



WHITE PAPER

CAPABILITY FRAMEWORKS THAT GET USED

Designing, levelling and embedding a capability framework in an Australian organisation — and why most of them end up unread.

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CAPABILITY FRAMEWORKS THAT GET USED

Designing, levelling and embedding a capability framework

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A capability framework is a written definition of the skills, knowledge and behaviours an organisation needs, described at levels of proficiency and mapped to its roles. Well built, it gives recruitment, development, promotion and workforce planning a common reference point. Poorly built — or well built and never wired into anything — it becomes a document people can name and cannot use.

This paper sets out what a framework contains, how to level it, how to map it to roles, and how to embed it in the decisions that surround it. It is written for executives, HR leaders and public sector managers commissioning this work for the first time, or repairing a framework that did not take.

Headline argument. The difference between a framework that is used and one that is filed is not the quality of the writing. It is whether anyone is measured against it, on a cadence, with the results visible in the decisions the framework was built to inform. Most frameworks fail this test — not at design, but after launch.

4

layers in a framework that survives: groups, capabilities, levels, role profiles

12–20

capabilities is the workable range before assessment becomes unsustainable

4–5

proficiency levels, each written as an observable behaviour, not an adverb

3

questions in the audit that separates real capability infrastructure from text



WHAT THIS PAPER ARGUES

A taxonomy is not a framework. Levels, role mapping and a stated use are what turn a list of words into an instrument someone can apply to a selection panel or a promotion decision.

Levelling is where most frameworks quietly fail. If the only thing that changes between two adjacent levels is the adverb, the levels are not real.

An unmeasured framework cannot be used as evidence. Instrument the one you have, run it on a cadence, and put the results in front of the decisions it was written to inform.

Author. Pat Sheehan, Managing Director, NSC Group. This paper draws on published public sector and international frameworks and on our own consulting practice. Where a claim rests on our experience rather than published evidence, we say so.

1. WHAT A CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK IS, AND IS NOT

A competency list names the things people need to be able to do. A capability framework does three further things: it describes each capability at several levels of proficiency, it maps required levels to actual roles, and it states how the framework will be used. Those three additions are what turn a list into an instrument.

The distinction matters commercially. Organisations frequently commission a framework, receive a well-written taxonomy, and discover a year later that nothing changed — because a taxonomy on its own cannot be applied to a selection panel, a development conversation or a succession review.

2. THE FOUR LAYERS

Frameworks that survive contact with an organisation almost always share the same architecture.

- **Capability groups.** A small number of domains — commonly technical or professional practice, personal effectiveness, working with others, and leadership or stewardship of resources.
- **Capabilities.** The named capabilities inside each group, written in the organisation's own language. Between twelve and twenty is a workable range; beyond about thirty, assessment becomes a burden nobody sustains.
- **Proficiency levels.** Usually four or five, from foundational to expert or strategic, each described by what a person at that level can be observed doing.
- **Role profiles.** The required level of each capability for a role or role family, so an individual can compare where they are against what the role asks.

3. LEVELLING: WHERE FRAMEWORKS GO WRONG

Levelling is where frameworks quietly fail. Three failure patterns recur.

Adjectival levelling. Levels distinguished only by intensifiers — 'applies', 'applies effectively', 'applies expertly'. Two assessors reading the same behaviour will place it at different levels, and neither can explain why.

Seniority levelling. Levels that describe hierarchy rather than capability, so the framework simply restates the org chart and cannot identify a senior person with a capability gap or a junior person ready to progress.

Volume levelling. Levels distinguished by how much of something a person does rather than how they do it. This rewards workload, not proficiency.

What works instead

Write each level as an observable behaviour with a distinct object: what the person acts on, decides, or is accountable for changes as the level rises. A person at a foundational level applies an established method under supervision; at the top level they set the method others apply and are accountable for its consequences. If you cannot state what changes between two adjacent levels other than the adverb, the levels are not real.

4. PUBLISHED FRAMEWORKS WORTH READING FIRST

Several substantial frameworks are freely available and worth reading before commissioning anything. In Australia the Australian Public Service Commission publishes Work Level Standards and integrated leadership material; the NSW Public Sector Capability Framework is widely used and well documented; SFIA is the international reference for digital and technology roles; and industry training packages set out unit-level competencies for regulated occupations.

Each is a serious piece of work. None of them was written for your organisation. Adopting one wholesale usually produces a document staff recognise as imported, and a framework people do not recognise is a framework people do not use. The productive approach is to borrow the architecture — the number of groups, the shape of the level scale, the discipline of observable descriptors — and write the content from your own roles, values and work.

5. BUILDING ONE: A FOUR-STAGE METHOD

- **Stage one — understand the work.** Role documentation, interviews, and where practical observation. Draft nothing until the work is described in the words the people doing it use.
- **Stage two — draft and test.** Build the capability taxonomy and the proficiency scale, then test both with a representative group who will be assessed against them. The test is simple: can two people independently place the same behaviour at the same level?
- **Stage three — map roles.** Set required proficiency by capability for each role or role family, and draw the career pathways that follow from the map. This stage surfaces the uncomfortable findings — roles that require everything, pathways that dead-end, families with no lateral movement.
- **Stage four — embed.** Rewrite position descriptions, selection criteria, development conversation templates and promotion criteria to reference the framework. If this stage is out of scope, the project has no mechanism to change a single decision.

