducing CBM in the context of major changes and trends, such as downsizing, the changing role of managers or the introduction of changes in HR practices. In fact creating a more adequate method for selection, development, assessment or rewarding is the main problem addressed by CBM. Member states that see themselves as less public administration and more responsive are more willing to introduce CBM.
- The process of implementing CBM tends to follow the tradition of centralization of each country's public administration. In the same vein, the prevalence of CBM all over public administration is different, but we notice a tendency to a selective approach. This approach can be characterized by the focus only on certain types of entities/bodies, an incremental implementation process and the focus on some professional groups and HR functions. Managers and senior and technical staff are the preferred targets.
- European public administrations show a high sensitivity to the CBM approach. In fact they are using both job and organizational variables as a source of competences. This is completely aligned with the person and macro-level orientation of competence movement. However, results are not clear on the methodological rigour used in the CBM programmes. References to specific competence identification methods, both from the individual and organizational side, are not very frequent.
- Countries that are already using CBM are highly satisfied with the experiences. All 13 countries show a positive global evaluation of CBM. All of them report a tendency to improve or to

broaden existing CBM programmes. Once again member state respondents are aware of the major benefits for employees, managers, and organizations.

- To employees CBM can foster personal development and a better understanding of what is necessary to achieve high performance. The motivation role of CBM is highlighted in this population.
- The benefits for managers are more technical. CBM programmes are giving managers more adequate decision making criteria and tools in order to effectively manage selection, evaluation and development. But CBM is also providing managers a better frame of reference to manage people.
- For organizations, CBM is providing better instruments to perform conventional HR practices, such as selection, evaluation or development. But CBM is facilitating the match between organization requirements and people. This last benefit is entirely in line with one of the central features of competence notion.
- European public administrations are facing the common difficulties encountered by most organizations that decided to implement CBM: the difficulty in specifying competencies and determining their verification level and problems about having a shared understanding about what competencies are and how to implement CBM practices. This might be the reason why benchmarking plays such an important role in competence identification.
- We would like to stress the relevance of these two concrete difficulties because they are at the heart of the CBM and make the difference between this approach and a more functional one. As we already mentioned, one of the more recognized advantages of CBM, the possibility to link individuals to organizations through company goals and values, is strategic value. Performing correctly the inference process from organizations to competencies and their respective verification levels is crucial if we really want to benefit from CBM.
- The same can be said about the shared understanding about what competencies are and how to implement CBM. Competence movement can be a powerful communication tool aligning individuals and organizations, but they turn out to be only effective if different stakeholders share the meaning of particular competences. Finally CBM has to be implemented. Otherwise everything remains the same, with very slight changes in labels and terminology.
- In this context the development of internal HR and management competencies seems to be fundamental in order to effectively use CBM. One has to remember that respondents describe the HR role in respective public administrations as predominately administrative and less strategic. The changing role and competences of HR public professionals seems to be fundamental in order to increase the effectiveness of HR practices.
- However, we don't think CBM is "the" best approach to manage people. CBM is a fad, like many others in management. But management fads, if taken seriously, can provide a good

pretext to experiment new practices and retain the most adequate. They are good instruments in reducing the knowing-doing gap, a common problem in organizations in general and in the public sector in particular. Effective private organizations can be characterised by having a contradictory nature: they are very conservative in their purpose and core values and, at the same time, very innovative in experimenting management practices and strategies. Public administrations are purpose and value based organizations. Generalised experimentation is what is lacking.

- Concerning the competencies management for older employees European public administrations can assume a leading role. According to results even if nothing is seriously been done in order to manage older employees, in future member states will be at least somewhat involved in HR several practices for this target.
- Effective HRM systems in the private sector are often described as composed by *high involvement work practices* such as employment security, selective recruiting, high wages and incentive pay, employee ownership, information sharing, participation and empowerment, self-managed teams, training and skill development, cross-utilization and cross training, symbolic egalitarianism, wage compression, and promotion from within. Most of these practices are present or can be improved in public administrations. Their implementation is what is at stake. CBM can help in this area.
- Other approaches put emphasis on the alignment nature of effective HR. Vertical alignment is the link between HR practices and the nature of organization vision and strategic goals. Horizontal alignment is the requisite of achieving a consistent approach to HR by developing a coherent set of practices. Action alignment refers to the need to translate HR policies into real practices. Because the novelty of CBM is the integration of organizational level variables into individual profiles and tends to be used in sets of HR practices instead of particular ones, it can be a good approach to assure both vertical and horizontal alignment. But going from rhetoric to practice is essential if we don't want to jeopardise the merits of CBM.
- In short, if the trend towards a more responsive model of public administration is taking place, then individual civil servants should be prepared to act accordingly. In this context CBM can play an important role in providing organizations with a basic set of enabling competences to a more effective role in society. After all, one of the most recognized contributions to the competence movement took place in a public context and member states who implemented CBM are very satisfied.

## INTRODUCTION

In following the current context of accelerated and prevailing change, human resource management has aimed at developing approaches capable of fostering people's contributions to organisations, creating at the same time organisational contexts with the potential of becoming areas of professional and personal accomplishment for those working in them.

One trend which has taken on a growing prevalent role in the configuration of human resource practices is **competency-based management** (CBM). Rooted in the North-American context, the competencies movement has settled into most economic activity sectors and into the majority of Western countries.

Public administration has not escaped this influence. In actual fact, some of the pioneering projects of competency modelling, conducted under the guidance of one of the initiators of this approach (McClelland, 1973), had the US State Department as a privileged context to identify competency profiles. More recently, the UN report (Unlocking the Human Potential for Public Sector Performance-World Public Sector Report, 2005), uses the competencies concept as one of the organising elements of the evolution of people management in the public sector.

After the initial studies on competence, the concept has been adopted mainly by consultancy firms with the academic community assuming a more cautious position, if not suspicious. Even so, since the 90's it becomes impossible to ignore the role played by competence movement in shaping HR. In this context, it is particularly important to know the current status and the development perspectives of competency-based management (CBM) in the European Union public administrations. This is the fundamental purpose of the current study.

More specifically, the study focuses on four different areas of the CBM practice:

- A search for context elements, which may eventually foster the emergence of CBM.
- Detailed characterisation of the existing CBM practices at national level.

- An attempt to collect implementation examples of CBM programmes considered to be successful
- The analysis of competencies management practices for older employees, a often forgotten dimension in human resource management in general and in CBM in particular.

The term competencies has a long history, having been used in several contexts and meanings. As Zemke (1982) stated, the word ‘competency’ does not have a meaning per se, it depends on the sense given by who defines it. We can still, rightfully, continue to affirm this 25 years on. These differences derive not only from intellectual divergences over the meaning of competencies, but also from the influence of national cultures in which the concept is used as a guideline in the changes to human resource management practices.

Given the likely variation of meanings for competency in the 27 EU countries, this project resorts to a broad definition, running the risk of actually using this notion of competency as a mere designation of pre-existing practices. The following definition seems to be sufficiently encompassing to accommodate the natural diversity of visions and practices of CBM in the European Union public administrations.

Competency management, sometimes called competency-based management (CBM) involves identifying the competencies that distinguish high performers from average performers in all areas of organizational activity and using this framework as the foundation for recruitment, selection, training and development, rewards and other aspects of employee management (IDS, 1997).

As we notice, this definition stresses the process of identifying competences and the use of this knowledge to shape human resource management practices. We believe that CBM movement only produces effective results if sensible changes in practices take place.

As we’ll see, in a sample of 24 member states’ respondents, 13 are using CBM programs. Despite the variability of professional groups and bodies involved, the huge disparity in methodological approaches used to develop competence portfolios and the diverse implementation strategies used, reported experiences

with CBM reveals signs of good impact on individuals, managers, organizations, and state in general. Coupled with the major changes taking place in public administrations, these results can lead to a deep discussion on the nature of HRM change requirements.

This report includes four major components. In the first we present a brief outline of the competency movement, and use some published cases to illustrate how CBM has been implemented in Europe. After that we present the research method used to produce results regarding CBM practices in Europe. The third part presents the data gathered on the description on CBM implementation in EU member states. And last of all we discuss the meaning of CBM in Europe and how European public administrations can take advantage of this movement.

## **COMPETENCIES MANAGEMENT: FROM THE JOB TO THE INDIVIDUAL WITH A SPECIAL SENSITIVITY TO ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS**

### ***Back to basics: why are competences so popular?***

Should we use the term competence? Are the traditional KSAO (Knowledge, skills, abilities and others), AMO (Abilities, Motivation and opportunities to participate) or even the French KKS (knowledge-savoir, know how-savoir-faire; behaviours-savoir être) adding up personality traits and values not enough to make decisions about hiring, evaluating or developing people? According to our view, the answer to this question is crucial if we really want to understand the reason why the idea of competence has flourished within human resource management field.

Like most recent concepts in management, a brief look at the some of the most popular definitions of competence immediately shows a great variability and a clear lack of consensus:

1. Mixture of knowledge, skills, abilities, motivation, beliefs, values, and interests (Fleishman et al., 1995).
2. ... an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to effective or superior performance in a job (Boyatzis, 1982)
3. A knowledge, skill, ability, or characteristics associated with high performance on a job (Mirabile, 1997).
4. A combination of motives, traits, self concepts, attitudes or values, content knowledge or cognitive behaviour skills; any individual characteristic that can be reliably measured or counted and that can be shown to differentiate superior from average performers (Spencer, McClelland, & Spencer, 1994).
5. A written description of measurable work habits as personal skills used to achieve work objectives (Green, 1999).

6. An identifiable aspect of prospective work behaviour attributable to the individual that is expected to contribute positively and/or negatively to organizational effectiveness (Tett et al. 2000).

This diversity becomes normal if we pay attention to the different domains which contributed to the development of competence modelling and practice: individual differences; educational psychology and training methods; leadership research and the history of assessment centers; job analysis research; the concept of multiple intelligences; Prahalad and Hamel's (1990) concept of "core competency"; the diffusion of strategic management tools based on the idea of using organizational purpose, and related values and behaviour patterns as guiding devices. As we consider those seven contributions as the building blocks of the competence movement we'll present a brief description of each one.

1. The search for the more stable characteristics that differentiate individuals has a long story, namely in *differential psychology*. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of researchers tried to develop techniques to measure human intelligence, traits, and psychomotor abilities. Most research procedures consisted in drawing inferences about internal variables from observable behaviour. This linkage between competence (internal) and the behaviour (observable) still is at the heart of competence modelling programmes.
2. In the field of *educational psychology and pedagogy*, we can find several efforts to develop the more effective methods to train people in order to increase performance. The most influential contributions aimed to clearly define learning objectives using observable behaviours<sup>1</sup>. Here the emphasis is linking performance to specific observable behaviours and not to infer a more stable human characteristic, such as personality or intelligence.
3. Rooted in military assessment programs in World War I and II and translated to the business contexts by AT&T, *assessment centers* played an important role as a basis for competence modelling. The processes of assessment centers

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<sup>1</sup> For instance Bloom's taxonomy was adopted by Tuning Project within Bolonha Agreement, aimed at develop good practices in teaching, learning and assessment in order to allow students to reach the intended learning outcomes of a course of study.

consists in evaluating manager's performance on several tasks, using a limited number of dimensions (drive, planning, creativity, flexibility), in fact labels for clustering behaviours considered relevant for job performance.

