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The Model for Acquiring Competencies in the State Protection Service Protection Teams in the Context of Operational Effectiveness and Reliability

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Abstract

Objectives: The article aims to present and analyze the competence acquisition model in SOP protection teams, assess the tools used to measure competences, and emphasize the significance of both specialist and interpersonal skills for operational effectiveness, motivation, and job satisfaction—illustrated through the example of SOP officers.
Methods: 1. Literature review 2. Competency model analysis 3. Case study 4. Internal methods and document analysis 5. Synthesis of findings 6. Logical inference

Results: The analysis led to the creation of a competence acquisition model for SOP protection teams, integrating both specialist and interpersonal skills. It highlights the link between competence development, motivation, and job satisfaction. Key development stages—training, internships, and ongoing learning—were identified. The model proves effective, adaptable to evolving challenges, and applicable to other uniformed services.

Conclusions: The competence acquisition model in the State Protection Service highlights that operational effectiveness depends not only on specialist training but also on the continuous development of interpersonal skills. A structured development process—from initial training to regular assessment—ensures the service's readiness in a dynamic threat environment. Motivation, openness to learning, and ongoing development are essential to prevent stagnation and retain competent personnel. The model can serve as a reference for other uniformed services aiming to improve their personnel development strategies.

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Introduction

Employee competencies are an essential element of success for individual employees and entire teams and organizations, regardless of whether it concerns the segment of the economy, business or the field of security. In highly specialized teams such as the State Protection Service (SOP) protection teams, where the requirements for employees are particularly high, acquiring and developing competencies becomes particularly important and challenging to achieve. A specialized protective team, in the context of the State Protection Service, is an operational unit composed of highly trained and skilled officers tasked with ensuring the safety of protected persons, facilities, and events. These teams carry out duties such as personal protection, route, site, and convoy reconnaissance and security, as well as technical surveillance countermeasures, both in Poland and abroad.

Legally mandated by the State Protection Service Act¹ of 2017, such teams are mission-specific, possess advanced tactical and technical training, and are equipped to respond to high-risk or sensitive scenarios. Their specialization includes the use of classified procedures, coercive measures, and cooperation with international security services when necessary.

They form the core operational component of SOP's protective mandate, combining tactical capability, intelligence support, and legal authority to protect top state officials and foreign dignitaries.

At the outset, employee competencies can be defined as skills, knowledge and personality traits that allow an employee to perform specific tasks and achieve intended goals. Over the centuries, the protection of state officials has always been entrusted to specialized and, over time, highly trained units - bodyguards, guards, or select military units (Zygadło, 2021, p. 296). In an era of constantly developing technology and current threats, especially hybrid ones, the safety of the most important state officials is an issue that requires constant adaptation, appropriate tools, modification of legal regulations, and qualified and well-trained staff (Zygadło, 2022, p. 9). In the protective teams of the State Protection Service, these competencies include both specialist knowledge and soft skills, such as communication, teamwork, stress management, and decision-making.

An effective way to acquire employee competencies is to participate in training, courses, and mentoring. Gaining experience is also a critical issue. In SOP protection teams, where specialist knowledge and the ability to work in a team are fundamental, it should be ensured that individual team members have the opportunity to participate in training conducted by experts in a given field, and the purpose of such training is both to acquire new skills and to update existing knowledge. Unfortunately, there is no quick solution for acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge — it requires time, effort, and significant financial resources.

1. Professional competencies

The concept of "competence" is analyzed based on various sciences, including psychology, pedagogy, and management, and depending on the perspective adopted, it has different meanings. The word "competence" comes from the Latin *competentia* and means suitability and compliance. Therefore, it can be said that a competent person is someone who knows how to perform specific activities (Kopaliński, 1983). The term competence, derived

¹ Ustawa o Służbie Ochrony Państwa z dnia 8 grudnia 2017 roku, Dz.U.2025.34 t.j.

