

Professionalism in Customs and workforce development

WCO initiatives to equip Customs with whole-of-career development strategies and practices

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The World Customs Organization (WCO) has been developing initiatives and tools to enable the customs community to empower its organisational platforms and promote an efficient shift to organisations which are compliant, agile and adaptable.

The 2nd WCO Capacity Building Committee meeting held in Brussels from 3-5 May 2011 outlined the crucial importance of ‘people development’ for capacity building and customs modernisation. The meeting decided to trigger further reflection on methods of building professionalism in Customs.

Global, regional and national imperatives have reinforced the need for responsive customs organisations. Each organisation’s human capital is one of their most valuable assets in keeping pace with an ever-changing environment. In order to continue contributing to today’s economy and knowledge society, Customs must adopt appropriate and relevant ‘fit-for-purpose’ professional principles and practices in line with the *Customs in the 21st Century* approach adopted by the WCO.

Since 2006, with the establishment of the Capacity Building Directorate and the launch of the PICARD Program, the WCO in partnership with the International Network of Customs Universities (INCU) has led innovative initiatives aimed at establishing Customs as a profession. New platforms have strived to provide a cooperative framework for customs education and research, and to build solutions to increase the professional knowledge and standing of customs executives and practitioners. These initiatives have included the PICARD Professional Standards adopted in 2008 for Operational and Strategic Customs Managers.

The WCO has been promoting Customs as a coherent professional body which is specifically structured on the basis of the unique aspect of customs operating models, sharing specific and graduated knowledge, competencies and skills, and as one which is fully connected to today’s economic and social challenges.

The importance of recognising Customs as a profession, with identified career paths, has led the WCO and its partners to contemplate encouraging national adoption of integrated education, training and development schemes provided by Customs and education authorities and, as well, initiating new approaches to Customs whole-of-career development strategies.

If people are the key enablers of any organisation, and if the workforce is the critical factor for ensuring the success of any capacity building initiative, the strategy to adopt is to have the right person at the right place, at the right time. Attracting talented people, aligning employee performance with the organisation’s mission and value, proactively shaping the future workforce, and retaining the top performers are some of the strategic issues that customs organisations are facing.

To assist its Members with their understanding and implementation of professional qualifications and career paths specifically related to Customs, the WCO Secretariat was mandated by the 2nd Capacity Building Committee to develop a framework of practices and principles on ‘people development’ for all customs practitioners, and to set up a virtual working group to address this priority issue. The group

is to gather together officials from different parties such as customs administrations, academia, and the private sector, all of whom are responsible for – and specialists in – the area of capacity building, namely, human resource management, organisational development and/or change management.

The group's objectives are to:

- establish principles and standard frameworks to design comprehensive workforce development strategies and programs for customs administrations
- set professional standards for the profiles of all customs practitioners; and to define knowledge, skills and competencies for the main customs job profiles and career streams
- develop principles and methods of achieving the key concepts tied to the implementation of workforce development programs such as succession planning, mobility and portability, performance management and compensation management, recruitment and on-boarding, development and learning
- introduce a basic training framework and processes (policies and curricula) as a reference for overall learning and career progression schemes.

Established with a restricted number of active contributors in early September 2011, the group has decided to tackle the scope of its activities by examining approaches already adopted or under development by customs administrations, academia and the business community. It will collect principles and practices from these communities, conduct research to identify gaps and missing components, and adapt theoretical concepts and academic findings to customs operating models.

In order to facilitate the project coordination and work of the different contributors, the group agreed on the development of a set structure for the framework of principles. An outline has been adopted by the group around six main topical clusters which will articulate the core and technical components for a future roadmap for the customs profession. This will also help to rationalise the involvement of each group's members by identifying the precise scope of their contributions.

The first cluster will address the definition of customs jobs profiles including elements such as the job families in Customs, the competencies needed for each main function, and the developmental programs tied to each of them.

The next four clusters will explore the principles and practices of four core components of an integrated human capital development policy: the definition of a Workforce Development Strategy, the Recruitment and On-boarding policies, the definition of Career Development Paths and Training policy, and the definition of a Leadership and Management Development Path.

The last cluster will focus on the Career Development Tools and Practices, developing a toolbox for the implementation of concepts and techniques like Succession Planning, Mobility and Outplacement, Rotation and Posting, Talent Management, Personal Development Planning and Learning, a Performance Appraisal System, and a Professional Qualifications Framework.

Actively cooperating through a dedicated collaborative workspace on CLiKC! (the WCO Customs Learning and Knowledge Community portal) and frequent virtual meetings, the group expects its robust inter-sessional work to enable the framework to be presented to the WCO Council in June 2013.

In addition to the work started by the group around the structured framework's outline, the Capacity Building Directorate has also coordinated other early achievements. During the first semester 2011, a questionnaire was sent to seventeen Member administrations to develop a preliminary analysis on the practices needed to design the career development program. The first stage of a study on a Customs Qualifications Framework has been initiated to design a table of equivalence between the levels of competencies, professional tasks and academic/educational recognition following the standards set by other international organisations. This study will contribute to the scope of the Group's outcomes and promote enhanced portability and mobility among customs practitioners.

These WCO initiatives on professionalism in Customs aim to enhance the procedures and processes used by customs practitioners around the world and, in turn, to enable those practitioners to benefit from individual autonomy and responsibility in managing their careers as well as promoting organisational transparency and predictability by the introduction and use of career mapping.

The Capacity Building Directorate intends to support WCO administrations as they apply creative solutions to develop knowledge, skills and enhanced performance within their organisations, and to ensure that there is a strategic alignment between their needs, organisational goals and the allocation of resources. Those organisational stakes are critical as they will contribute directly to strong and effective customs administration regimes: they will cut costs not capabilities, maximise workforce productivity, and build a flexible, adaptable organisation.

Editor's note: The INCU is pleased to be working closely with the WCO on this important initiative that will build on the current Professional Standards and provide a comprehensive training and education framework for customs professionals at all levels.

