Competency Assessment as a Tool for Public Service Transformation: A case study in Korea

This case study was prepared in the context of the 2017-2019 OECD multicountry project on civil service leadership focussing on a variety of challenges and practices relating to the changing nature of leadership in the public sector. It was peer reviewed at a workshop with the ten countries participating in the project. The case study analyses the implementation of the senior civil service competency assessment system in the Korean civil service as a tool to improve leadership competencies, while also contributing to a change in culture towards competency based leadership in place of prioritising seniority and command/control leadership.
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Introduction

The definition of leadership competencies and their application in public sector contexts is a growing trend identified across OECD countries. The approach recognises that public service leadership, regardless of the specific stream or function, has some cross-cutting traits. OECD countries use competency models to select their senior civil servants, develop their skills, and assess their achievements. As such, they are increasingly central to management of the most senior public managers.

A 2010 OECD study on competency management suggested that countries implement competency systems for a variety of reasons. This included creating flexibility, increasing efficiency and effectiveness of people management, providing clarity over employees’ development priorities, overcoming the classic bureaucratic model, strengthening government competitiveness, creating a flexible and highly professional civil service that easily adapts to the challenges confronting government, a vehicle for organisational and cultural change, or strategic alignment between the individual and the organisation.

In 2017 the OECD published “Skills for a High Performing Civil Service” which presented a new way to look at the skills and competencies needed in the civil services of today and tomorrow. It highlights skills sets to maximise public value in 4 areas where the civil service connects with the outside society:

- Policy advice and analysis: Civil servants work with elected officials to inform policy development. However, new technologies, a growing body of policy-relevant research, and a diversity of citizen perspectives, demand new skills for effective and timely policy advice.

- Service delivery and citizen engagement: Civil servants work directly with citizens and users of government services. New skills are required for civil servants to effectively engage citizens, crowdsource ideas and co-create better services.

- Commissioning and contracting: Not all public services are delivered directly by public servants. Governments throughout the OECD are increasingly engaging third parties for the delivery of services. This requires skills in designing, overseeing and managing contractual arrangements with other organisations.

- Managing networks: Civil servants and governments are required to work across organisational boundaries to address complex challenges. This demands skills to convene, collaborate and develop shared understanding through communication, trust and mutual commitment.

Leadership is seen as essential not only to lead a strategic orientation to each of these areas, but to spark innovation in the way they are joined together to drive value for citizens, business and society at large. This suggests that leaders need an understanding of all of these aspects, but that alone is not enough. They need to be values-driven and capable of employing a variety of leadership styles in different situations. They need to be trusted political advisors, engaged social partners, and inspirational civil service leaders. This suggests a clear need of leadership competencies that weave these elements together and look to the future. This stands in contrast to more traditional forms of leadership where the most senior person is given authority to command and control in a top-down manner.

This case study looks at how Korea has implemented a competency model and assessment process. Based on interviews with a range of informants within the public sector, and in academia, the case study shows how Korea has used its competency assessment system as
a tool not only to improve the leadership competencies of its senior civil servants, but as a tool to transform the culture of the civil service. The case study introduces Korea’s civil service, describes the model and the assessment process, and concludes with questions for reflection and discussion at the NSG meeting, hosted by Korea in October 2019.

The Korean Senior Civil Service

Korea’s career civil service system has traditionally been career-oriented. Korea’s modern civil service system began in 1949 with the National Civil Service Act. Despite various reforms since then, the systems continued to be structured around rank-in-person and closed-carrier system principles. Then, as the country struggled with the financial crisis in 1997, the Korean government realised the urgent need to initiate government reforms that would enhance workforce competency, while emphasizing competitiveness, openness, performance, and accountability. Within this context, the Civil Service Commission (CSC) was established in 1999 and started to introduce and enhance merit-based personnel policies such as the open competitive position system and the development of a Senior Civil Service (SCS).