4. Research on *job analysis* has focused, at least partially, on the identification of the critical job requirements that differentiate high from low performers. For example, Flanagan used the critical incident technique to analyze behaviours and propose six broad dimensions of Air Force officer's performance. This kind of approach is still alive and led to several managerial competence models. Boyatzis's work (1982) is perhaps the most popular.
5. The most quoted father of the modern notion of competence is David McClelland (1973) who wrote a very influential article (Testing for Competence Rather for Intelligence). McClelland's argument was very provocative and appealing: we can demonstrate that classical intelligent tests are not able to predict important real life outcomes, so it is appropriate to consider the existence of more relevant concepts, such as knowledge, skills, abilities, traits or motives more directly related to performance in real job contexts. Intelligence tests should be replaced by "competency testing".
6. The main argument presented by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) is that sustained competitive advantage is based in a number of central and distinctive nuclear capabilities, sometimes referred to as cross functional learning ability, or people-embodied skills. In short, if the proper development or organizational core competences is the very root of competitiveness, it is logical to think that at the individual level performance is based on competences. Being the one of the most reprinted articles in the Harvard Business Review story, Prahalad and Hamel's appealing approach played an important role in the diffusion of the competence idea and its relevance to organizational performance. If the five contributions mentioned above have the individual behaviour, and the subsequent inference to non observable internal variables (personality, intelligence, competences, values, etc.) as key factor, the concept of *core competence* pertains to a very different level of analysis: the organization and

its effectiveness. This level of analysis is more appealing to managers in general, not just for human resources professionals.

7. The last leading factor for the popularity of the competence concept is the trend of doing management using the *organizational purpose and core values* as the main reference for most of the choices. As studied by Collins and Porras (1994), visionary companies are very conservative regarding purpose and core values, their more relevant dimensions. At the same time these companies are extremely dynamic in experimenting and changing short term strategies, cultural and other management practices in order to adapt to environmental changes. Companies with strong values and clear dynamic capabilities require people who act in a consistent way: identify with values and guiding principles and show the capacity to adapt to changes. How to translate into expected people behaviour factors like values and adaptative capacity? The concept of competence is appropriate because it renders possible the translation of organizational levels requirements, namely goals and values, into individual level characteristics.

This last factor is consistent with the results of JACMTF group (Job Analysis and Competency Modeling Task Force; Shippmann et al, 2000). In a remarkable effort to evaluate the contribution of competence modelling, author's compared competence modelling to job analysis using rigour as the frame of reference. The results are clear. Competence modelling is worse than job analysis in 9 of 10 criteria. The exception is the linkage of the result to business goals and strategies. Investigating the reason why competence modelling is so appealing to the consumer, and using again job analysis as a comparison, Shippmann et al. (2000) concluded that competence modelling outperforms job analysis in it's ability to focus on core competencies, it's sensitivity to organizational fit rather than job fit, including values an personality orientations, face validity (evident for everybody), and potential to drive training and development HR applications.

In this context it is clear the reason why competences are so important now days. Using a not very scientific procedure is now possible to develop a set of human characteristics relevant for an organization, linked to performance, focused on

individuals not on particular jobs, that everyone can understand and that can be used to shape HR practices. Of course this level of analysis change was not in the minds of the original contributors to the competence concept. However, despite its lack of methodological rigour, the competence fad is there and no one can ignore it<sup>2</sup>. European Public Administration is looking after ways to improve its performance. Can the competence approach to human resource management be a valid answer?

***Competence management versus more traditional management: is the difference relevant to public administrations?***

The concept of competence management raised several criticisms. Perhaps the most common is arguing that nothing really changes in HR management practices, except the terminology we use. Expressions like “old wine in new bottles” or the more suggestive “viagraized job analysis or impotent imposter?” appeared in the academic fields stressing this. So, is there a difference? Lawler (1994) was one of the scholars who tried to differentiate between the competence approach and the “most traditional approach”. Regarding this subject he asserts:

Instead of thinking of people as having a job with a particular set of activities that can be captured in a relatively permanent and fixed job description, it may be more appropriate and more effective to think of them as human resources than work for an organization... Competency based organizations as organizational systems in which the capabilities of individuals are the primary focus and which cause them to be managed in a way that provides competitive advantage.

According to Lawler’s perspective, the difference is, in fact a matter of emphasis on people’s characteristics and in organizational performance rather than in fixed jobs. A changing world is asking for flexibility and autonomy, and job based human resource practices are not giving an adequate answer.

If we go more deeply into HR practices what differences are expected? Hondeghem and Vandermeulen (2000) show us how subtle and at the same time

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<sup>2</sup> Appendix II presents an example of a European competence framework developed in the Dutch civil service.

deep can be the differences between competence and traditional approaches (figure 1), concerning job description, selection, development, appraisal, and rewards. Competence based management only takes place if HR practices change accordingly.

**Figure 1. Contrasting functional and competency approaches to HRM**

FUNCTIONAL APPROACH	COMPETENCY APPROACH
<b><i>Job description</i></b>	<b><i>Competency profile</i></b>
Cluster of core tasks and functional requirements (knowledge, skill, responsibility)	What is done, why and how? Cluster of core tasks and competency requirements (knowledge, skills, personality, attitude, values and norms, incentives))
<b><i>Selection: “How is the person”?</i></b>	<b><i>Selection: “How does the person function?”</i></b>
Selection in order to realise a fit between the function and the individual	Selection in order to realise a fit between the individual and the organization
Selection in order to fill a vacancy	Selection with a view of growth and development of an organization in the long term
Selection criteria based on the current function	Selection criteria based on the future
Selection criteria focusing on knowledge, personality and attitude	Selection criteria: besides knowledge, personality and attitude, also skills, values, behaviour
<b><i>Development</i></b>	<b><i>Development</i></b>
Development of knowledge	Development of knowledge, ability, willing and being
Aimed at hierarchical promotion	Aimed at horizontal mobility
With a view of rising job skills	Aimed at the maximum use of human potential
	With a view of developing skills, attitudes and behaviour
<b><i>Appraisal</i></b>	<b><i>Appraisal</i></b>
Focus on function in the job	Focus on functioning in the job, performance, results and potential
Focus on dedication	Focus on behaviour
<b><i>Reward</i></b>	<b><i>Reward</i></b>
Pay according to the job	Pay according to work
The relative weight of the function determines the wage	The required competencies for an organization determine the wage
Focus on responsibility, knowledge, age and seniority	Focus on output

Source: Hondeghem and Vandermeulen (2000)

Change appears to be the more relevant factor determining the need to implement CBM programmes. For instance, Lawler (1994) refers to four forces leading to competence management: the shift from mass production to service, knowledge and consumer focused economy; globalization and its impact in increasing competition; the need to react to rapid changes occurring in the organisation's environment; the evermore prevalent flat organizational structures, more responsive but less akin to clear career ladder's. Following Lawler's thinking, if we can say these factors are present in public administrations, they become a clear context to the emergence of CBM.

In the same line of reasoning, Schaarderdenburgh and Van Beek (1998) suggest a main reason for introducing competence management in public administrations. According to their perspective, competence management can be an effective leverage for public administrations to change, namely from bureaucracy to more flexible, efficient and dynamic organizations. Competence management rends the individual more visible and stresses the role of people in reaching an organization's goals. So, competency management can be an effective tool to change a bureaucratic culture into to a more personalised one.

Whit another focus, Hondegen and Vandrmeulen (2000) suggest that CBM reflects a shift from a functional approach but also as shift from the meaning of performance management. If performance management emphasizes results and outputs, competence management focuses on inputs, on what people are able to bring into the work. In public organizations output is often hard to measure, so the CBM can be an appropriate approach for performance management.

But the introduction of CBM implies a change in the way HR plays it's role. According to Ulrich and colleagues (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Beatty, 2001), HR functions in organizations can play 4 roles:

- The *strategic partner*. Contributes actively towards the definition of the more global strategies of the services which they belong to. Develops HR processes and programmes which are able to connect these strategies to people management.

- The *administrative expert*: Contributes towards the design and implementation of administrative processes in people management. Takes charge of processing documents and complying with legal requirements in an effective way.
- The *employee champion*: Contributes towards designing and implementing programmes intent on motivating employees, knowing their needs and seeking to conciliate their interests with those of the organisations.
- The *change agent*: Contributes towards creating a flexible, adaptive culture, causing an increase in the capacity to change of the organisations they belong to.

This means that in order to successfully change HR in their bodies, HR professional in public administrations must change their own competency model. For example, in the USA, National Academy of Public Administration (1996) developed a competency framework involving five key competencies: supporting the organizational strategy, using HR tools, resolving conflicts, supporting organizational change, and creating trust. Governments will need to invest in training their own HRM professionals and managers have to take HRM specialists seriously if they want to manage their people effectively.

**Foreseeable changes in public management: do competences have a role to play?**

*It is my hope that competencies will provide us with a shared language for talking, in concrete terms, about high performance and managerial excellence. I believe that a shared view of the standards we are striving to achieve will assist us in our continuing efforts to prepare the Organization to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*

*Kofi Annan*

This quote, taken from the United Nations report (*Unlocking the Human Potential for Public Sector Performance-World Public Sector Report, 2005*) reveals the communication power that competence approach brings to discussion about individual and organizational performance. But it also shows the important role played by competence in the proposed development framework for human resource management.

As a starting point, the UN Report (2005) distinguishes between three broader models of public administration and management that seem to frame contemporary HRM changes. These models are described in figure 2. The models are somehow chronological (responsive governance is more an emergent set of trends), but in practice they overlap in different countries as a result of the influence of geo-political, social, economic factors.

**Figure 2. Three models of public administration**

	<b>Public administration</b>	<b>Public management</b>	<b>Responsive governance</b>
<i>Citizen-state relationship</i>	Obedience	Entitlement	Empowerment
<i>Accountability of senior officials</i>	Politicians	Customers	Citizens and stakeholders
<i>Guiding principles</i>	Compliance with rules and regulations	Efficiency and results	Accountability, transparency and participation
<i>Criteria for success</i>	Output	Outcome	Process
<i>Key attribute</i>	Impartiality	Professionalism	Responsiveness

