

ISSUES OF MERIT

September 2009

a publication of
the U.S. Merit Systems
Protection Board,
Office of Policy
and Evaluation

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Not All Training is Created Equal

MSPB examines the "trainability" of the skills Federal employees report needing.

Federal employees have different reasons for requesting training, ranging from "my supervisor told me to go" to "this interests me." Part of most employees' decision process, even if unconsciously, is whether a particular ability can be improved through training. We wouldn't expect training to make us taller or change our eye color. It might be equally futile to pursue training for mental or emotional characteristics that training is unlikely to change. To help agencies make better training decisions, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) examined the "trainability" of the training Federal employees feel they need.

Participants in a recent Merit Principles Survey described the ability they most needed to improve to do their job well. We classified their responses into the six types of ability described below:

(1) *Knowledge* includes job knowledge, academic subjects, and knowledge of laws, policies, and regulations. Research indicates that these topics are *highly trainable*—they can be readily learned in training classes.

(2) *Language* abilities include reading, writing, editing, and public speaking. They are considered *moderately trainable* because they can be learned, but how well

they are learned is constrained by an individual's natural talent for language.

(3) *Social* abilities help us get along with other people. They are considered *moderately trainable* because learning them is constrained by each learner's level of talent and personality traits.

(4) *Reasoning* abilities are based on logic and mathematics. They are also considered *moderately trainable* because they have a natural ability component.

(5) *Motivation* captures employee willingness to perform work and is considered *less trainable*.

(6) *Mental Style* includes long-term "mental habits" such as flexibility, creativity, rapid learning ability, and decisiveness. They are considered *less trainable*.

The figure on page 5 shows the percent of survey participants who want to improve each type of ability. Almost 4 in 10 (39.7%) of the skills and abilities employees reported as most necessary to improve their job performance are highly trainable. Only a small percentage (3.4%) of employees reported needing training in either of the two less trainable categories. The majority of reported training needs (57.0%) are moderately trainable, i.e.,

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The MSPB Office of Policy and Evaluation conducts studies to assess the health of Federal merit systems and to ensure they are free from prohibited personnel practices.

Issues of Merit

We offer insights and analyses on topics related to Federal human capital management, particularly findings and recommendations from our independent research.

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DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

KSAs: Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water?

Agencies need to find a balance between getting enough information to adequately assess applicants and lessening applicant burden.

When I read that John Berry, the director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), was proposing that agencies stop using Knowledge, Skill, and Ability narratives (KSAs) as part of the application process and rely more on applicant resumes, I thought there would be cheering in the streets. One of the biggest complaints we hear from applicants and selecting officials about the Federal hiring process is how long it takes. Oftentimes, the requirement to write (and evaluate) lengthy KSAs to describe the applicant's experience in certain areas is a significant contributor to the length of the process.

However, I have recently seen a number of KSA advocates who claim that the narratives help the human resources (HR) staff and selecting officials identify which candidates have the best skills for the job. They argue that a resume alone does not provide adequate detail to determine an applicant's qualifications, and the occupational questionnaires used by many agencies rely on an applicant's self-reported information and is therefore not an effective screen. For this reason, the advocates argue that KSAs do have a place in the hiring process.

It is my opinion that both sides have valid points and propose that KSAs do have their rightful place in the hiring process—provided that they are used more effectively than in the past.

Typically, an agency will announce a position, identify the knowledge,

skills, and abilities necessary for the job in the announcement, and ask applicants to write half a page to a page of narrative describing their experience in each of these areas. Often, agencies will have applicants write six or more separate narratives.

There are some fairly standard KSAs that applicants are asked to address, such as written communication, oral communication, or the ability to analyze complex situations and develop solutions. Few instructions are provided to the applicant on what should be included in the narratives other than to address their knowledge, skill, or ability in this area. The narratives are generally evaluated by the HR staff or subject matter expert panel to determine the best qualified applicants, and the list of those applicants is sent to the selecting official for further assessment.