The SCS was finally adopted in 2006 in order to develop a highly skills senior leadership cadre that could be counted on to support the government in developing and implementing better public policy, regardless of ministerial specialisation. The hope was to place high-level officials in the right positions across the government, thereby busting administrative silos, encouraging openness and competition within the government, and strengthening responsibility for government performance.

About 1,500 senior civil servants are currently classified and managed as SCS, and most of them are positioned at deputy ministers and director-generals in the central government. Some of the positions are open to the broader public in order to encourage private-sector experts’ integration into the senior civil service, while others are staffed internally to encourage inter-ministerial competition and to facilitate collaboration among ministries.

Before the introduction of SCS, high-level officials ranked between grade 1-3 (1=highest) were usually appointed according to their seniority, but today’s SCS system combines those ranks so they effectively no longer exist and ministers can staff their SCS positions according to the needed competency and speciality. To support that, the Korean government designed the senior civil servants’ remuneration to reflect the importance and difficulty of job, and its performance, rather than civil servants’ seniority or grade. Senior civil servants set performance agreements with their superiors, who are typically vice-ministers or deputy-ministers, and their performance is annually evaluated and reflected in their remuneration. Poor performers are subject to qualification screening to determine whether they could continue to perform duties as senior civil servants.

A candidate who wants to become a senior civil servant must first go through a strict competency assessment centre which lasts one day and assesses candidate’s leadership competencies through four different interactive tests. Candidates who pass the leadership assessment centre are then subject to personnel screening conducted by the Appointment Screening Committee of the Ministry of Personnel Management, and those who pass this screening are finally selected and staffed at SCS level positions.
Korea’s first competency model was developed in 1999, when they introduced the open competitive position system (OPS), which designates approximately 20% of senior positions in the national government as open to external competition. The competency model for the OPS positions was comprised of five core competencies: expertise, strategic leadership, problem-solving ability, managerial capability, and communication & negotiation skills.

In the early 2000s, National Competency Standards began to be discussed and developed in Korea across relevant ministers. In 2001, the CSC developed a Government Standard Competency Dictionary as a reference for developing the competencies of general civil servants, including senior officials, to be used as foundation for their job analysis, job-performance payment system (introduced in 2002), and for developing a future reform agenda in government personnel policies. The common competencies were described as 19 standard competencies which included ethics, organizational commitment, teamwork, customer-oriented, professionalism, business acumen, information management, problem recognizing and understanding, self-control, communication, vision, adaptability, strategic thinking, coaching & development, resource management, effective implementation, political wit, coordination and integration, and negotiation.

The competency model for the SCS assessment, developed in 2003, included 9 core competencies: recognizing & understanding problems, strategic thinking, result-orientation, professionalism, leading innovation, visioning, coordination and integration, communication, and customer-orientation. It was the result of job analysis on over 1,400 positions, benchmarking on international cases, and consultation with private experts. In 2009, Some of the original competencies were simplified and combined to form the current SCS model based on six competencies.

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<th>Competency group</th>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>Strategic thinking</td>
<td>Set long-term vision and goals, and make implementable action plan with clear priorities</td>
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<td>Problem recognition</td>
<td>Timely recognize problems after information analysis, and identify the core of problems through analyzing various related issues</td>
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<td>Performance orientation</td>
<td>Devise various plans to maximize job performance, and pursue effectiveness and efficiency in the process of goal achievement</td>
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<td>Working</td>
<td>Change management</td>
<td>Understand the trends and flow of environmental change, and take measures to let individuals and organization appropriately respond and adapt to changing circumstances</td>
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<td>Relating</td>
<td>Client satisfaction</td>
<td>Think of work partners as clients, understand their needs, and try to meet them</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coordination and integration</td>
<td>Understand the interests and conflicts among stakeholders, and suggest rational solutions in a balanced perspective</td>
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From 2004, the CSC started to develop assessment modules. Based on the nine SCS core competencies, the Korean government designed a package of pilot simulation tests, assessor’s guide, and checklist for implementation; which was reviewed and completed after workshops with senior civil servants, interviews with experts and HR managers, and pilot tests. They designed it in the format of the assessment centre (AC), which is a package of tests designed to allow assesses to demonstrate competencies needed for a given role under standardized and controlled conditions.
In 2005, they trained 155 assessors, and in 2006, CSC introduced the SCS candidate program as a mandatory process for civil servant candidates, and finally in June 2006, the first competency assessment was conducted. The original assessment was implemented as six types of exercises on nine competencies, which was simplified to four types of exercises on six competencies in 2009. The number of assessors has increased from seven to nine since 2010.