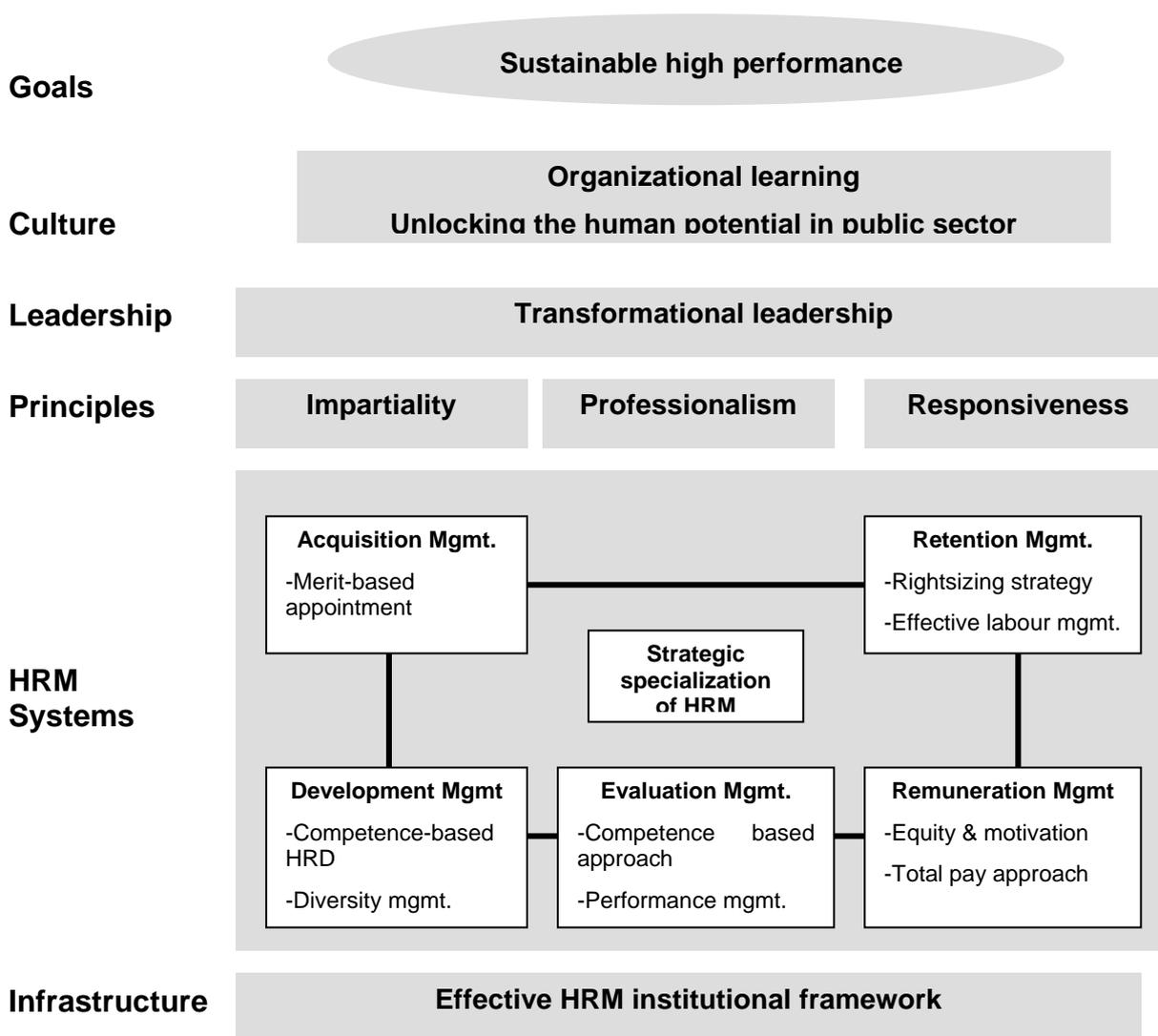
Source: UN Report, 2005

According to the UN Report (2005) describing the major HRM features of the three models the trend shows CBM is absent in Public Administration but emerges mainly as a basis for human resource development in Public Management and then becomes central in Responsive Governance as a basis for HR development, performance management and career advancement.

Still following the UN Report, competence models can be used in shaping several HRM activities. In merit based appointment, competence models act as “person specification” framework to give criteria for selection; concerning pay and rewards, competence can be used in job evaluation as a basis for pay and grading; regarding performance management, competence models provide a framework for managing staff performance; in job reduction procedures, competence models help governments to identify priority jobs and jobs that are no longer needed; in development activities, competence models enable managers and jobholders to identify “performance gap” between existing competence and job requirements.

In an effort to organise the huge amount of information contained by the UN report regarding the role of HR in promoting organizational effectiveness, Kim and Hong (2006) provide an interesting picture (Figure 3). Linking the main variables, we can say that attaining the goal of sustainable high performance in public administration depends on developing a culture based on organizational learning. This culture is based on transformational leadership oriented to promote impartiality, professionalism and responsiveness as major values and guiding principles to the development of HRM systems. HRM should become more strategic in developing five activities: acquisition management based on merit appointments, retention management based on a rightsizing strategy and effective labour management, remuneration management emphasising equity and motivation by creating a total pay approach and the use of competence as a basis to development and evaluation management. All this requires appropriate institutional and legal infrastructures for HR practices to operate.

Figure 3. Simplified conceptual framework of UN Report 2005



Source: Kim & Hong (2006), p. 2000.

In short, if we consider the contextual factors that determine the CBM emergence, all of them conducting to a shift from the job to the person, who has to work accordingly to organizational values and goals, take in to account the communicative power of the word “competence”, and the probable move in Public Administrations toward a more responsive model, we can conclude that CBM found a proper field to flourish.

## THE STUDY: CBM IN EUROPEAN UNION

### **SAMPLE AND DATA GATHERING METHODS**

The target of the study is the 27 macro-level HR representative in each member state. From this universe, 24 answers were obtained. The response rate is 89%. Additionally the European Commission provided its own particular answer.

The countries involved in the study were the following<sup>3</sup>:

• Check Republic	• Austria	• Bulgaria
• Portugal	• Estonia	• Finland
• Italy	• Germany	• Luxembourg
• Belgium	• Hungary	• Greece
• Lithuania	• Malta	• Holland
• Ireland	• Romania	• France
• Poland	• Slovenia	• Spain
• Latvia	• Sweden	• Cyprus

Considering the exploratory nature of this project, the research strategy was descriptive. The description was based on a questionnaire filled out by national representatives (individually or in group), taking the country as the level of analysis. Data gathering took place between September and October 2007. A complete copy of the research instrument can be found in the appendix. We would like to thank all participants for the time and energy they put in this project.

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<sup>3</sup> In spite of the absence on the UK answer, we know, by published sources (Horton, 2000) British civil service has been aware of the debate and by the mid-1980s first introduced training programmes at the Civil Service College based on competency framework. According to the same source, by the early 1990s, the concept of competencies was used in many parts of the civil service's personnel policy. Appendix II exhibits a competence portfolio for British senior civil service.

The questionnaire was designed in order to cover the main specific objectives of this research:

- A search for context elements, which may eventually foster the emergence of CBM, focus on the mix of public administration models in use, major contextual factors with influence in HR dynamics and the type of role played by HR in public administrations.
- Detailed characterisation of the existing CBM practices at national level, specifically the nature of implementation of CBM programmes, and the methods used in this process.
- An evaluation of the benefits from the use of CBM to individuals, managers, organizations, and the state in general.
- The identification of the main drawbacks encountered in the implementation of CBM programmes and the foreseeable evolution of those programmes.
- An attempt to collect implementation examples of CBM programmes considered to be successful.
- The analysis of competencies management practices for older employees, an often forgotten dimension in human resource management in general and in CBM in particular. The analysis focuses on the degree of each country's involvement in practices for this target, as well as the foreseeable involvement in those practices.

The data analysis strategy consists of simply calculating the central tendency measures (mean and mode) for each variable. Furthermore we used simple cross tabulation on several context variables and the use of CBM in order to explore possible liaisons.

Adopting a research strategy like this is risky and can be considered the study's major limitation. Having system wide global data, by member state, doesn't give us information about the variations within each country. Further difficulties were reported by some respondents, indicating different conceptions of competence or the lack of more detailed information vis-à-vis national practices or programs that could use the competence concept, but in a very limited manner.

However, the information obtained is rich enough to depict an adequate portrait of the current status and the development perspectives of competency-based management (CBM) in the European Union public administrations. The following section presents the results provided by 24 member states respondents. A preliminary version of the data was presented to the WRWG on November the 20<sup>th</sup>.

## **RESULTS**

### **CBM in European Union: prevalence, fostering conditions, and approach to implementation**

Consistently with the wide range of different conceptions on competence used in specialized literature, several distinct definitions of competence appeared in this study. For instance, the European Commission, doesn't agree with the definitions proposed by this report's authors, and put forward another one, highlighting the input side of the topic:

'Competency' is more precisely defined as the behaviours that employees must have, or must acquire, to input into a situation in order to achieve high levels of performance, while 'competence' relates to a system of minimum standards or is demonstrated by performance and outputs.

Other member states provided their own definitions. As we can see, despite the variability, the core themes of CBM arise from the following views expressed: focus on people instead of the job, the concern for performance, the need of behavioural evidence, the work as the context in which competencies reveals, and the existence several types of competencies.

*Competencies describe the knowledge, skills and abilities required for effective performance in a particular role. (Ireland)*

*Competencies are behavioural criteria (skills, knowledge, attributes) defined in the action descriptions that characterizes the behaviour of the employee in specific situations and helps to compare employees and foresee work performance. (Latvia)*

*Competencies are defined by the dimensions “know-how”, “problem solving” and “accountability” in application of Hay company's system, witch is internationally used in more than 47 countries. (Austria)*

*Competencies are technical as weel as behavioural (Belgium)*

*Competencies: A combination of the knowledge and skills required for discharging public administrative tasks, the various behavioural elements that foster their application, and efficiency motivation. (Hungary)*

*Most agencies have a more or less explicit definition of competencies. There is not a common definition for the entire civil service. On staff agency level the Swedish Administrative Development Agency argues for the following definition: Competence*

*is the capacity and intention to carry out a specific task by applying knowledge and skills. (Sweden)*

*Knowledge (savoir), know how (savoir-faire), behaviours (savoir être). (France)*

*“Competency” is the ability to use in one’s work the knowledge, skills and experience, that are defined in the job description, as well as the personal attitude of the employee, in order to perform the activities that are meant for the position or the place of work in a way which guarantees the safety. The competency can be created through education, experience and specialized training. (Bulgaria)*

*Although there is no explicit and precise definition of the term “competencies”, the term is sometimes used in designing training programmes aiming at certain abilities/skills, such as communication, leadership/management skills, interpersonal skills, negotiation skills. (Cyprus)*

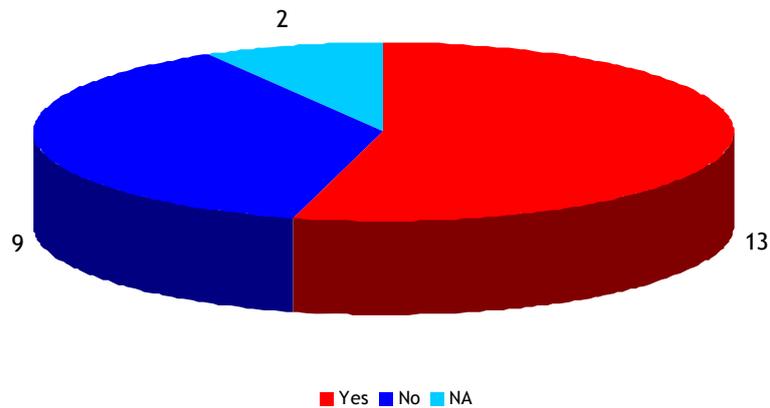
*Competency - an intrinsic characteristic of a person enabling him/her to perform efficiently his/her duties and achieve good results at work. (Poland)*

*Success in achieving the objectives of the organization based on knowledge, skills, abilities and attitude. Competencies are manifested in person’s behaviour at work, thus they are easily monitored, evaluated, compared and developed. (Estonia)*

The data obtained tells us that 13 of 24 member states surveyed reveals the existence of more or less prevalent CBM programmes implemented in their country’s public administration (Figure 4). From now on the two missing values will be interpreted as an indicator of not having a CBM. So, most of the subsequent analysis has 13 as the basis for calculation.

In some countries CBM implementation occurred in the 1980’s (Sweden) until more recently experiences in 2004/2005 in Slovenia and Estonia. As we see some countries do indeed have great experience in implementing CBM in their public administration.