from the Latin *competentia*, is understood as the possession of knowledge that allows a person to make judgments, express authoritative opinions, and operate within a defined scope of issues — a scope in which the person is qualified to make assessments due to their experience and knowledge. Thus, a competent person is someone who is properly prepared to perform specific actions (Furmanek, 1997, p. 14). On the other hand, the Dictionary of the Polish Language defines competence as the scope of powers and authorizations, the scope of action of a body of authority or an organizational unit, and the scope of someone's knowledge, responsibility and skills. On this basis, it can be stated that a competent person is someone authorized to make decisions and act, having the basis and qualifications to express judgments and assessments.²

The idea of employee competency management was popularized by D. McClelland, who used the concept of competence to define the criterion responsible for people's success at work. In a 1973 article in *The American Psychologist*, he contrasted job competence with criteria for evaluating and selecting employees, such as formal qualifications and general intelligence. The author argued that „if we want to find out who will be a good policeman, we must find out what good police officers do” (McClelland, 1973, p. 7). This approach focuses on specific employee behaviors that promote effectiveness in a given job, rather than on intellectual abilities or formal education, which may or may not be utilized on the job.

Due to the form of social activity, competencies are interpreted as the ability to perform tasks in a given area or perform functions by accepted standards (Rakowska, 200, p. 9). In the professional sense, competencies are dispositions manifested in the scope of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, allowing professional tasks to be performed at the appropriate required level. Knowledge is understood here as knowledge of facts (I have information on a subject), of principles and laws (I know why it is so), and of subjects of action (I know the conditions of my actions). Knowledge understood in this way results in the ability to perform a specific action in an appropriate way (Kossakowska & Sołtysińska, 2002, p. 14).

The term "competence" also describes the dispositions a person achieves throughout their life through learning. They indicate the level of competence that determines effective action in a given field. An important element in the definition of competence is attitudes. They manifest the characteristics of a person, especially their value systems, motives for action, skills, self-image and attitude to their social role.

There are many definitions of employee competencies, but in the most general terms, it can be assumed that it is a set of knowledge, skills, capabilities and characteristics of the employee that the employer needs or, in other words, the employer's expectations towards the employee.

When discussing competencies, it is worth noting that they should not be confused with qualifications. Qualifications are primarily what we can learn to be able to perform in a specific profession. On the other hand, competencies, apart from knowledge, also include the employee's skills, characteristics and predispositions. Qualifications are a component of competencies. Qualifications and competencies co-exist and also mutually condition each other. Specific competencies are needed, e.g., to learn, while acquiring specific qualifications enables the development and deepening of competencies.

² *Słownik języka polskiego*, Wydawnictwo PWN, Warszawa 2005, s. 348

The concept of professional competencies is also associated with such concepts as "profession", "professional tasks", and "skills". A profession is a set of professional tasks distinguished as a result of the social division of labor, requiring appropriate professional qualifications. The concept of "professional tasks" is understood as a stage of work within a profession with a clearly defined beginning and end. A set of professional activities related to the purpose of the action ends with a specific product, service or decision. Skills are the ability to perform activities to fulfil a professional task (Kwiatkowski, 2024).

Competencies within the context of protective teams refer to the integrated set of knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes required to effectively perform tasks related to the protection of individuals, facilities, and sensitive operations. These competencies enable team members to operate in dynamic, high-risk, and politically sensitive environments, while ensuring the safety, legality, and operational success of their mission.

2. Selected types and divisions of professional competencies

Professional competencies are skills, knowledge and character traits that allow one to perform a specific job effectively and efficiently. Professional competencies can be divided into several categories, depending on the specific context or criteria. There are many categories and numerous divisions and distinctions in the literature on the subject, e.g. according to the level, professional competencies can be divided into basic competencies (e.g. the ability to read and write), key competencies (e.g. the ability to work in a team) and specialist competences (e.g. the ability to use a specific tool or computer program). According to the type of skills, professional competencies can be divided into technical, interpersonal, organizational and creative. We can also divide competencies according to how they are acquired, i.e. competencies acquired at school (e.g. through formal education) and competencies acquired in the workplace (e.g. through professional experience and training).