Assessment exercises

The competency assessment for SCS candidates is conducted in a way to appraise how candidates behave and respond to simulated policy situations in a closed assessment centre. The assessment takes place in a single day, which includes a short orientation followed by four assessment exercises.

Table 2. Four assessment exercises

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<thead>
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<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Time</th>
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| 1:1 Role Play    | Conducts press interviews, staff coaching, action plan presentations | Preparation 30’  
|                  |                                                         | Role play 30’  |
| 1:2 Role Play    | Resolves conflicts and disagreements in a constructive manner | Preparation 30’  
|                  |                                                         | Role play 30’  |
| Group Discussion | Negotiates and coordinates interagency issues            | Preparation 40’  
|                  |                                                         | Discussion 50’  |
| In-Basket        | Finds solutions to various problems in a timely manner   | Preparation 50’  
|                  |                                                         | Interview 30’  |

The 1:1 role play is a simulation exercise where one assessor and the candidate play their assigned roles to address a specific situation. Assessors can be a superior, co-worker, subordinate, or a reporter as defined in the scenario, and the candidate is expected to report, discuss, coach, present and/or interview with the appraiser to address/solve the situation.

The 1:2 role play is an simulation exercise where two assessors and the candidate play their assigned roles to address a situation. Candidate can play various roles in the given simulative situations, such as a mediator for conflicted stakeholders or a decision-maker facing a difficult problem with a complex background.

Group discussions are simulations where three candidate and one assessor join in the exercise. It’s different from 1:2 role play in that they are expected to reach an agreement on a specific problem. They play diverse stakeholders in a specific situation, and are expected to advocate their own interests and discuss different ideas and interests of other stakeholders. They’re expected to protect their own interests based upon data and evidence provided in the materials, but they’re also expected to settle upon a mutual agreement in the given discussion period.

The In-basket exercise is a simulation where documents are piled up in the basket and need to be handled by the candidate. For 50 minutes, the candidate is expected to read and understand a simulated problem and to think about how he/she will make decisions and orders to address it. Candidates are also expected to write a simple note to summarise his/her ideas on it. After that, an assessor conducts an interview with the candidate based upon the note and assesses how the candidate understood the problem and tried to address it while making use of the competencies needed for SCS.

The exercises are simulated but based on realistic situations set in modern work environments. Candidates’ answers are expected to be based upon the descriptions and data provided in the material. There are no single correct answers for any simulation and
this aims to equalise chances regardless of whether a candidate is familiar with the subject matter of the case. Assessors rate each candidate based upon how the candidates demonstrated their six competencies through the 4 exercises regardless of their subject matter expertise.

Assessment Implementation

Assessors rate each category of competency on a scale from 0 to 5 (5 = high) while participating in one of the 4 exercises. Then, after all four exercises, all the assessors meet to discuss what they observed and how they scored the candidate. Final scores for each candidate are discussed among assessors in order to prevent errors and ensure fair assessment. Candidates must achieve a minimum average scores of 2.5 points out of 5 to pass. The test result is notified to ministries within 3 days, and a feedback report is sent to the candidate, which includes the result (pass or fail), general level of competency, positive and negative behaviours observed in each competency element, and tailored advice on competency development.

Box 1. The Assessors of the Korean competency assessment system

Assessors can be former or current senior civil servants recommended by central ministries, professional experts and professors in the field of public administration, personnel management, business management, or psychology. As of 2018, there is a pool of around 500 assessors.