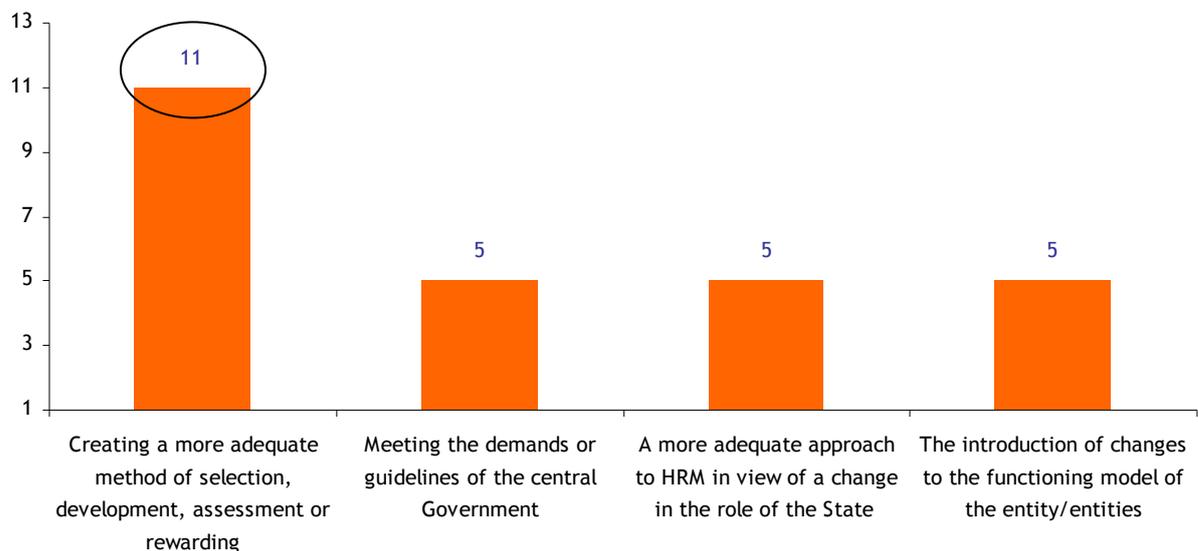
**Figure 4. CBM prevalence (n=24)**



*Has any CBM programme been implemented in your country's public administration?*

The main reasons that lead to CBM implementation were the need to introduce changes in core HRM practices, such as selection, development, assessment or rewarding (figure 5).

**Figure 5. CBM implementation: what for? (n=13)**

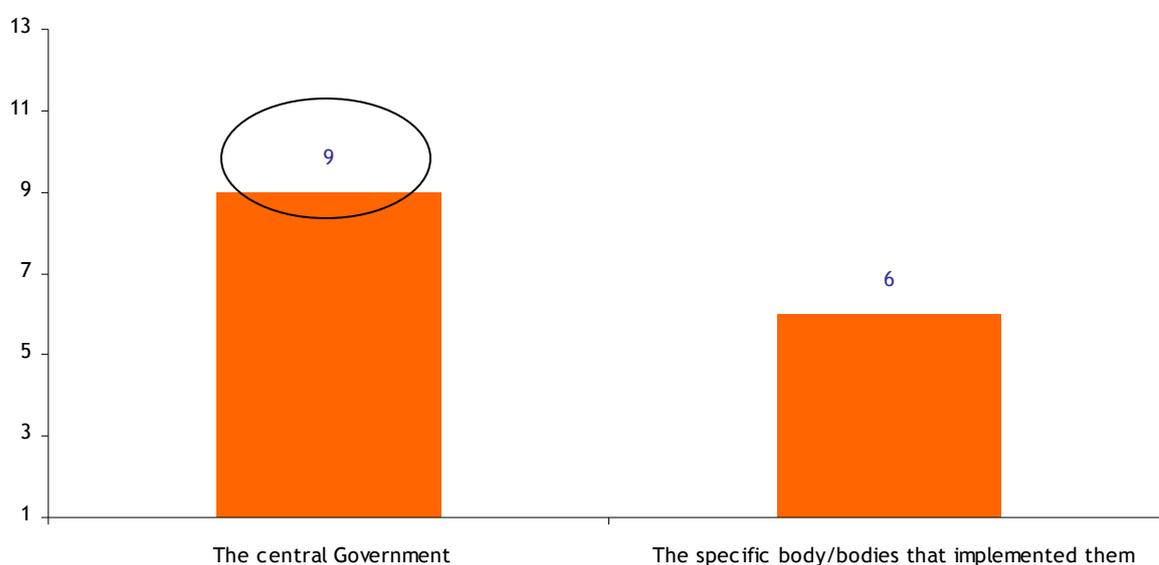


*The fundamental problem(s) being addressed with the introduction of CBM programme(s) was/were...*

On the other hand we should pay attention to mention (five) changes in demands or changing courses of action of the central government, the effects of changing role of the state or alteration in the government model of specific bodies. Change moments are good contexts for the CBM to arise.

In most of countries (nine), the central government has the initiative in developing the CBM programmes. Six countries refer to a decentralized approach. Of these, three mention complete autonomy to specific bodies that implemented them.

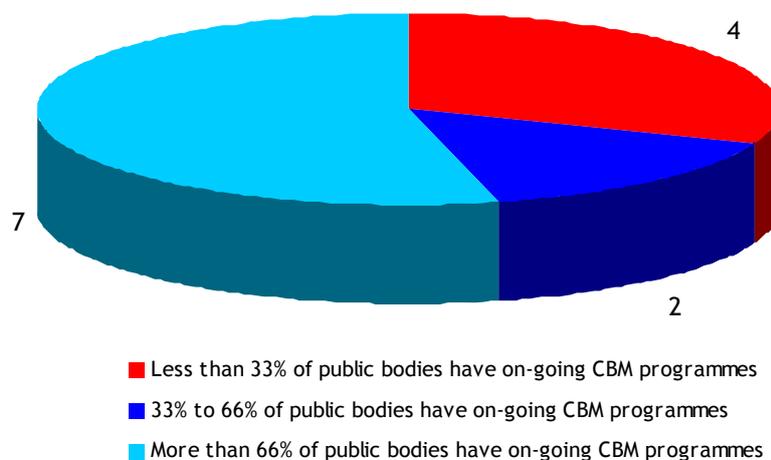
**Figure 6. Degree of centralization (n=13)**



*Whose initiative was it to develop that/those CBM programme(s)?*

Considering the 13 countries in which CBM has been implemented, we see a clear tendency to broadening the scope of application. In fact, seven member states report that more than 66% of public bodies have ongoing CBM programmes (Figure 7). The nature of the government model (more or less centralized) will probably explain this trend.

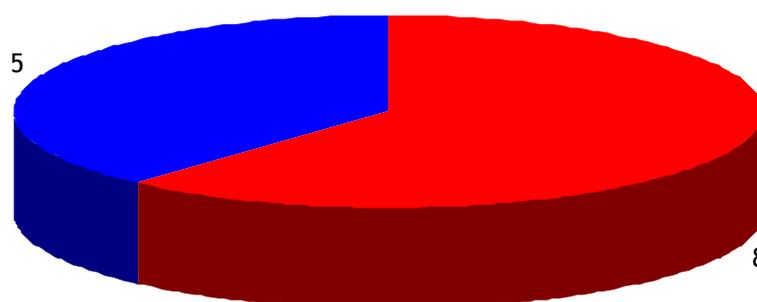
**Figure 7. The scope of CBM (n=13)**



*How could you characterise, at present, the scope of CBM practices in your country's public administration?*

Taking into account the type of entities/bodies involved in the implementation of CBM, we can see a tendency towards a selective approach to implementation. It seems that CBM is introduced in some types of bodies and after they pass the test period are expanded to other bodies (Figure 8).

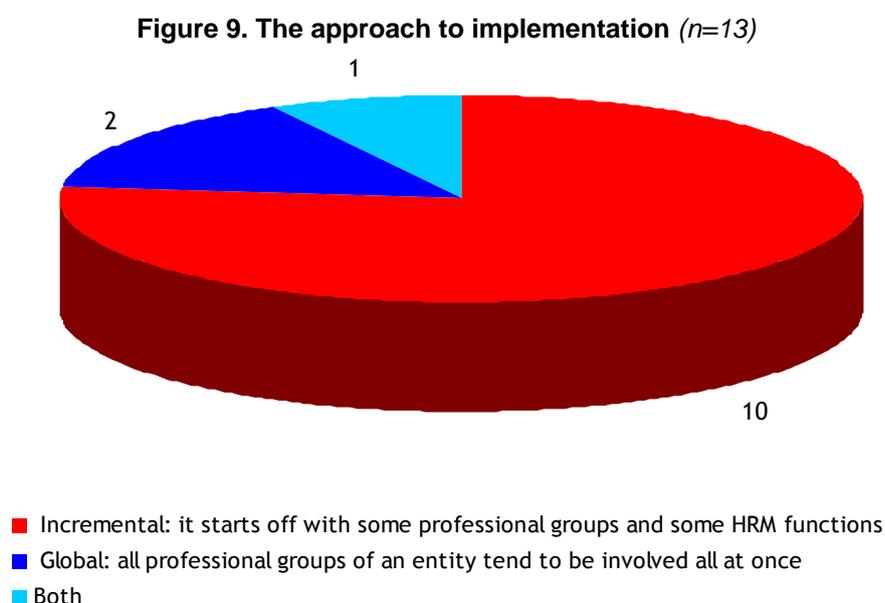
**Figure 8. The type of entities/bodies involved (n=13)**



- There are on-going CBM programmes in all types of entities/bodies
- Only certain types of entities/bodies (for example health, education) have implemented CBM programmes

*As to the type of entities/bodies involved in CBM programmes you would say that...*

This tendency to a selective and step by step approach is confirmed by the data gathered on the strategy to implementation (Figure 9). In fact 10 out of 13 member states point out an incremental approach, starting with some professional groups and some HR practices.



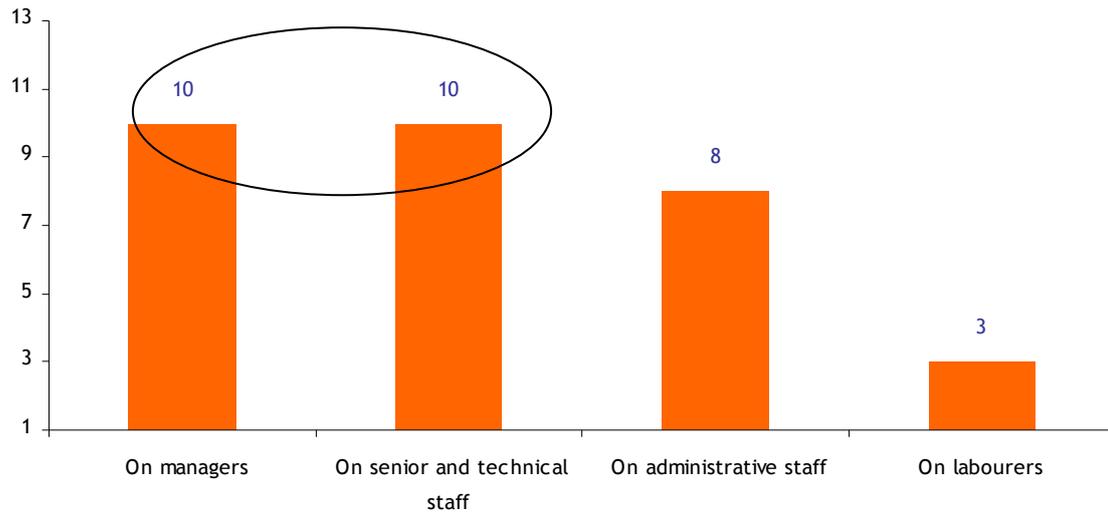
*The approach to the introduction of CBM programmes tends to be...*

Developing the nature of this incremental approach, we can notice that CBM has managers<sup>4</sup> and senior and technical staff as favourite targets (figure 10), mentioned by 10 countries. Administrative staff is less involved (8) and blue collar workers are mentioned only by three member states.