We can also distinguish several types of professional competencies, such as:

- Technical competencies, i.e. skills related to the operation of machines and tools, the operation of software or the ability to use a specialist language.
- Interpersonal competencies, i.e., skills related to working in a group, such as the ability to work in a team, as well as communication and negotiations.
- Organizational competencies, i.e. skills in team management, planning and coordinating work, and budgeting and settling projects.
- Personality competencies, i.e., those related to the individual implementation of tasks, affect the overall quality of their execution (speed of work, conscientiousness, or accuracy).
- Social competencies, i.e. the ability to communicate and cope with emotions (essential in conflict situations in the work environment) or motivational skills.

Another division is the division into:

- Physical competences, which refer to the physical capabilities of the employee. Some professions and occupations may require greater physical fitness, e.g., construction workers, soldiers, or police officers, and some less, such as office workers, programmers, or translators.

- Knowledge competences, which are necessary in most professions. The employee needs specific knowledge in the field they are involved in, e.g. an architect must know about building design or the strength of materials.

There is also a division into competencies in terms of style of action. Such competencies have a vast scope. The action style can differ: fast, slow, effective or less. Each profession requires a different style of action.

The next, and probably the most common among employers, is the division into soft and hard skills. Soft skills refer to personal skills, our characteristics, way of acting and perception of the environment. Soft skills are a set of skills that allow for effective communication and cooperation with other people. Soft skills include, among others (Fastnacht, 2006):

- Communication skills: the ability to effectively convey thoughts and emotions and to listen and understand others.
- Teamwork skills: the ability to cooperate with other people, share responsibilities and support each other.
- Negotiation skills: the ability to resolve conflicts and reach compromises.
- Empathy: the ability to understand and feel other people's emotions.
- Assertiveness is the ability to take responsibility for one's decisions and express one's needs and opinions.
- Ability to work under stress: coping with various difficulties and under time pressure.

Hard skills, also known as technical skills, are specific skills and abilities related to a given profession or a specific field of knowledge, i.e., specific skills we possess. Hard skills include for example, knowledge of foreign languages, specialist programming languages, and specialist knowledge related to the operation of specialist machines or devices.

Soft skills are important in many different professional situations because they allow one to communicate better with others and work more effectively in teams. They are often more important than technical skills because they allow one to deal better with people and situations. On the other hand, hard skills are important for many professions because they allow one to perform specific tasks and responsibilities related to a given profession.

All the mentioned types and divisions of professional competencies hold a key place in the functioning of protective teams. Technical (hard) competencies provide the specialized skills necessary for protective tasks, such as firearms handling, tactics, and knowledge of legal procedures. Soft (interpersonal) competencies are equally important, enabling effective communication, teamwork, stress management, and decision-making in crisis situations. Physical competencies ensure readiness for quick and effective action, while organizational and knowledge-based competencies allow proper planning and coordination of operations. In practice, the effectiveness of protective teams results from the harmonious integration of all these competencies, which together form the essential qualification set needed to protect individuals, property, and successfully carry out missions in diverse and often demanding environments.

3. Noel Burch's Ladder of Competence on the Example of the State Protection Service

The four-stage competency model, also known as the four learning phases, learning matrix or the ladder of conscious competencies, describes the different stages of acquiring competencies and illustrates the universal learning process. The Competence Ladder, authored as two factors influencing the acquisition of new competencies. Mastering new skills is a complex process that requires time, determination, discipline and readiness to face difficulties. Mastering new skills is a complex process that requires time, determination, discipline and readiness to face difficulties.