Since it is very important for the assessors to share a common understanding for the assessment, the Korean government designed a mandatory comprehensive training programme for assessor candidates. This 11-hour long training programme invites 9 candidates, and is conducted 4 times per year; allowing for the development of 36 new assessors every year. Those who finish this programme also need to participate in the assessment as observer at least 3 times before participating as a regular member of the assessment team.

Assessment teams are typically comprised of 4 current or former SCS members and 5 professors/experts. Civilian professors and experts are carefully selected while considering their gender, and balance in their speciality (public administration, business, psychology, etc).

Between 2006 and 2018, about 22% of SCS candidates (1,197 out of 5,442 candidates) failed the competency assessment. Those who fail for two consecutive times can take the assessment again six months later, and one year later in case they fail it beyond a third time. There is no limit to the number of times a civil servant can take the test. However, if the candidate is a civilian expert applying for an open position, he/she is limited to two attempts.

In order to meet the high demand for assessments, The Ministry of Personnel Management (MPM) drafts as annual plan based on ministry’s forecasts, and aim to meet each ministry’s specific demand for assessments within two months. The assessment takes place twice a week, which enables approximately 70 assessment sessions in a year.
Benefits from implementing the Competency assessment

How did the competency assessment affect the SCS members’ general level of competency? Since the introduction of the SCS system and its competency assessment centre, the goal has been to appoint SCS members according to their expertise and competency, rather than the order of seniority or age. During interviews with Korean civil servants, it was clear that the awareness and language of competency development became part of their narrative.

The Korean government’s official performance indicators for the SCS competency assessment include the validity of the assessment and the fairness of assessment operation. These are calculated through surveys to assessors and candidates. In 2018, 89% of assessors agreed that the exercises are suitable for assessing competencies of SCS, while approximately 82% of candidates agreed the assessment was fair and were satisfied with the assessment process. The candidates answer the survey before they receive the result.

Expanded use of competency assessment test

After years of successful implementation of the competency assessment, the Korean government began to prepare expanding its use for division director candidates, who are SCS members’ direct subordinates. In 2009, they developed a competency model for division directors along with 4 exercises, and in 2015, it became mandatory for these candidates to pass the competency assessment test before their appointment. Six assessors use the 4 exercises of 1:1 role play, presentation, in-basket and group discussion to assess 6 competencies required for division director level positions. Following this competency model, each ministry can develop and implement their own competency assessment system, when approved by the MPM.

The SCS competency assessment method was also benchmarked and used by local governments for their HRM purposes. For example, Seoul city established their competency model in 2007 and developed simulated exercises which were used to assess about 200 candidates for promotion in 2008. Now, Busan city, Daegu city, Gyeonggi-do province, Chungnam province, and Dangjin city also use competency assessments for promotion. 19 ministries in the national government also use it for promotion to grade 5, even though it is not required by regulation. Korea Electric Power Corporation, Korea Railroad, Korea-water, and 24 other public corporations also have developed customized competency assessment methods to evaluate candidates for managerial positions and use the result for promotion, appointment, and development.

Wider use of competency-based HRM

Around the time that the competency assessment test was introduced for SCS, competency-based HRM policies and practices also began to be implemented. These included the adoption of strategic workforce planning in 2005, which required each central ministry or agency to analyse current and future competencies of its civil servants and then make a 5-year strategy to reduce the gap through recruitment, development and redeployment. These practices brought about wider use of competency based HRM practices in many fields.

The Korean government uses their Public Service Aptitude Test (PSAT) for entry-level recruitment. Introduced in 2005, this test evaluates the basic competencies needed for civil servants at the first stage of their entrance exam. The final stage of the entrance exam has also been strengthened through the application of competency-based behavioural event
interviews, group-discussions or presentation. In addition, they conduct in-depth interviews lasting over 4 hours for their high-level (Grade 5) entrance exam.