**Figure 10. Professional groups involved in CBM programmes (n=13)**

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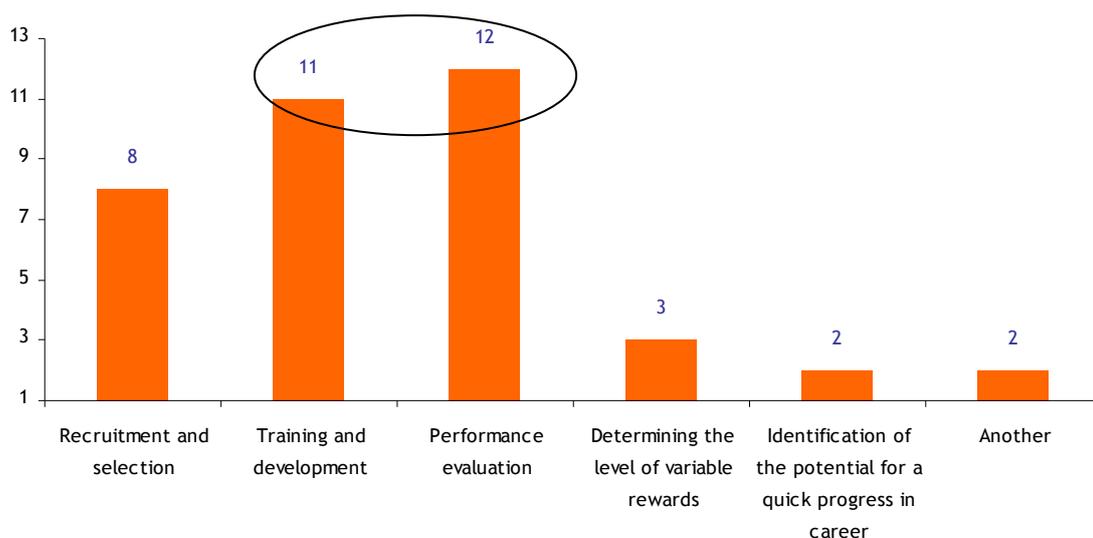
<sup>4</sup> Appendix II contains an interesting proposal for changing competences of public managers (Virtanen, 2000).



*Concerning the professional groups involved, you could say that the CBM programmes focus essentially...*

By the same token, and consistently with previous results, the HR practices at stake are performance evaluation (12 countries), training and development (11 countries), and recruitment and selection (8 countries). Figure 11 presents these results.

**Figure 11. HR practices focused (n=13)**

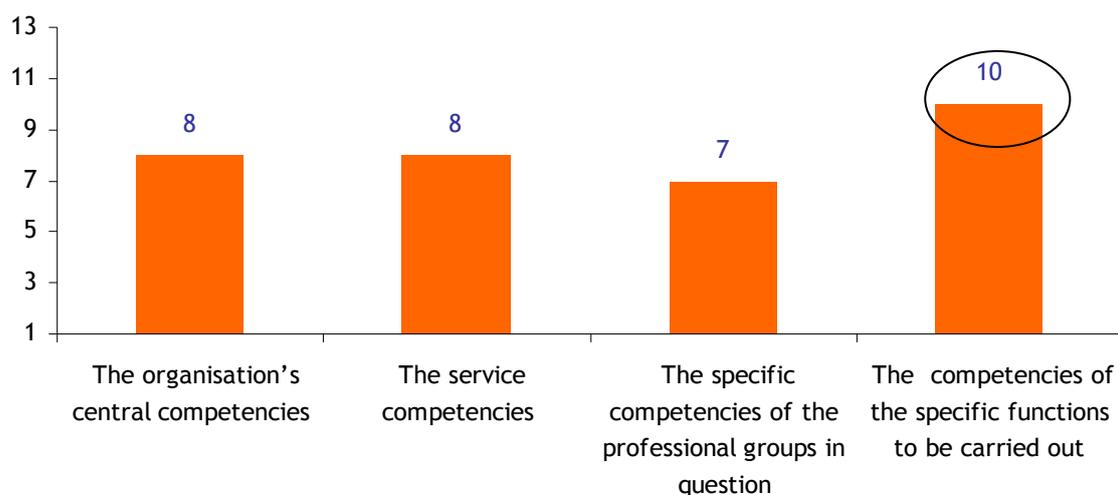


*The HRM functions which the CBM programmes focus on are, especially...*

### **Competence portfolio development**

One of the major issues of CBM programmes is the source of competences as well as the strategies for competence identification. As we already saw, one of the distinguishing features of CBM is an increased sensitivity to organization goal's and values. Figure 12 depicts these results. As we can see, specific functions are still playing an important role a source of competencies for most member states (10). But macro level (organization, service) sources are also being used, which is consistent with the very nature of CBM movement.

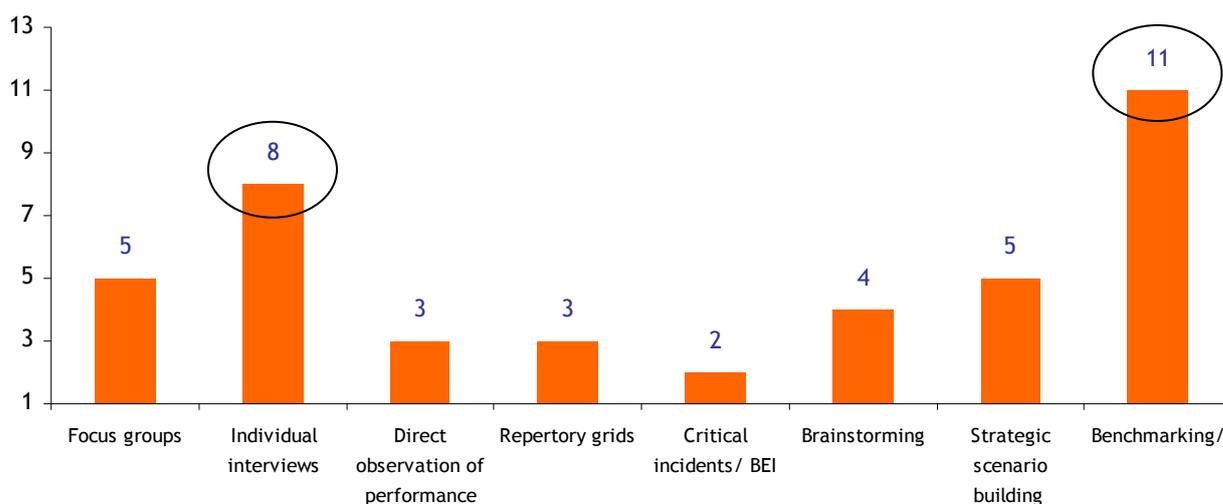
**Figure 12. CBM portfolio: sources of information (n=13)**



*What are the sources for determining competencies that are to be included in the frameworks*

Besides using the organization as a source of competences, CBM implies the use of specific methods in determining the key features of frameworks. However, this is one of the most common problems faced by those who are in charge to develop competence portfolios. Using a bottom-up approach to competence identification, and involving frequently non HR specialists in group projects, the process of identifying competences and respective behavioural observable indicators can turn out to be a tricky task. Facing this huge difficulty, group members and organizations search for already developed solutions and buy competence portfolios from consultancy firms or adopt them from other similar organizations (benchmarking). The result is a great homogeneity in competence frameworks, a well known phenomenon in competence movement, particularly evident in management jobs (figure 13).

**Figure 13. Methods for identifying competences (n=13)**



*The most widely used methods and techniques for competencies frameworks development are...*

In this context, we should not be surprised with the fact that benchmarking is the dominant method for developing competence frameworks. Individual interviews are the second most cited method (eight countries mentioned it). Surprisingly, critical incidents or behavioural event interview, the most traditional data gathering techniques in competence modelling are mentioned only by two member states. Maybe these techniques are included in some of the eight countries that mention individual interviews.

### Using CBM in European Union: the benefits and the drawbacks

When we look at the CBM advantages and shortcomings we see a very positive picture. In global terms, when faced with a direct question aimed to determine how respondents assess the impact of the adoption of CBM programmes in their country's public administration, the answer is unanimous: the 13 member states consider the impact positive. More specifically, for the employees (figure 14) CBM is providing greater encouragement for personal development as well as a better understanding of what is necessary to achieve high performance at work. As we can note CBM is playing an important communication role.

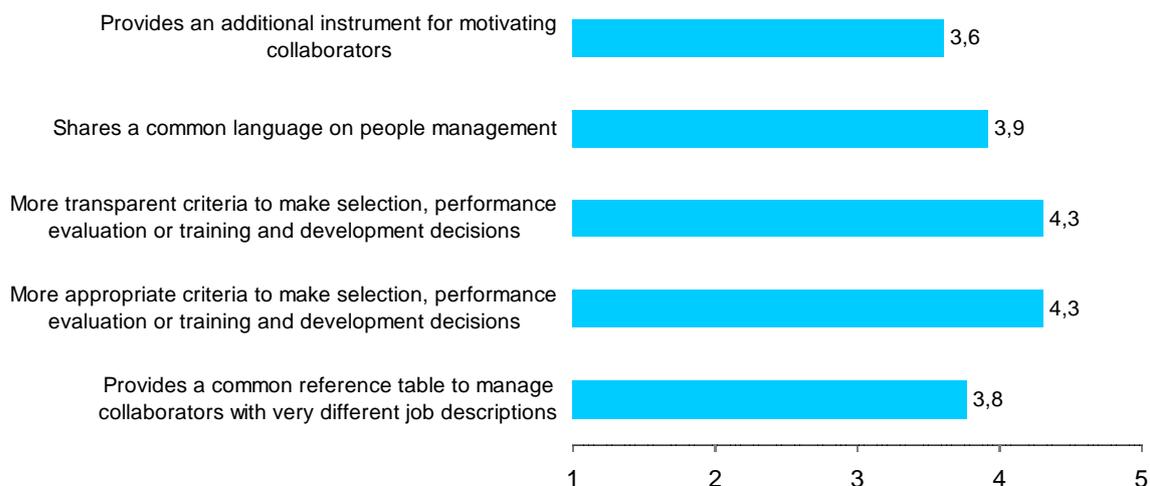
**Figure 14. Benefits of CBM for employees** (n=13, with some exceptions due to missing values)



*In your opinion, what are the main benefits deriving from the use of CBM, for employees. Scale: 1=totally disagree; 5= totally agree*

The benefits to managers are technical in nature. According to respondents CBM is providing them more transparent and appropriate criteria to make selection, performance evaluation or training and development decisions (Figure 15). In a less intense level, CBM is playing also a communication role, providing managers a common language or frame of reference to manage people.