While it is important to evaluate the key KSAs necessary to the job, using the KSA format may have unintended consequences. Making applicants go through this labor-intensive process could discourage good applicants from applying because they can find other job opportunities that have a more streamlined process. Also, using this KSA format may artificially help applicants who are good writers (or who hire good writers to write their KSAs) or who are good at self-promotion. In addition, the agency must use valuable resources to evaluate each candidate's narratives. Given the rise in applications that many agencies have seen recently, this workload increase could be

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KSAs

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untenable.

However, we should not completely discount the idea of KSAs. Instead, we should consider how they might be used more effectively. The first applicant assessment used in the hiring process does not need to evaluate every knowledge, skill, and ability necessary to do the job. The goal of the first assessment is to screen the applicants to a workable number of well-qualified candidates who can be further assessed through more rigorous tools, such as structured interviews and job simulations.

Therefore, instead of asking applicants to complete numerous generic KSAs, the idea should be to identify the one or two key competencies that will best differentiate which candidates should move on in the process. The KSAs not addressed in the initial screen can be evaluated through subsequent assessments, such as through a structured interview.

When asking applicants to address the one or two key competencies, agencies should provide specific instructions on the length of the narrative (no more than half a page) and what specific points to include. An accomplishment record would be a great format for this assessment.¹ For instance, instruct applicants to

¹For more information on accomplishment records, see MSPB, "Assessing the Assessments: An Overview of Accomplishment Records," *Issues of Merit*, July 2008.



select **one** past accomplishment related to the

KSA, describe the accomplishment in sufficient detail to understand its importance, identify the specific role the applicant played in achieving the accomplishment, and describe the impact of the accomplishment on the organization.

By using one or two short, well-designed narratives, we can overcome many of the problems associated with today's KSAs. We can get the information we need to provide a preliminary assessment of applicant qualifications. We can also make better use of agency resources because fewer, shorter KSAs will have to be evaluated. Also, because applicants are given specific instructions on what to include in the narrative, the narratives should take less time to complete and be less burdensome. Using KSAs in this manner can help ensure that we are making the best possible decisions concerning who are the best candidates while reducing the burden placed on applicants and speeding up the hiring process.

John Crum

Director, Policy and Evaluation

Did you know...

OPM held a comment period in June on proposed changes to the qualification standards for administrative and management positions and professional and scientific positions. If the proposed draft changes are instituted, the grade level for which individuals holding a Bachelor's degree can qualify for these positions will change from GS-05 (or equivalent) to GS-07 (or equivalent).

This change would eliminate the Superior Academic Achievement (SAA) provision of the current qualification standards that allows individuals with a Bachelor's degree to qualify at the GS-07 level for certain positions based on class standing, grade-point average, or honor society membership.

The draft Group Coverage Qualification Standard for Administrative and Management Positions and a draft Education and Experience Requirements for Professional and Scientific Positions for GS-07 (or equivalent) and Above table are available at: www.opm.gov/qualifications/Standards/DRAFTS.

Also, OPM has decided to retain the time-in-grade requirement, which was set to be eliminated on May 18, 2009 and then postponed to August. For more information, see <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2009/E9-19174.htm>.

Sexual Orientation, Workplace Treatment, and the Limitations of Survey Data

In June, President Obama issued a memorandum that extended long-term care benefits to same-sex domestic partners of Federal employees and allowed Federal workers to use sick leave to care for their domestic partners. The President also asked agencies to review what other employee benefits can be extended to employees' same-sex domestic partners. As the work experiences of gay and lesbian Federal employees receive more attention, it may be instructive to examine employee attitudes about how sexual orientation affects treatment in the Federal workplace. Doing so may also serve as a case study into the limitations of interpreting survey data.

In MSPB's 2005 and 2007 Merit Principles Surveys, about one percent of respondents reported that they had been denied a job, promotion, pay increase, or other job benefit due to discrimination based on their sexual orientation. This was a lower percentage than those who reported discrimination based on race/national origin, sex, age, and disability, and comparable to discrimination attributed to religion, marital status, and political affiliation.