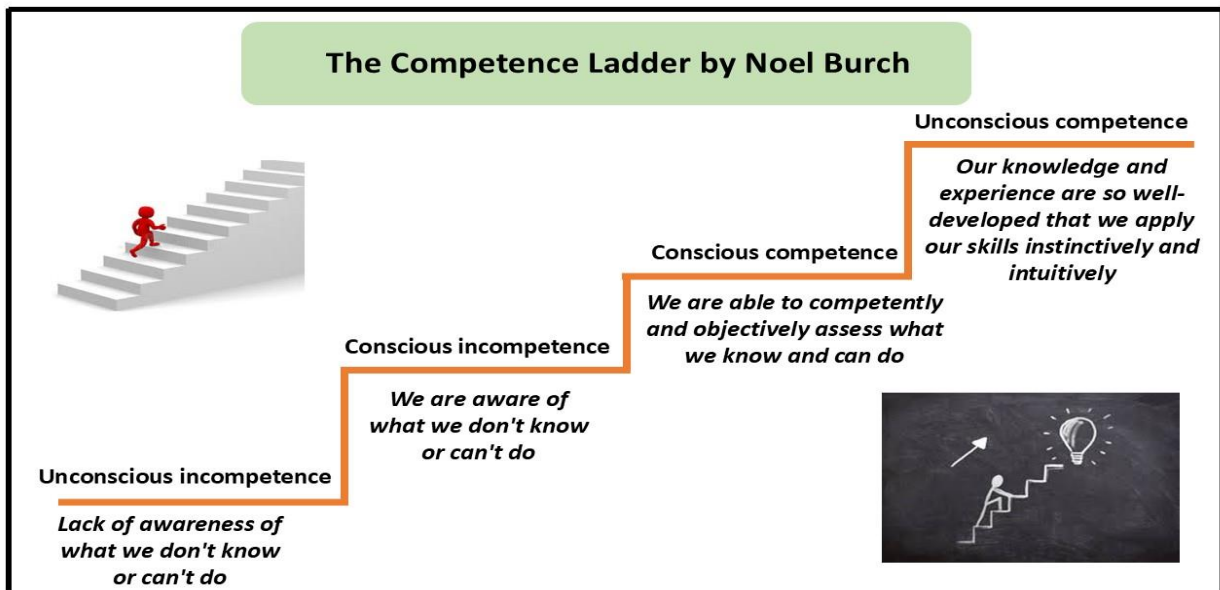


Fig. 1. Noel Burch's Ladder of Competencies
Source: own study

The Competence Ladder is a model that describes the following levels of learning (Burch, 2019):

Stage 1 – Unconscious incompetence (I don't know that I don't know) – At this stage, the employee is not aware of their own incompetence. They do not know or understand how something works, so they perform certain tasks incorrectly. At this stage, the employee also has no need or motivation to change it. It also happens that some people question the usefulness of certain skills. The State Protection Service sees newly recruited officers as unaware of what they do not know yet. Even if a new officer already possesses certain skills (analytical or physical, such as hand-to-hand combat or weapons handling), at this stage, an officer—even with specialist knowledge—is not yet able to effectively apply them to fulfill the duties.

Stage 2 – Conscious incompetence – this is the stage where employees become aware of the lack of specific skills and the desire to change this state. They must realize that acquiring new skills will be of great value to them and allow them to move on to the following stages. At this stage in the State Protection Service, officers—after some time in service or following specific interventions or situations they have faced—become aware of the shortcomings in their skills. It is also the stage when officers willingly participate in training and actively seek further development opportunities and training.

Stage 3 – Conscious competence – this is the stage at which employees already have knowledge and skills and are able to use them in practice. However, at this stage, when using new skills, intense concentration is necessary. Only regular exercises will make it possible to use this knowledge naturally, without needing concentration.

This stage is the moment when officers of the State Protection Service can be assigned to protection teams. Unfortunately, in the SOP, reaching this stage is a time-consuming and costly process. The most difficult part is retaining an officer at this stage.

Stage 4 – Unconscious competence – An example is employees or officers with many years of experience who use their skills almost automatically and can teach others. In other words, this is the mastery level. Unfortunately, there is also a downside. People who have reached the top of the competence ladder may believe they already know everything, which can lead to reluctance to further develop, maintain their level of competence, and close themselves off to new knowledge. This is equivalent to regression.

