

Professional Competencies Frequently Asked Questions

What is a professional competency for qualitative research?

A professional competency is defined as the knowledge, skills, behavior, beliefs, values, traits and motives that drive superior performance of qualitative research consultants.

Why is it important for our industry to have competencies, especially if we have never had them before?

Since the inception of the qualitative research industry, many QRCs have developed practices and approaches that they used as guidelines for their own “professional” performance. To date, however, no concerted effort has been made to codify these practices and approaches for the entire qualitative research industry. In order to ensure that the industry and its practitioners continue to develop and mature, it is essential to have a shared and explicit definition of the specific competencies that define “professional performance.” In effect, having these competencies makes us a unified and cohesive profession instead of a cottage industry of individuals with their own, often divergent, set of practices and approaches.

How do professional competencies benefit the qualitative research industry?

- They identify and define the skills, traits and practices that constitute the professional conduct of qualitative research consultants internationally in an ever-expanding and diversifying global society.
- They create a framework for education by developing and evaluating curricula for QRCs.
- They are the basis of a forum for the discussion and inclusion of diverse perspectives on our profession while emphasizing our areas of consensus.
- And they assist clients in identifying the quality they seek in a QRC and in evaluating the performance they receive, thereby increasing their confidence in the qualitative research they conduct.

These and other benefits serve to improve the collective performance of QRCs, thereby improving the overall image and prestige of our profession.

How do professional competencies benefit individual QRCs?

Once accepted as professional norms, these competencies will benefit individual qualitative researchers in several very important ways. For example, they provide QRCs with a guideline for self-evaluation, identifying areas of accomplishment and opportunities for continued growth. In addition, they set professional and

career expectations for QRCs by providing an explicit statement of the nature of professionalism for qualitative research.

What are the specific competencies for Qualitative Research Consultants?

There are eleven competencies under three headings. The specific competencies (listed below) are described by a set of fairly detailed statements in the full document.

Consulting:

- Consulting
- Content Knowledge

Research:

- Conceptualization and Design
- Research
- Interviewing
- Analysis

Professional and Business Practices:

- Communication
- Professional Practices
- Business Practices
- Project Management/Coordination
- Commitment to the Profession

How were these competencies developed and who developed them?

The “Professional Competencies of Qualitative Research Consultants” (“Competencies”) took more than three years to develop. The work was done by a subcommittee under the umbrella of the Professionalism Committee which consisted of George Balch, Robert Kahle (chair), George Silverman, and J. Robert Harris. This protracted and detailed process began with a review of an extended discussion about professional standards from the online QRCA Forum. With that learning, the development proceeded through a series of progressive stages: reviewing competency documents from a number of other professions and organizations, including the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the National Speakers Association (NSA); receiving outside consultation from a professional in the field of competency development; and studying proprietary training materials. This information and feedback resulted in a preliminary set of competencies for qualitative consultants. The next phase was to expose these competencies to individuals within the qualitative research profession. Roundtables on the subject were conducted at the National QRCA Conference in Orlando (2000) and at the joint conference of the QRCA and the Association for Qualitative Research (AQR) in Paris in 2001. This was followed by an interactive presentation at the QRCA conference later that year in Chicago. All of this feedback resulted in developing and fine-tuning yet another draft, which ultimately became the eleven statements of competency.

In the final development phase, this draft version was sent to the American Evaluation Association (AEA) for additional input and comment. Valuable feedback was also obtained from an article on the subject published in the QRCA "Views." Finally, copies were sent to a diverse sample of QRCs and a detailed analysis of input from all sources resulted in the final version of the Competencies.

How do the competencies apply to QRCs throughout the world?

The competencies were specifically developed for QRCs worldwide. In the latter part of the testing phase, they were given to a diverse international sample of QRCs, including QRCA members, members of other associations, and non-affiliated QRCs, as a final evaluation of their relevance. In addition to being international in scope, this sample also included practitioners who were young and old, male and female, veterans and newcomers to the field; and it encompassed a broad range of qualitative specialties, disciplines and approaches. A thorough analysis of the feedback from this sample gave no evidence that the competencies would not apply to QRCs around the world.

Will these competencies always define professionalism for QRCs?

Although the development of the competencies is an important step, it is intended to be an ongoing process. The competencies will be updated and revised as our industry expands and matures. The QRCA Professionalism Committee will oversee this task on a continuing basis with help and input from other sources within the industry.

Do these competencies represent the viewpoint of QRCA or the industry as a whole?

The QRCA Board of Directors has endorsed them as the competencies that define professional performance for qualitative research consultants. In doing so, the QRCA is committed to making the competencies known to the broader qualitative research industry and urges the entire industry to adopt them as a significant step toward raising the level of professionalism in qualitative research.

I am confused by the terms "competencies" and "standards." Is there a difference between them? If so, what is it and why did QRCA develop competencies instead of standards?

Competencies and standards are similar in that both address the qualities, aptitudes and skills necessary to professionally conduct qualitative research. There is, however, an important difference between the two terms. While professional competencies *identify* and *describe* specific elements needed to perform tasks and carry out responsibilities, standards *measure* these elements and set a minimal level of proficiency.

QRCA developed competencies because they define the qualities, aptitudes and skills that encompass the performance of professional QRCs, which had never been done in our industry. Until there is a common understanding and agreement throughout the industry that these are, in fact, the competencies that define our professional performance, there can be no successful attempt to set minimal levels of proficiency.

I am hearing a lot about the benefits of these competencies, but what are their drawbacks?

The qualitative research industry and its practitioners can only benefit from having a shared set of professional competencies. While the industry has grown and prospered without them, industry-accepted competencies provide the definition of professional performance that allows the qualitative research industry to focus on specific ways to mature, progress and improve. As for individual QRCs, the competencies will undoubtedly benefit some more than others, depending on their career aspirations and level of development. Overall, however, there are no apparent drawbacks or liabilities for either the industry or its practitioners.

What if I have contributions or objections to offer in response to these competencies? How do I make them known?

Feedback and inquiries should be directed to the Professionalism Committee of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association, which appreciates any thoughts or comments you may have. The Committee can be reached at www.qrca.org.