**Figure 15. Benefits of CBM for managers** (n=13, with some exceptions due to missing values)



*In your opinion, what are the main benefits deriving from the use of CBM, for managers. Scale: 1=totally disagree; 5= totally agree.*

Benefits for organizations are consistent with the reasons why CBM is implemented. In fact, according to reported data, CBM is providing more useful tools and guiding principles for selection, evaluation, training and development. The organizational dimension is also touched by CBM, regarding the integration between organization requirements and people characteristics, and the integration of the organizational goals to be achieved.

**Figure 16. Benefits of CBM for organizations** (*n=13, with some exceptions due to missing values*)



*(In your opinion, what are the main benefits deriving from the use of CBM, for organizations. Scale: 1=totally disagree; 5= totally agree)*

Looking at benefits for the state in general the results are also very encouraging. In all parameters considered member states provide a good picture, especially in terms of availability of more useful instruments for selection, evaluation and development (Figure 17). But the other results, with mean values around 3.8, show the relevance of CBM in linking people and organizations.

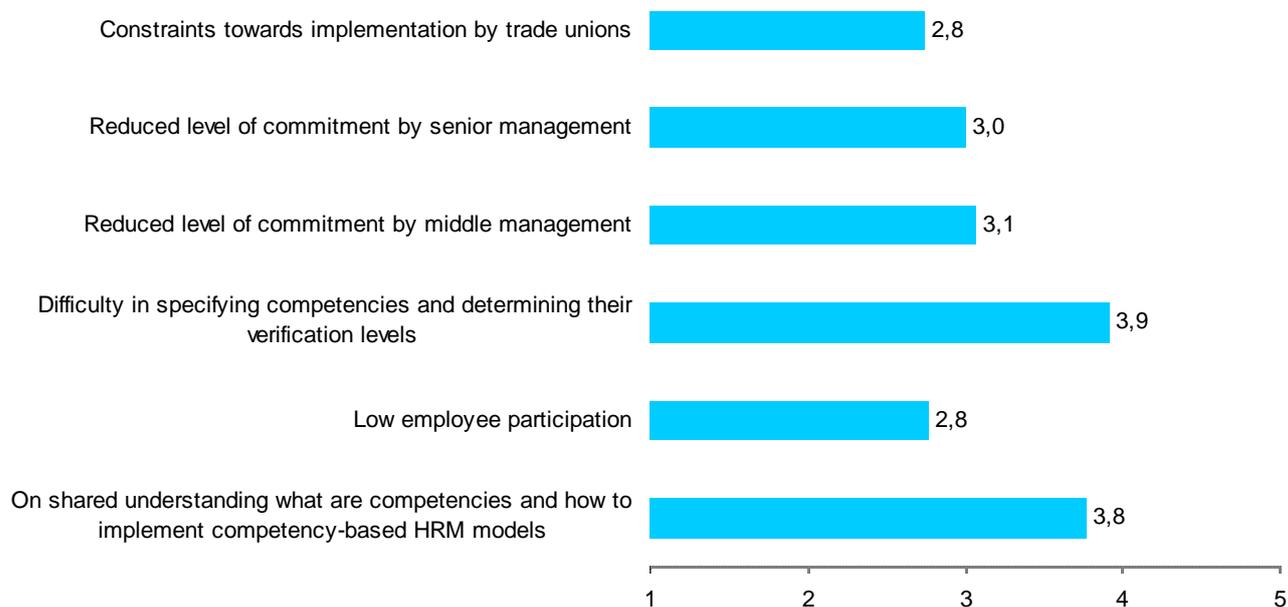
**Figure 17. Benefits of CBM for the state in general** (*n=13, with some exceptions due to missing values*)



*In your opinion, what are the main benefits deriving from the use of CBM, for organizations. Scale: 1=totally disagree; 5= totally agree*

Although the experience with CBM is clearly positive, some problems arise during the implementation. Two main problems become clearly relevant during implementation. On one hand the difficulty in specifying competencies and determining their verification level. In the other hand, problems about having a shared understanding about what competencies are and how to implement CBM practices (Figure 18). These problems should be faced if we aspire at taking real advantage from CBM.

**Figure 18. The main problems encountered in the implementation** (n=13, with some exceptions due to missing values) (scale: 1=totally disagree; 5= totally agree)

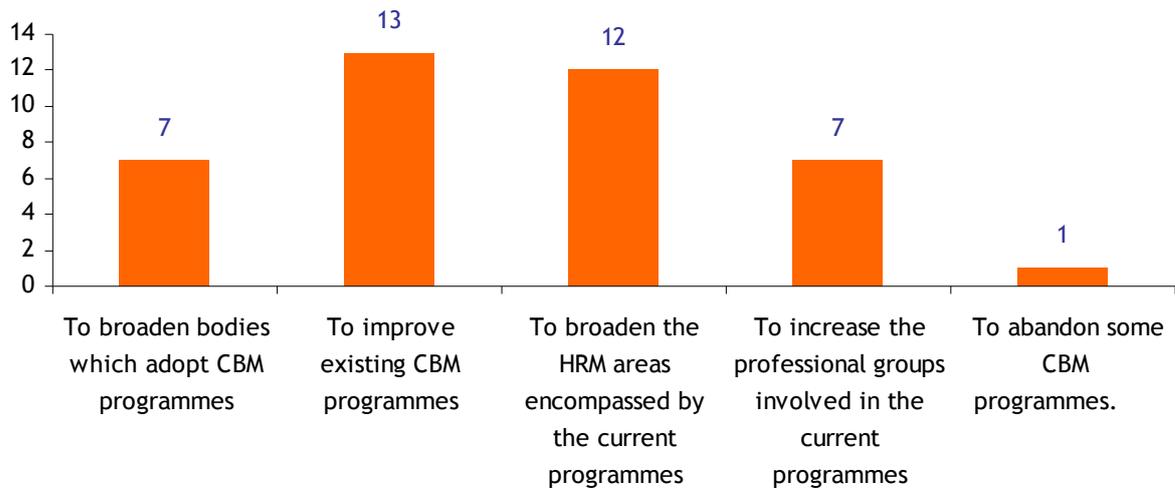


*What have been the main problems encountered in the implementation of CBM programmes in your country's public administration? Scale: 1=totally disagree; 5= totally agree*

### **The future of CBM**

In line with results just presented, member states are satisfied with the experience of CBM (Figures 19). The results are clear: all respondents reveals a trend to improve existing CBM programmes, and 12 states a trend to enlarge HR areas encompassed by current programmes. Seven member states declare also a trend to broaden bodies which adopt CBM programmes or to increase the professional groups involved in actual programmes. The only reference to abandon CBM programmes means the integration it into more global ones.

**Figure 19. The future of CBM (n=13)**



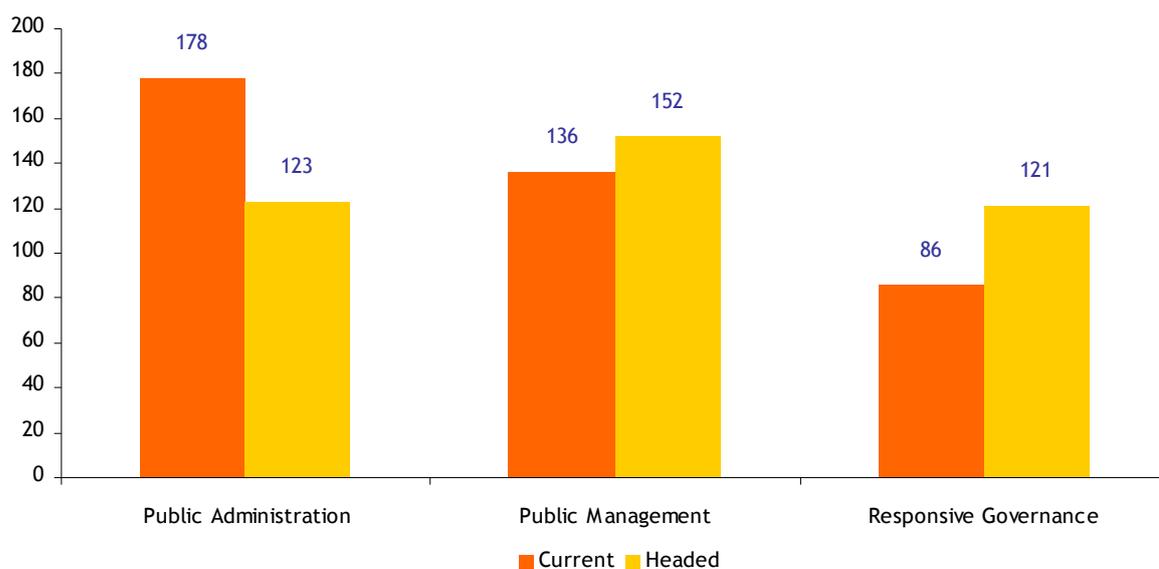
*(Generally speaking, what will be the predictable tendency of CBM in your country's administration?)*

### The context of CBM implementation: identifying macro-level conditions

Despite the descriptive nature of this project we tried to search for context factors eventually related to CBM implementation. Our strategy was to split the sample into two groups: countries that have CBM programmes and those who don't. After this we explored differences among the two groups in selected variables.

Following the ideas contained in the UN report regarding three models of administration we developed 3 indexes: public administration, public management, and responsive governance and asked respondents to score their own country's public administration current and foreseeable situation. The results are shown in figure 20.

Figure 20. Models of administration perceived by respondents (n=18)

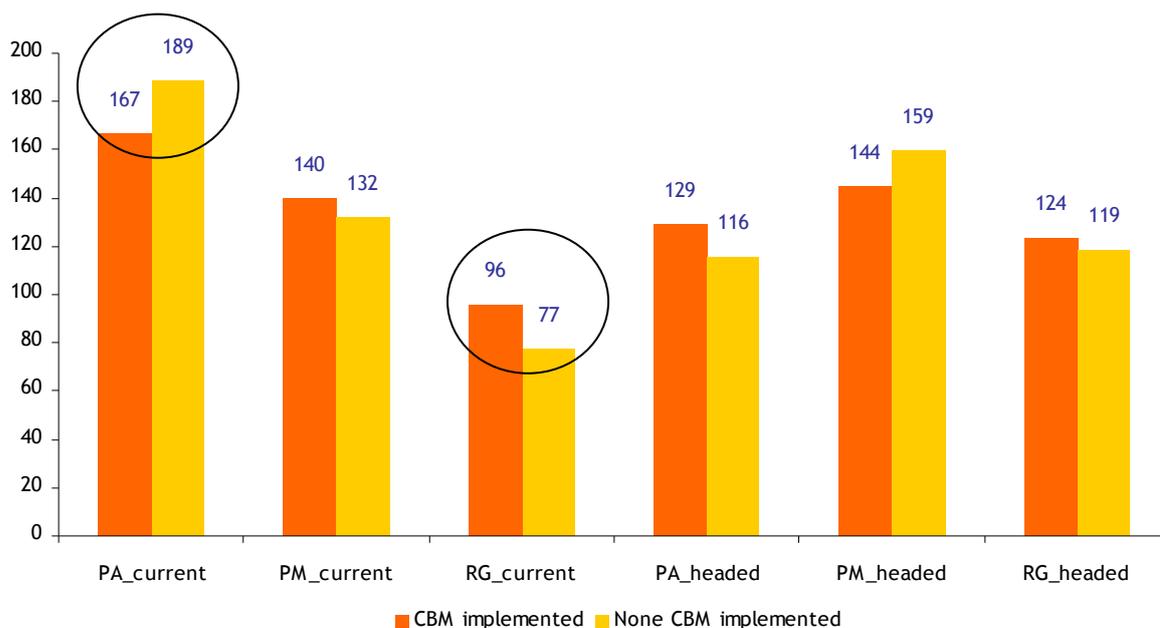


*The following presents several descriptions of public administration models. Please indicate in what way each one is similar, in general terms, to your country's public administration.*