Some employees, however, believed their sexual orientation affects how they are treated in the workplace in ways besides outright discrimination. For example, the 2007 Career Advancement Survey (CAS) asked employees how important they believe certain factors were in explaining why they did not get the most recent job for which they applied. Five percent of respondents believe their sexual orientation was "very important" or "somewhat important" in explaining why they did not receive the job, making it one of the least cited reasons on par with marital status, political affiliation, and religion.

The CAS also asked employees to rate the impact that a number of personal characteristics have had on their career advancement. Four percent of respondents reported that their sexual orientation had a "somewhat negative" or a "very negative" impact on their career advancement. Surprisingly, twice as many respondents (eight percent) believed that their sexual orientation had a "somewhat positive" or a "very positive" impact on their career advancement. This was a higher positive response rate than either religion or political affiliation received.

Since the survey asked all employees about the impact of sexual orientation without asking directly about the sexual orientation of the respondent, we cannot

definitively state what these results mean. However, one possible interpretation may be that some heterosexual employees believe that gay and lesbian employees are at a disadvantage, so they view their own sexual orientation as a positive factor in their career advancement. Another interpretation may be that some gay and lesbian employees believe they must put more effort in their work in an attempt to overcome any negative stereotypes. These same employees may believe this extra effort has played a positive role in their career advancement.

The biggest constraint we face in interpreting these survey results is that, as mentioned, we have no data on the sexual orientation of survey respondents and, therefore, no indication of what percentage of the workforce identifies themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. For this reason, making any judgment about what portion of these employees believe they have been discriminated against is not possible. Additionally, we cannot assume that all of the one percent of Federal employees who believe they have been discriminated against based on their sexual orientation are gay or lesbian. Although this may be likely, it is still possible that this one percent includes some heterosexual employees who believe they have been discriminated against.

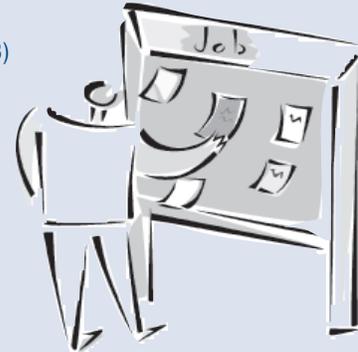
The MSPB has been reluctant to ask employees to identify their sexual orientation on surveys for a number of reasons. First and foremost, we would not want to offend employees who may believe that a question of such a personal nature does not belong on a survey of work attitudes. In addition, although our surveys are confidential, we recognize that some employees may simply not trust that the responses they provide will remain so. It is possible that either of these scenarios would decrease the number of employees responding to our surveys to an unacceptable level. Perhaps shining a light on issues faced by gay and lesbian Federal employees can help create an environment where these concerns no longer exist.

Since it is extremely difficult to put these survey results in the proper context, why present them at all? We believe these results can be an important baseline to inform future research. In an attempt to ensure fairness to all employees, it will be important to monitor the attitudes of all employees about how sexual orientation affects treatment in the Federal workplace. ❖

Reforming Federal Hiring

In June, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and OPM released memorandums to agencies expressing concern about the quality and timeliness of the Federal hiring process. As part of the budget process, each agency is expected to make specific improvements in its hiring process. Agencies are to map their current hiring process and identify any barriers, streamline vacancy announcements, notify applicants of their status, and include hiring managers in the recruitment process. During the last 10 years, the MSPB has released numerous reports addressing these issues, which can assist agencies in their task. They include:

- [Federal Appointment Authorities: Cutting through the Confusion](#) (2008)
- [In Search of Highly Skilled Workers: A Study on the Hiring of Upper Level Employees From Outside the Federal Government](#) (2008)
- [Attracting the Next Generation: A Look at Federal Entry-Level New Hires](#) (2008)
- [Reforming Federal Hiring: Beyond Faster and Cheaper](#) (2006)
- [Managing Federal Recruitment: Issues, Insights, and Illustrations](#) (2004)
- [Identifying Talent through Technology: Automated Hiring Systems in Federal Agencies](#) (2004)
- [Help Wanted: A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements](#) (2003)
- [Making the Public Service Work: Recommendations for Change](#) (2002)
- [Assessing Federal Job Seekers in a Delegated Examining Environment](#) (2002)
- [The Federal Merit Promotion Program: Process vs. Outcome](#) (2002)
- [Competing for Federal Jobs: Job Experiences of New Hires](#) (2000)



In addition to hiring reform, OMB and OPM have asked agencies to improve employee satisfaction and wellness. MSPB's 2008 report [The Power of Federal Employee Engagement](#) will assist agencies with this goal. All of these reports, along with our newsletters, can be found on MSPB's Studies page at www.mspb.gov.