6. USING THE FRAMEWORK

Once mapped, one document supports several processes that are usually run with separate, inconsistent criteria.

- **Recruitment.** Job design and structured selection criteria drawn from the role profile rather than the last advertisement.
- **Development.** The gap between assessed and required proficiency becomes the development plan, which makes learning spend arguable.
- **Progression and promotion.** A defensible, written basis for a decision that would otherwise rest on individual judgment.
- **Workforce planning.** A capability heatmap showing where capability is concentrated and where it is thin.
- **Succession.** Which critical roles have a viable internal successor, and which do not.

7. MEASUREMENT: DOCUMENT OR INFRASTRUCTURE

A framework can be well written, well levelled and correctly mapped, and still change nothing — because nobody is measured against it. This is the most common state of capability work in large organisations: a well-designed model on an intranet, referenced occasionally in a town hall, absent from every decision it was built to inform.

A framework that is not measured cannot be used as evidence. Promotion, development spend and succession decisions then continue to be made on impression, borrowing the framework's vocabulary to give the conversation a structured appearance. That is not capability management.

Two versions of the failure recur. In the first, the framework was never instrumented at all: the engagement produced the model, the design and the launch communications, but no assessment instrument, so the framework exists as text and never as data. In the second, it was instrumented badly — a one-off self-rating survey, unnormed, never re-run, quietly dropped inside two years.

What instrumented actually means

Three conditions distinguish a measured framework from a published one. **Every capability has an assessment method** — not a self-rating quiz, but something a manager or peer can complete about another person, with defensible items and a comparison group. **Assessment runs on a cadence** — a population baseline, more frequent measurement for cohorts in development, and results compared against prior cycles so movement is visible at individual, team and organisation level. **Decisions visibly reference the results** — a promotion rationale names the capabilities where the evidence supports the move, and the ones where it does not yet.

A useful audit takes three questions, run against each capability in your framework: can you name the method that assesses it; can you show movement on it at team level over the last twelve months; and can you point to one decision in the last year where its result was referenced? The capabilities that survive all three are your real capability infrastructure. Our experience is that the number is smaller than executives expect, and often zero.

The remedy is rarely a new framework. Most existing frameworks are serviceable. The work is instrumenting the one you have, running it on a cadence, and putting the results in front of the decisions capability is meant to inform. Where a client needs validated multi-rater measurement to do that, we work alongside Influential Solutions (influential.solutions), whose instruments are built for exactly this problem.

8. WHY FRAMEWORKS FAIL AFTER LAUNCH

The common causes are structural rather than editorial.

It was bought, not built. Generic descriptors nobody recognises attract no ownership.

Nothing else changed. Position descriptions, selection criteria and performance conversations continued to reference the old criteria, so the framework had no occasion to be used.

It is too large to sustain. Assessment against fifty capabilities happens once and never again.

No owner. A framework needs a custodian with authority to update it as roles change; without one it dates within two years.

Assessment without consequence. If a capability gap does not lead to a development commitment, staff correctly conclude the exercise is administrative.

9. A SHORT COMMISSIONING CHECKLIST

- Can you state, in one sentence, the decision this framework is meant to improve?
- Are the proficiency levels distinguished by something other than adverbs?
- Have the people who will be assessed seen a draft and been able to change it?
- Is role mapping in scope, or does the engagement stop at the taxonomy?
- Which existing documents and processes will be rewritten to reference it, and who owns that work?

- Who is the custodian after handover, and when is the first scheduled review?
- How will people be assessed against it, how often, and which decisions will cite the results?

10. CONCLUSION

Capability frameworks fail for structural reasons, not literary ones. The design work — groups, capabilities, levels, role profiles — is well understood and can be done well by a competent team in a matter of months. What determines whether the framework is still in use three years later is everything that happens after the launch: whether position descriptions were rewritten, whether anyone is assessed against it, whether a promotion rationale has ever cited it, and whether a named custodian keeps it current as the work changes.

If you are commissioning this work, write the embedding into the scope from the outset. If you already have a framework and suspect it is not being used, do not start again. Run the three-question audit in section 7 against each capability, and instrument what is worth keeping.

TALK TO NSC GROUP

Talk to us about your framework

If you are commissioning a capability framework for the first time, or repairing one that did not take, we will review what you have against the three-question audit in section 7 and tell you plainly what is missing. No cost, no obligation.

nscgroup.au/contact · info@nscgroup.au · +61 401 625 132

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ABOUT NSC GROUP

NSC Group is an Australian workforce culture, organisational review and performance consultancy led by Pat Sheehan. We work with boards, executives and leadership teams on culture diagnostics, organisational review, capability frameworks and executive coaching. Learn more at nscgroup.au.

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NEXT STEP

Where to take this

If you already have a framework and suspect it has gone quiet, audit it before you rebuild it.

RUN THE AUDIT

Is your capability framework actually being used?

A short audit built on the three conditions in section 7: whether position descriptions were rewritten, whether anyone is assessed against the framework, and whether a named custodian keeps it current.

nscgroup.au/tools/framework-audit

THE SERVICE BEHIND THIS PAPER

Capability frameworks

How we scope, run and hand over the work.

nscgroup.au/services/capability-frameworks

Or start a conversation

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