For training and development, the competency assessment increased demand for programs to develop skills and competencies needed for senior leaders. Since 2006, the SCS candidate program has been implemented as mandatory course to be completed before the competency assessment test. And since 2009, the National Human Resource Development Institute (NHI) has designed and delivered various specialised competency development programmes which use diverse coaching and problem-based methods.

Success factors and recent progress

The Korean competency assessment was designed as an essential pillar of the SCS system introduced in 2006. The introduction of SCS system was a flagship initiative in the first roadmap prepared by the Presidential committee of government innovation and decentralization under President Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008). Therefore, competency assessment was introduced with strong political support within the national government, as core pieced of a broader initiative, which improved acceptance and compliance of the civil servants, especially at senior levels.

The Korean government also took steps to ensure validity and fairness of the assessment process in its design and implementation. For example, assessors are carefully selected to ensure they have no prior knowledge of the candidates. Assessors are not provided with background information on the assesses, such as name, affiliated organization and position, career, academic background, or performance review. Survey results from 3,102 candidates during the last 10 years indicate an average score or 3.78 (out of 5 point) on the validity of the assessment, and 4.12 on the fairness of the assessment.

There have also been continuous efforts to update and expand the assessment method. In 2017, MPM updated the 2009 competency model for division directors, and also developed a competency model for grade 5, which enabled them to establish a pipelined competency model for different managerial levels.

Regulations have also been recently updated based on feedback from candidates. For example, external candidates for open positions were required to pass the assessment, but since 2012 they could be exempted from the assessment when they’re applying for highly specialized positions in the field of culture, art, and medical service. In 2016, they also widened its scope of exemption to those who are recognised to have managerial careers in SCS-level positions such as board members in private companies, schools, and research institutes.

Box 2. Training programme for external candidates

Since 2006, the Korean government designed and implemented a training programme for external (non-civil servant) candidates for SCS positions. It was a 3 hour-long introductory course for the competency assessment. As the demand increases over time, MPM revised the programme into an 8 hour-long course which includes practicing the 4 types of assessment exercises in 2015. In 2018, 103 SCS candidates and 186 division director
candidates benefited from this training course. MPM also provides an online tutorial course through their website.

Finally, the Korean government has developed tools, and various educational programmes and policies to support civil servants’ competency development. An on-line competency diagnosis toolkit is available to all civil servants at the national government in the form of a self-evaluation survey and a second survey for superiors, colleagues, and subordinates to evaluate the applicant’s competency in a 360-degree feedback method. This tool assesses each applicant’s competency level in a comparative sense, and provides practical advice on the competency development points as feedback. Applicants can also draft an individual competency self-development plan from the diagnosis result, to establish concrete education activities, such as attending educational courses, having a mentor, or even reading books suggested by the system. NHI provides a variety of competency education programmes in line with the competency models, and has provided consulting to support ministries and local governments’ training institutes to develop and implement their competency development courses. These include co-developing customized competency model, sharing and reviewing exercises, educating facilitators needed to run the exercises and programmes, and providing relevant contents to support their education.

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<th>Box 3. Training Programme for Civil Servant candidates</th>
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The NHI has provided a variety of competency development programmes based upon the government competency models for above grade 5 level officials.

The SCS candidate programme, introduced in 2006, is open to grade 3-4 officials at the national government, who should be candidates for SCS positions. For 5 days, the participants practice and discuss various competency assessment exercises, after diagnosing their own competencies.

For division director positions who are typically staffed as grade 3-4 officials, they also provide similar programmes since 2009.

Finally, for the grade 5 officials, who are usually staffed as deputy directors or division directors at the sub-ministerial bodies, they provide 3-day programmes since 2009. This programme is open to both the newly recruited and the promoted grade 5 officials.