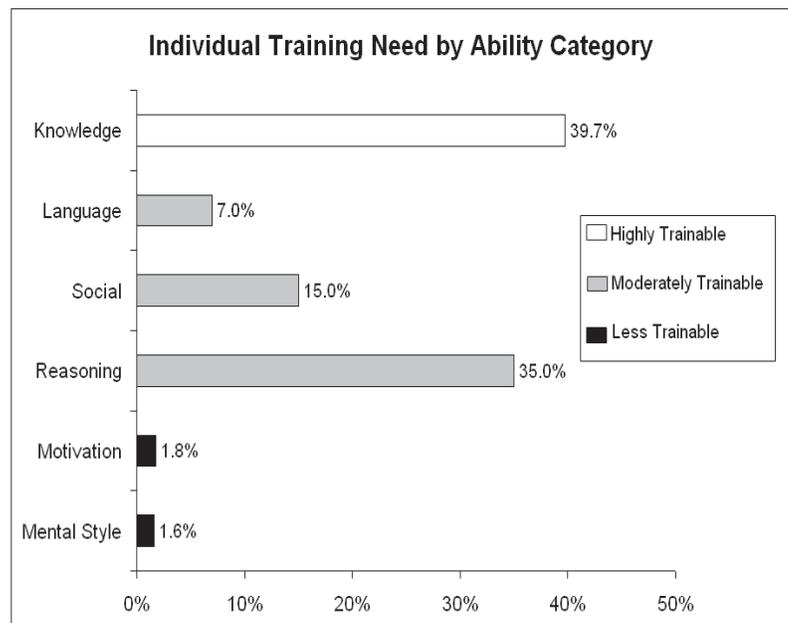
Trainability

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language, social, and reasoning abilities. These skills can be learned, but the degree to which they can be learned is constrained not only by adequate preparation, but also by differences in the natural abilities people bring to training.

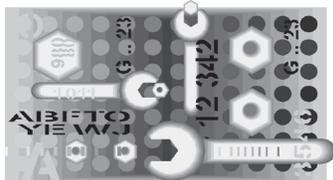
One way to ensure that Federal employees will benefit from training in these moderately trainable abilities is to use adequate training course prerequisites and pretesting. These procedures will also minimize waste by reducing the number of employees who attend training without a good chance of learning from it.

MSPB's forthcoming report, *Making the Right Connections: Targeting the Best Competencies for Training*, examines the abilities needed to succeed as a Federal employee and discusses which are highly, moderately, or less trainable. Watch for our report and its recommendations about how to target training effectively. ❖



Due to rounding, figures do not total 100%

TOOLS OF THE TRADE



Using Job Announcement Templates

The MSPB has urged agencies to improve their job announcements to make them more user-friendly. OPM is now working with agencies to make these improvements. OPM, as well as the agencies themselves, have developed standardized templates to assist in the effort.

Standardization has its advantages. For HR staffs, it can increase efficiency and reduce unwanted variability. For hiring managers, standardization can increase quality and simplify decision making. For applicants, it can increase understanding of the job. For these reasons, job templates—standardized formats and language for vacancy announcements—have a role in a high-tech, streamlined Federal hiring process. But templates must be developed and used thoughtfully, rather than mechanically, if they are to benefit agencies and applicants. In this article, we provide some suggestions on using templates for agencies to consider.

Focus on the applicant. It's possible to create a job announcement by cutting and pasting information from a variety of sources (job descriptions, mission statements, agency policies, and OPM guidelines). But what is efficient for the agency is not necessarily efficient for the applicant. Information that is meaningful to agency personnel may not be meaningful to the applicant, as in the example below.