Maintaining the last rung of the ladder of competence in the State Protection Service is very difficult. Often, an SOP officer, having achieved this masterful level of competence, is promoted to a position where he no longer uses his skills to the fullest. After some time, an officer may regress on the competence ladder. To prevent this, officers must undergo continuous training. Due to excessive physical and mental strain, an officer may not be able to maintain the highest level of competence. The worst outcome for the unit is when such an officer leaves the service. This situation is due, among other factors, to the lack of career advancement opportunities and the prospect of earning significantly more in the private sector.

A positive feature of the described model is that if a promoted officer no longer uses some of his competencies, he develops others, e.g., managerial or analytical. In this way, although he regresses in some competencies, he climbs to a higher level in others. The Competence Ladder is not just a general model that applies only to newly hired employees or officers. The employee overcomes individual rungs of the ladder with each new competence he acquires.

4. The model of acquiring competences functioning in the State Protection Service

The State Protection Service is a complex action system (Zajko, 2020, pp. 9-44), an integral component of the state security system. It ensures the continuity of governance and the ability to carry out vital constitutional, governmental, and strategic functions crucial for the state and its international reputation. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the security system for individuals protected by the State Protection Service encompasses the implementation of various processes and tasks, both to ensure national security and to guarantee undisturbed conditions for those individuals to carry out their duties (Zygadło, 2022, p.16) The specificity of the various tasks performed by officers of the State Protection Service requires a high level of general knowledge, above-average physical fitness and specialist skills, i.e. several competencies enabling them to perform their tasks efficiently and effectively.

Professional competencies have varying degrees of intensity. An officer with minimal knowledge and skills to work in a given position has critical or threshold competencies. High competencies, in turn, indicate high work efficiency and should be expected from experienced officers. Conversely, incompetence is manifested by a set of undesirable behaviours that reduce or prevent the effective performance of professional tasks (Whiddett & Hollyforde, 2003, p. 13) Achieving an appropriate level of training requires officers to undergo at least several years of

diversified training and professional development, as well as adequate financing and training infrastructure.

The State Protection Service looks for candidates' predispositions and competencies useful for the formation during the recruitment process. Candidates are filtered and profiled during the analysis of applications for admission to the service, candidates' CVs and job interviews. Then, pre-selected candidates are tested in exams, verifying their psycho-physical competencies.

After being accepted into service, SOP officers acquire competencies mainly during training and courses. All officers at the beginning of their service start with basic training. Then, during the service, they increase their competencies during specialist training, profiled depending on the tasks a given officer performs. It is worth emphasizing that the State Protection Service does not limit itself to training within the formation but also widely uses external training, drawing on the knowledge of other services and institutions. SOP also uses tools based on modern technologies to train officers. Such tools include a multimedia shooting range or an IT threat simulation system.

At an advanced stage of their competencies, officers undergo exercises "on a live organism", i.e. as close as possible to the conditions in which they work daily. Public utility facilities such as schools, hospitals, railway stations or shopping centres are used for these exercises during normal functioning.

After completing specialist training and passing the required exams, SOP officers also undergo mandatory internships before being assigned to protection teams, where they operate under the supervision of experienced colleagues. During the internship, the officer applies the acquired skills and, most importantly, is observed and evaluated in terms of work style and competencies. Officers may be assigned to a specific protection team only after completing this entire process, passing multiple exams, and receiving a positive assessment. Naturally, this is carried out in accordance with the operational needs of the service.

Table 1. SWOT analysis of the competency acquisition model used in SOP

S – strenghts	W – weeknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Solid training 2. Maintaining an optimal level of competence 3. Enables effective and reliable implementation of tasks 4. Professional development of officers 5. Training of specialists within the formation 6. Confidence in action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. High costs 2. Requires much work from both trainers and officers 3. Requires time 4. Training groups too small
O – opportunities	T – threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Professional development of officers 2. Education of future command staff 3. Acquiring financial resources motivated by training 4. Establishing cooperation with specialist scientific and academic centres 5. Exchange of knowledge and experience with other services and institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Too little training infrastructure 2. High physical load on officers 3. Large number of security measures implemented 4. No possibility of providing officers with rest (between training and task implementation) 5. Lack of financing to enable the implementation of the training process