Evaluation and Recommendations for further development

Korea’s approach to competency assessment centre is particularly important when considered in the context of the broader transformation that the establishment of SCS system brings to the Korean public administration. Transitioning from purely seniority based system to one where SCS could be managed as a separate group is a trend in many OECD countries, and one that Korea would not have achieved without a strong focus on common competency assessments. As such, the political push to establish the assessment centre as a central pillar of the SCS system was well placed and continues to benefit the Korean civil service by strengthening the overall capability of senior civil servants in the government.
The design of the assessment process, and the well-managed implementation process by experienced and devoted staff and assessors seems to have contributed to its successful impact. The range of assessors, which include ex-SCS members, academics, private sector HR professionals and psychologists, is an impressive model that could be followed by other OECD countries. And the competency diagnosis followed by individual development planning and customized/diverse training courses also play an important role for improving the competency of the civil servants, and thus promoting the overall competitiveness of the Korean government.

At the national government level, the impact of the SCS competency assessment has been spreading to other levels of the government, making competency management the norm rather than the exception, gradually changing personnel management policy from a traditional approach emphasizing seniority to a more future-directed orientation concentrating on fairer competency-based practices. Many suggest that this has contributed to developing a culture of self-development and continuous learning in the civil service. As such, Korea’s competency assessment model may be key component of a wider transformation of the Korean civil service, beyond enhancing senior officials’ competencies.

With this in mind, there is a great need to ensure that the competency system continues to adapt to the changing demands of the Korean public administration. Looking into the future, the following areas could be considered, and discussed in the context of the National Schools of Government meeting, hosted by the NHI in October 2019.

**Skills and Competencies for leaders in the future**

For the last two decades, the Korean government has developed a series of pipelined competency models from SCS level to division directors, and grade 5 officials. And the competency model for SCS, developed in 2003 remains unchanged since it was simplified in 2009. While the current 6 competency elements are clearly important for senior officials, it is worth considering whether they fully capture the changing leadership competencies and skills need in the future. For example, do they place enough emphasis on competencies related to public service values; co-production and delivery of public services with citizens and other sectors? Do they emphasise a leadership who can rethink the rules, use digital tools and data for better insights, and implement innovations while managing risks?

Recently the OECD adopted the Recommendation on the Public Service Leadership and Capability which presents 14 principles for a high-performing and fit-for-purpose civil service, organised around 3 pillars. The first, and foundational pillar, recommends that governments build values-based culture and leadership with a focus on public value. Increasingly, senior civil servants will need to be trusted policy advisors to their Ministers, effective public managers capable of steering innovation in large public organisations, and social partners connecting with the wider public, private and not-for-profit sectors to achieve inclusive growth and public value for all citizens. This requires senior civil servants who not only are values-driven themselves, but are able to impart values throughout the public sector. The MPM has recently updated some of its behavioural indicators for the assessment to include social values. Perhaps this can be the basis to look at how a values based model can be implemented in the Korean public service and built into the existing competency models.
Updating the testing methods using more digital options

There are no methods that are perfect, and the balance of tests used in Korea’s system are commendable to provide a range of insights on a candidate’s approach. However, as with the competency model itself, there may be new methods that could be considered, particularly those that leverage advances in digital technologies. Identifying new innovations in competency testing may have three interrelated benefits: it could improve the validity of the test, reduce the cost, and find ways of testing new skills around the use of digital technology, for example.

Running quality competency assessment tests requires significant investment. To train a new assessor, the MPM runs the introductory training programme and invite him/her to at least 3 assessments as an observer with payment. They also invest in the renewal of simulated exercises; run surveys on the assessments, outsource the development of new sets of exercises every year, and run pilot tests for newly developed exercises. Running the mandatory SCS candidate programmes, capacity building programmes for division director candidates and the external candidates for open competitive position also requires continuous investment.

With regards to the validity question, one of the big challenges raised by many of the respondents is the apparent bias in the text towards those who have experience in central functions of the administration – in core policy development and planning, rather than those in line ministries whose jobs are oriented towards implementation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the aggregate failure rates hide a rather large distribution across different job categories. NHI tries to address this by carefully selecting each candidate’s exercises to ensure that they are not directly linked with his/her ministry/agency, and by focusing assessments on candidates’ problem solving process rather than their content knowledge. They suggest that implementation-oriented agencies’ failure rates are higher than that of policy-oriented ministries largely because they have less experience handling complex issues.