The perception of the current situation indicates that EU administrations have more public administration characteristics and less responsible governance traits. Public management is in between. Respondents recognize a clear changing pattern in their administrations, moving to more public management and

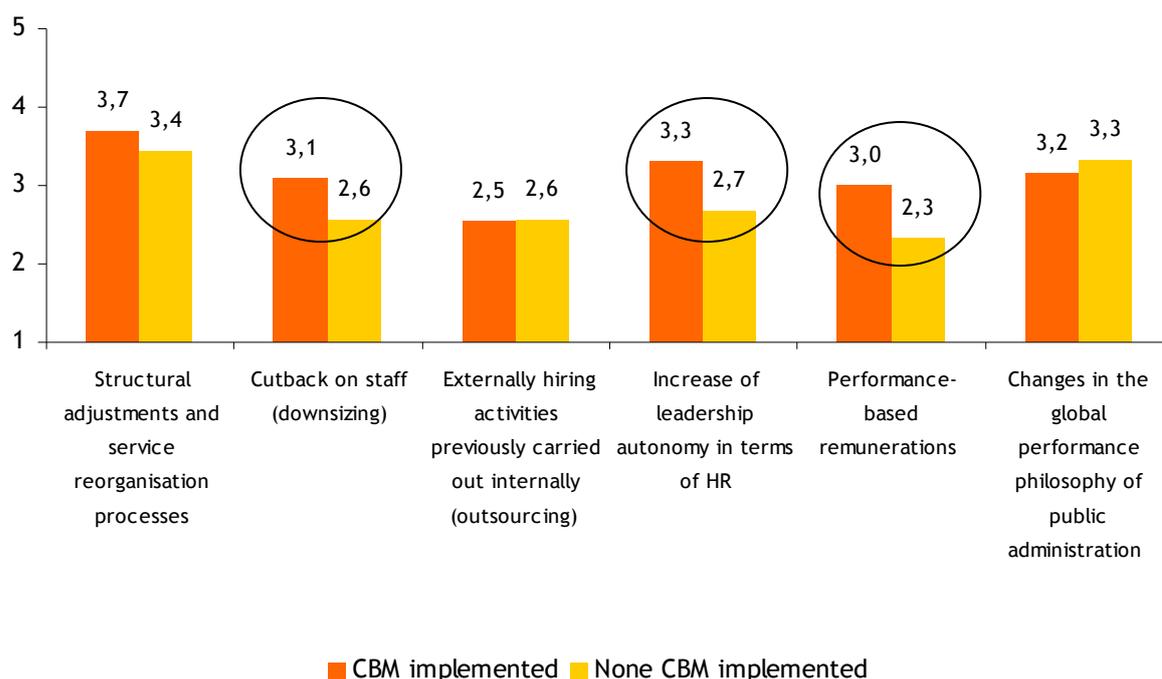
responsive governance models and less public administration models. Are these results related to having implemented CBM or not? This seems to be true (Figure 21). Member states who have CBM programmes describe their administrations as less public administration and more as responsive government.

**Figure 21. Models of administration and CBM (CBM=9; no CBM=9)**



Thinking about the impact of contextual factors in CBM coming out we also see an interesting result, which is consistent to change as a major determinant of competence movement. We asked member states to rate on a five point scale (from great impact to little impact) in what way diverse tendencies have characterised people management in their country’s public administration. Figure 22 reveals three key differences among countries with or without CBM programmes. Those who have CBM programmes report the effects of downsizing more, the increase of leadership autonomy in terms of HR management and the move to a more performance based remuneration system.

**Figure 22. Global tendencies in public administration (CBM=13; no CBM=9)**

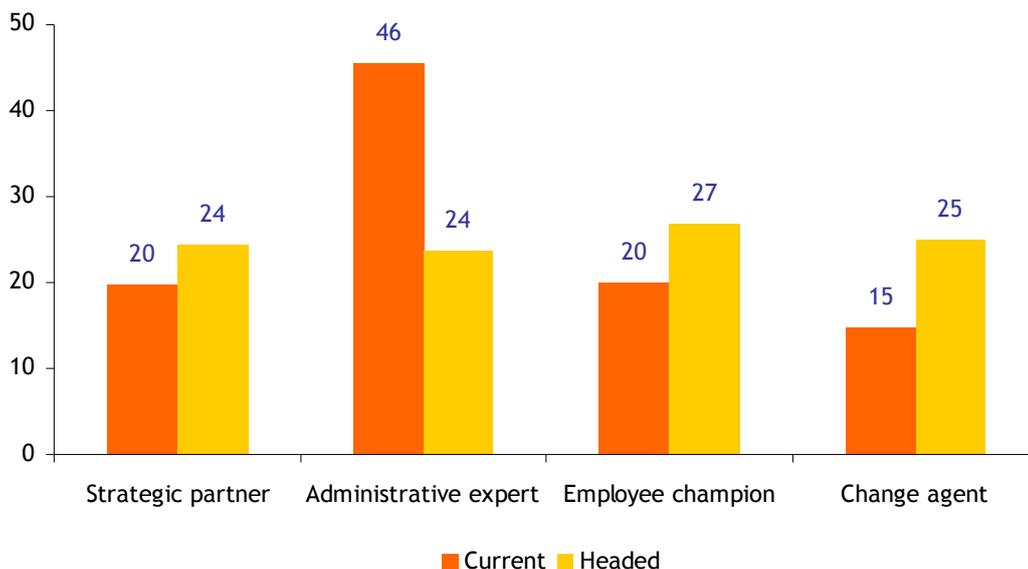


In what way have the following tendencies characterised people management in your country's public administration? Scale: 1=no impact; 5= great impact

One of the suggestions made by the UN report pertains to the role played by HR function in developing a competence approach to HR management. In line with this preoccupation we analysed the perceived roles played by HR in EU public administrations. We used Ulrich's model previously mentioned in order to study this topic. We asked respondents to characterise the role played by HRM in their country's public administration, both current and likely future situation. Global results are presented in figure 23.

As we can see, respondents describe the current role of HR as predominantly administrative. However, they perceive clear changes toward a more balanced set of the four roles: strategic partner, administrative expert, employee champion, and change agent.

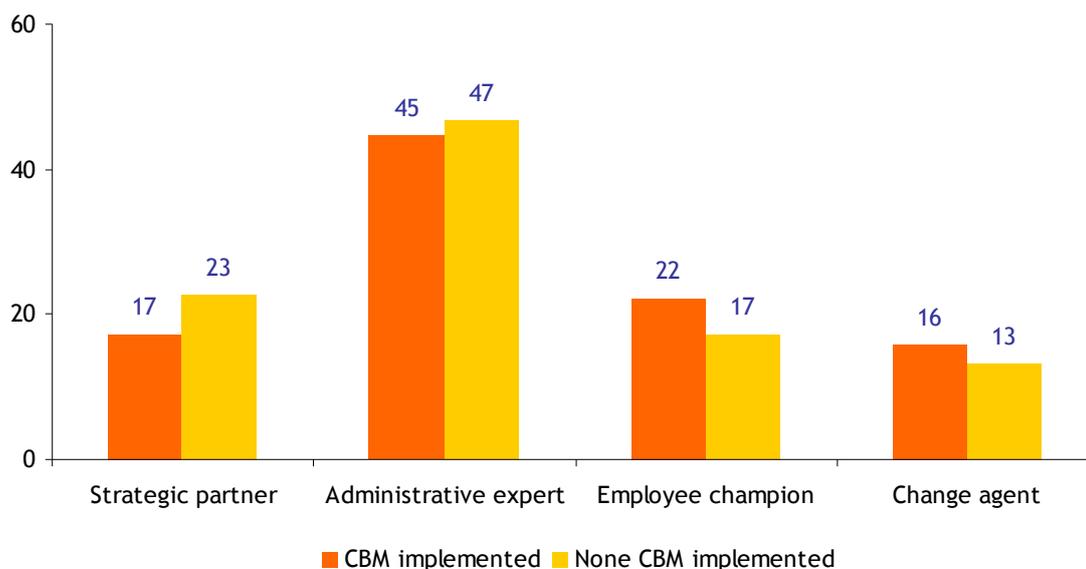
**Figure 23. Roles played by HR (n=20)**



*How do you characterise the role currently played by HRM in your country's public administration?  
Considering the predictable evolution, what will this role be like in the near future?*

As regards the relation between HR roles and the implementation of CBM programmes, we didn't found relevant differences (Figure 24).

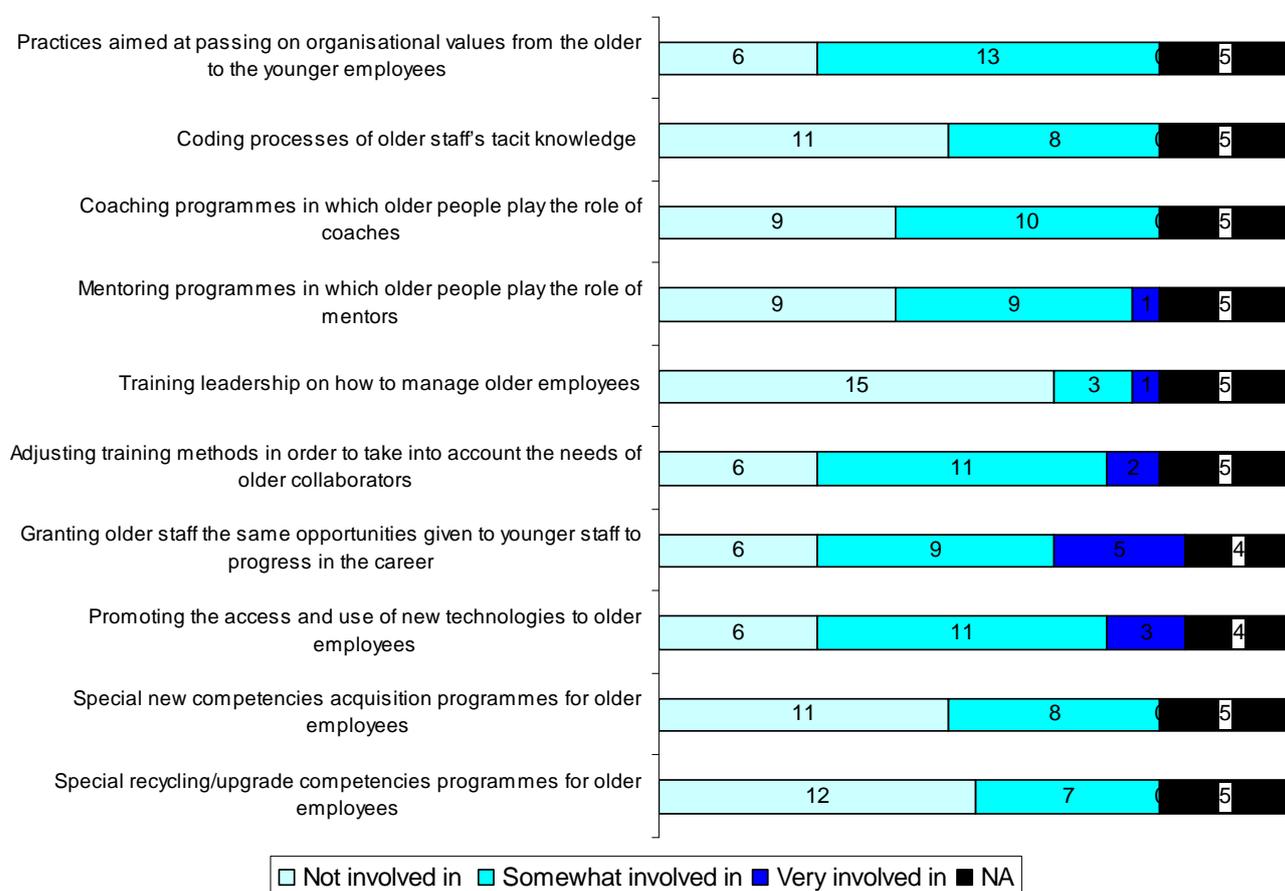
**Figure 24. Roles played by HR and CBM implementation (CBM=11; non CBM=9)**



## What about the management of older employee’s competences?

Considering that the European population is ageing, and assuming that this tendency may also, have a reflection on public administration workers, we asked member states to indicate what their country’s public administration is involved in doing. After that, respondents should indicate to what extent it is likely that in the future the state will be involved in accomplishing several actions. Results describing current situation are in figure 25.

