Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSAs)

The third and final internal factor included in our model of employee behavior (Figure 2-1) is the employee's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). It is clear that KSAs have a significant impact on employee performance. All things being equal, if employees lack the KSAs to perform a task or behavior, they will likely fail. Almost all HRD programs focus on improving or renewing the KSAs of employees.

Despite the ubiquitous nature of KSAs, these factors can be difficult to define with precision. Definitions differ according to the person defining them. Edwin Fleishman, a leading researcher of human abilities, defines ***abilities*** as general capacities related to the performance of a set of tasks.[97] Abilities develop over time through the interaction of heredity and experience and are long-lasting. ***Skills*** are similar to abilities, but differ in that they combine abilities with capabilities that are developed as a result of training and experience.[98] Skills are often categorized as psychomotor activities (whereas abilities tend to be more cognitive), and skills are typically measured in terms of the ease and precision evident in the performance of some task.[99] Increasingly, skills are being studied and addressed using the broader term of "competency."[100] Finally, ***knowledge*** is defined as an understanding of factors or principles related to a particular subject.

Over 100 different types of abilities have been identified, including general intelligence, verbal comprehension, numerical ability, and inductive reasoning.[101] Some types of abilities, like general strength, have even been partitioned into subcategories (including explosive, dynamic, and static abilities).[102] Researchers have developed taxonomies to describe the abilities needed to perform particular tasks. Taxonomies help HRD professionals select and assign employees for training, choose appropriate learning strategies for individuals of differing skill levels, and specify training needs and content when designing training programs. Fleishman and colleagues have developed one such taxonomy that has been applied to HRD.[103] We will discuss needs assessment in Chapter 4.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that motivation, attitudes, and ability are critical to explaining employee behavior and to understanding and applying HRD. It is the combination of these influences with the external influences described earlier that affect employee behavior.