Some have suggested that developing new exercises in house, rather than outsourcing them, could be a useful way to both improve the relevance of the cases used in assessment, as well as reduce costs in the long term. In-house development doesn’t necessarily mean within the MPM – it could include development in the line ministries themselves, in order to ensure that cases represent a range of job functions and leadership contexts.

Using digital solutions and tools to conduct aspects of the assessment – including at distance. For example, video-conference could be used, which can reduce the cost needed for training/retaining competent assessors and the administrative/travel cost for their participation. If the simulation exercises are updated to make use of web-accessible open resources, rather than the pre-developed/provided information, it could reduce cost for developing the simulations, but also enable the assessment to observe the candidates’ competencies in data search and analysis. Furthermore, as technology advances, the use of artificial intelligence and big-data technology might be applicable in the near future, to areas such as competency diagnosis, competency development, and developing organizational workforce development plans to identify organizational skills and competencies gaps.

Driving culture change towards competency-based inclusion

One of the clear benefits of Korea’s competency model is that it’s been used to drive a culture change in the public sector. Traditionally Korea’s public sector was based on
seniority and command/control leadership. After the financial crisis of the 90s, it was clear that this model was incapable of responding to the challenges of a modern globalised world, and the government introduced the SCS system to ensure that only highly skilled candidates reached the top levels of the hierarchy. Preference was for those who can bring in more flexible and agile management styles.

Looking forward, Korea would be well placed to ensure that the competency assessment system remains capable of supporting this culture change. While the role of seniority has been reduced, it has not been replaced completely. Candidates still must “wait their turn” to be invited to the competency assessment. Most informants assumed that this takes 20 years from when one becomes a civil servant. So in fact, the seniority system continues, but civil servants must pass through a competency gate which may weed out those who are not ready. Does this system go far enough in generating a real culture change? Could the competency system be used in a way to encourage younger people exhibiting strong leadership potential to rise through the system more quickly?

A second, and related factor, is the very low numbers of female candidates. Statistics provided by the MPM suggest that only around 10% of candidates are women, but that women have a significantly lower failure rate than men. Many of the informants interviewed for this case study suggested that the low numbers of women candidates simply reflect the demographic make-up of the public sector. Twenty years ago there were very few women in the civil service, and since it takes twenty years to be invited to the assessment process, very women are invited. These numbers are beginning to rise, and with time it will balance out. But is there enough time to wait. Korea’s gender balance at senior levels is among the worst of OECD countries. Perhaps there are opportunities to improve the gender balance in the SCS through the competency assessment process, thereby improving the speed at which Korea catches up to the rest of the OECD on this important indicator.

Additionally, the assessment centre will only remain a relevant tool for culture change as long as it remains a true competency assessment test rather than a game to be won. There is concern among many Koreans who are involved in the test as well as those who observe it from a distance, that after over 10 years of using the same methodology, the test is increasingly gamed. Some suggested that a secondary industry of private schools has been set up in order to help candidates pass the test. Rather than focusing on how to be a good leader, these schools help candidates modulate their behaviour during the one-day assessment to play to testers’ expectations. While this is a natural phenomenon, it could potentially be mitigated by adjusting the testing methods on a regular basis, and by expanding the competency orientation beyond testing.

Finally, changing the culture towards competency based leadership requires more than a test for entrance to the SCS. The competency model should form the basis of ongoing support for leadership across the Korean public sector. Many OECD countries use their leadership competency models to not only test at SCS entrance, but also as the basis of annual performance and talent management discussions; for leadership development and training, and for peer to peer exchange. Only by making the competency model something that lives and breathes throughout the career of a SCS will it become a true tool for culture change.