**Figure 25. Managing older employees: current practices (n=24)**

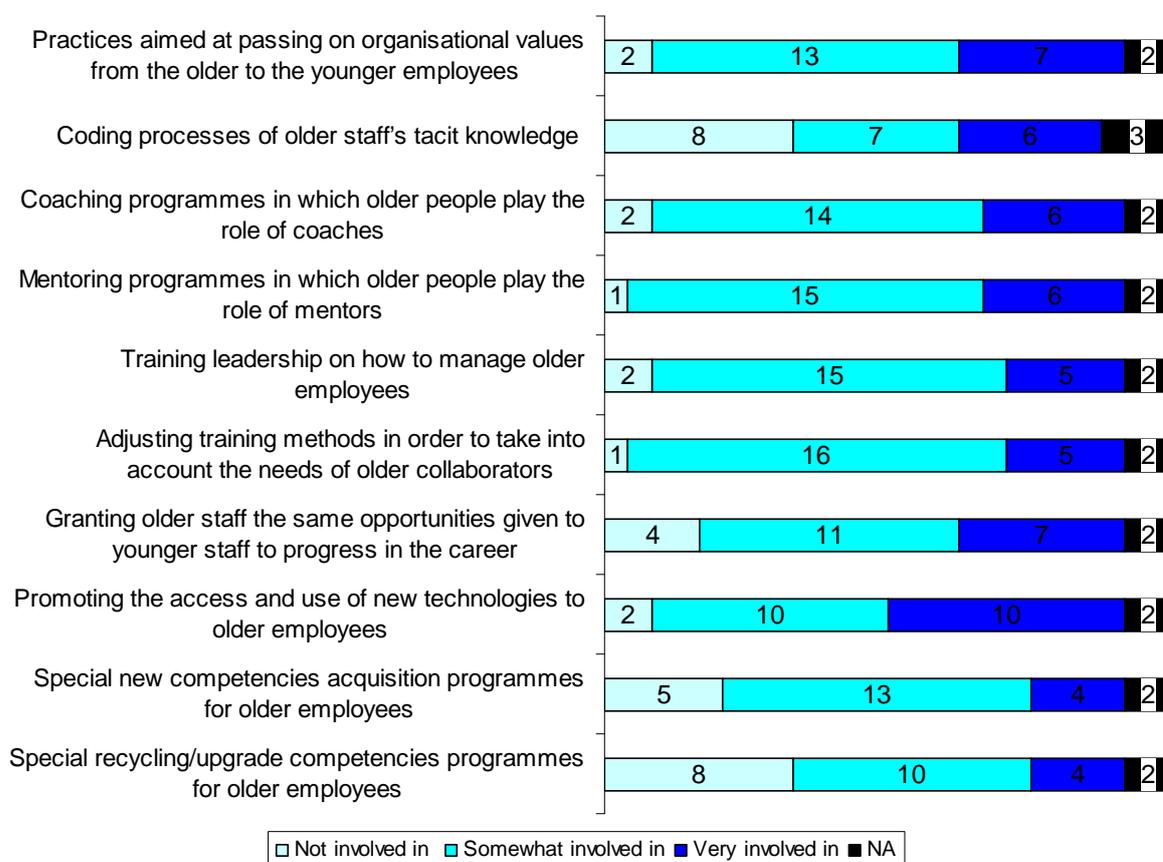


*Indicate whether in your country the State is involved or not in accomplishing each one of the actions described*

As we can see, nothing is seriously been done in order to manage older employees<sup>5</sup>. The only exception (five references) is granting older staff the same opportunities given to younger staff to progress in the career.

But it appears that things will change. Relying on respondent’s points of view, member states will be at least somewhat involved in most practices considered in this study (Figure 26).

**Figure 26. Managing older employees: current practices (n=24)**



*Now please indicate, to what extent it is foreseeable that in the near future the State will be involved in accomplishing each one of those actions*

<sup>5</sup> This subject is not without controversy. For instance Swedish respondents don't share the opinion underling questions about age and prefer speaking about generation change rather than competencies change. Nonetheless research in HR show that age is negatively associated with learning outcomes and with learning in organizational settings.

Still according to member state perspective, their countries will be very involved in promoting the access and use of new technologies for older employees (10 countries). Seven countries report high future involvement in value sharing practices and equal career opportunities.

## CONCLUSIONS

In an effort to adapt to a changing environment organizations are moving toward more flexible and responsive management models. In this context European public administrations are involved in numerous change efforts in order to increase their performance. CBM, aiming to improve HR systems, is one of the change strategies used by some member states. The initial experiences started in the 1980's (Sweden and UK) and even now some countries are developing their competence frameworks (for example Portugal).

The competence movement is complex and multifaceted. So, as expected, the 13 European Union member states that revealed the adoption of CBM programmes are using their own definitions. In spite of the differences, the central themes of CBM are covered by national definitions: focus on people instead of the job, the concern for performance, the need of behavioural evidence, the work as the context in which competencies are revealed, and the existence of several types of competencies.

State members are introducing CBM in the context of major changes and trends, such as downsizing, the changing role of managers or the introduction of changes in HR practices. In fact creating a more adequate method for selection, development, assessment or rewarding is the main problem addressed by CBM. Member states that see themselves as less public administration and more responsive are more willing to introduce CBM.

The process of implementing CBM tends to follow the tradition of centralization of each country's public administration. In the same vein, the prevalence of CBM all over public administration is different, but we notice a tendency to a selective approach. This approach can be characterized by the focus only on certain types of entities/bodies, an incremental implementation process and the focus on some professional groups and HR functions. Managers and senior and technical staff are the preferred targets.

European public administrations show a high sensitivity to the CBM approach. In fact they are using both job and organizational variables as a source of competences. This is completely aligned with the person and macro-level

orientation of competence movement. However, results are not clear on the methodological rigour used in the CBM programmes. References to specific competence identification methods, both from the individual and organizational side, are not very frequent.

Countries that are already using CBM are highly satisfied with the experiences. All 13 countries show a positive global evaluation of CBM. All of them report a tendency to improve or to broaden existing CBM programmes. Once again member state respondents are aware of the major benefits for employees, managers, and organizations.

To employees CBM can foster personal development and a better understanding of what is necessary to achieve high performance. The motivation role of CBM is highlighted in this population.

The benefits for managers are more technical. CBM programmes are giving managers more adequate decision making criteria and tools in order to effectively manage selection, evaluation and development. But CBM is also providing managers a better frame of reference to manage people.

For organizations, CBM is providing better instruments to perform conventional HR practices, such as selection, evaluation or development. But CBM is facilitating the match between organization requirements and people. This last benefit is entirely in line with one of the central features of competence notion.

European public administrations are facing the common difficulties encountered by most organizations that decided to implement CBM: the difficulty in specifying competencies and determining their verification level and problems about having a shared understanding about what competencies are and how to implement CBM practices. This might be the reason why benchmarking plays such an important role in competence identification.

We would like to stress the relevance of these two concrete difficulties because they are at the heart of the CBM and make the difference between this approach and a more functional one. As we already mentioned, one of the more recognized advantages of CBM, the possibility to link individuals to organizations through company goals and values, is strategic value. Performing correctly the inference

process from organizations to competencies and their respective verification levels is crucial if we really want to benefit from CBM.

The same can be said about the shared understanding about what competencies are and how to implement CBM. Competence movement can be a powerful communication tool aligning individuals and organizations, but they turn out to be only effective if different stakeholders share the meaning of particular competences. Finally CBM has to be implemented. Otherwise everything remains the same, with very slight changes in labels and terminology.

In this context the development of internal HR and management competencies seems to be fundamental in order to effectively use CBM. One has to remember that respondents describe the HR role in respective public administrations as predominately administrative and less strategic. The changing role and competences of HR public professionals seems to be fundamental in order to increase the effectiveness of HR practices.

However, we don't think CBM is "the" best approach to manage people. CBM is a fad, like many others in management. But management fads, if taken seriously, can provide a good pretext to experiment new practices and retain the most adequate. They are good instruments in reducing the knowing-doing gap, a common problem in organizations in general and in the public sector in particular. Effective private organizations can be characterised by having a contradictory nature: they are very conservative in their purpose and core values and, at the same time, very innovative in experimenting management practices and strategies (Collins & Porras, 1994). Public administrations are purpose and value based organizations. Generalised experimentation is what is lacking.

Concerning the competencies management for older employees European public administrations can assume a leading role. According to results even if nothing is seriously been done in order to manage older employees, in future member states will be at least somewhat involved in HR several practices for this target.

Effective HRM systems in the private sector are often described as composed by *high involvement work practices* such as employment security, selective recruiting, high wages and incentive pay, employee ownership, information sharing,

participation and empowerment, self-managed teams, training and skill development, cross-utilization and cross training, symbolic egalitarianism, wage compression, and promotion from within (Pfeffer, 1994). Most of these practices are present or can be improved in public administrations. Their implementation is what is at stake. CBM can help in this area.

Other approaches (Gratton & Truss, 2003) put emphasis on the alignment nature of effective HR. Vertical alignment is the link between HR practices and the nature of organization vision and strategic goals. Horizontal alignment is the requisite of achieving a consistent approach to HR by developing a coherent set of practices. Action alignment refers to the need to translate HR policies into real practices. Because the novelty of CBM is the integration of organizational level variables into individual profiles and tends to be used in sets of HR practices instead of particular ones, it can be a good approach to assure both vertical and horizontal alignment. But going from rhetoric to practice is essential if we don't want to jeopardise the merits of CBM.

In short, if the trend towards a more responsive model of public administration is taking place, then individual civil servants should be prepared to act accordingly. In this context CBM can play an important role in providing organizations with a basic set of enabling competences to a more effective role in society. After all, one of the most recognized contributions to the competence movement took place in a public context (McClelland, 1973) and member states who implemented CBM are very satisfied.

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