Source: own study

The strength of this model is undoubtedly the solid training of officers, which allows for the effective and reliable implementation of tasks. The weakness of the model used in the SOP is that it is costly, requires much work and is very stretched in time. Training a security officer takes at least several years. This model also has limitations, such as the SOP training infrastructure, which is too small for training needs, and the many security measures implemented, especially recently in connection with the armed conflict in Ukraine. The burden of implementing security measures on officers and the need to provide them with rest significantly hinders the implementation of the optimal amount of training and extends the entire process in time.

5. Methods of measuring competences in the State Protection Service

For the protection system of the most important persons in the state to become more effective and efficient, its organization and functionality should be systematically assessed according to established criteria (Zajko, 2020, p. 279) In the case of the SOP, part of the evaluation of the protection system is the assessment of the competencies of its officers. Competency measurement methods are used both in individual work with a client (e.g. as part of a coaching service) and in human resources management in organizations (e.g. recruitment and selection, periodic assessment, evaluation of the effectiveness of development activities).

In order to determine the level of training of a given officer in the State Protection Service, the following methods of measuring competence are used:

- examinations;
- certification;
- evaluation;
- assessment.

The classic form of measuring competencies is exams, after passing which officers receive certificates enabling them to move on to the following stages of training.

Evaluation is an essential and valuable element of measuring professional competencies. The State Protection Service allows for selecting effective training, assessing its effectiveness and verifying whether the intended goals have been achieved. Evaluation is also used to improve future training programs and document the effects of training to develop training programs so that they are effective and benefit officers and the organization.

Assessment as a method of measuring competences is very often and willingly used in the State Protection Service, because it allows for obtaining a subjective assessment of officers from people who work with them. Opinions on individual officers supplement exam results and are issued not only by instructors, trainers and superiors, but also by co-workers and members of teams in which a given officer performs tasks. It is beneficial when assessing interpersonal skills or other personality traits that are difficult to measure objectively. Assessments include not only specialist knowledge or specific technical skills, but also soft skills, such as interpersonal and teamwork skills, work efficiency and time management, or the ability to solve problems and make decisions, especially in stressful situations. The purpose of assessments is to obtain an assessment of professional competences, which can be used to determine the direction of the officer's further professional development.

Summary

Having the right professional competencies is extremely important these days, especially in highly specialized teams. Due to the development and evolution of threats, SOP officers are faced with increasingly higher requirements. In order to acquire the necessary competences, you should use various available methods, such as training and courses and exchange of experiences between services. It is also important to constantly improve qualifications by learning new technologies and broadening horizons by participating in team projects and cooperating with specialists from various fields.

It is worth remembering that acquiring competencies is a continuous process that is very expensive and requires hard work. However, in the case of SOP officers, it brings tangible benefits in ensuring the continuity of the state's functioning, which is key to the survival and development of every country. Each country has a formation whose task is to ensure the safety of people in the most important positions. The idea of functioning of such formations has nothing to do with the so-called privileges of power, contrary to some opinions. President of the United States Bill Clinton, in one of his interviews, answering a question about the need for protection, said that as a president elected to this position by citizens: "he owes the country to stay alive". Taking care of the safety of a specific group of people is neither their privilege nor their right but is an obligation to the state and its citizens. A successful attack on a high-ranking government official can cause many undesirable events in the international arena or disrupt the political, military or social situation in a given country, region or even the world. Therefore, comprehensively trained officers of the State Protection Service are not only a staff base for protection teams dealing with the security and protection of the management bodies of the Republic of Poland and the highest representatives of foreign delegations staying in the territory of the Republic of Poland. SOP officers are also the calling card of the formation and the country, carrying out tasks outside the borders of the Republic of Poland, accompanying protected persons during foreign trips, and carrying out protection tasks in diplomatic missions of the Republic of Poland.

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