From an announcement for an HR specialist position—

“Applicants must have demonstrated experience as listed below. This requirement is according to the [agency staffing policies] which include interpretive guidance and reference to the OPM Operating Manual for Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions.”

Applicants **do** need to know what the job requires—but few, if any, applicants will want to know why or how the agency establishes its qualification requirements. When using templates, we suggest that recruiters read the result from the applicant's perspective. Will the applicant need the information? Will the applicant be enlightened?

Will the applicant care? If not, edit accordingly.

Check the fit. The information in templates may be accurate and “HR approved.” But templates are often written to accommodate a wide range of positions and situations. Like “one size fits all” clothing, an unreviewed and unedited template may not fit the position (or applicant) particularly well. For example, a template may include language to accommodate a situation that is improbable or impossible for the specific job being filled, as in the examples below.

From an announcement for a GS-14 program analyst position (education cannot qualify and the position has no education requirement)—

“If you are qualifying based on education OR if there are mandatory education requirements listed under the Qualifications and Evaluations section, you **MUST** submit a copy of your college transcript with your application. . . . If you fail to provide required information, or the information you submit is insufficient to verify your qualifications, you **WILL** lose consideration for the position.”

From an announcement for a permanent position—

“If this position is temporary, management may have the discretion of converting this position to a permanent position depending upon funding and staffing allocation.”

The statements are accurate. But they are not user-friendly in that they force the applicant to decide whether the statement applies. Such statements can also generate unnecessary paperwork or deter applicants. In the first example, a cautious applicant, having read the warning that failure to provide required information is fatal, might submit transcripts under the assumption that an agency would not mention transcripts unless they might be needed. In the second example, an applicant who reads the statement that “management may have the discretion [to make this position] permanent” might wonder whether the position is less “permanent” than advertised.

We suggest that agencies adapt their templates and statements to the position rather than forcing the applicant to do the work. A knowledgeable recruiter could quickly identify template statements as unnecessary and revise or eliminate them, resulting in a job announcement that is clearer, shorter, and more effective.

In closing, start with a template, but customize it to the position and the applicant. A little tailoring can produce a much better-fitting job announcement. ❖

Performance-Based Actions: Focus on Performance Management, Not the Law

A continual criticism of the Civil Service is its inability to fire poor performers. There are two sections of Title 5 that authorize an agency to take a performance-based adverse action: section 7513 and section 4303. To remove or demote a Federal employee, section 7513 requires the agency to show by a preponderance of the evidence that an employee who was on notice of a performance expectation failed to meet it, resulting in a negative impact on the efficiency of the service.

In contrast, section 4303 requires only substantial evidence that the employee was given an opportunity to improve but still failed to meet a critical element of the job.¹ Congress created section 4303 as part of the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 to make it easier for agencies to take a performance-based action. Federal agencies have the option to use either section of the law to take a performance-based adverse action. According to data from the Central Personnel Data File (CPDF), in the past decade, agencies have been using section 7513 to address poor performance more often than section 4303, although the use of section 4303 is increasing.

Despite this option provided to agencies, performance-based actions remain difficult to take,

according to the management officials we surveyed for an upcoming report, *Addressing Poor Performers and the Law*. However, the difficulty does not originate with the burden of proof required to act. Rather, according to our survey respondents, the difficulty originates with the obligation of a supervisor to engage in performance management.

Respondents indicated that the subjective nature of performance and the time it takes to track and document performance were the greatest reasons why taking performance-based actions are difficult. Thus, the solution to addressing poor performance primarily lies in supervisors engaging in better performance management. Changing the law would not be a quick fix because these underlying challenges would remain. To be notified when *Addressing Poor Performers and the Law* or any other report is issued, please join our ListServ on MSPB's Studies page at www.msps.gov. ❖

¹Substantial evidence means that a reasonable person might find the evidence supports the agency's findings regarding the poor performance, even though other reasonable persons might disagree. In contrast, preponderance of the evidence means that a reasonable person would find the evidence makes it more likely than not that the agency's findings regarding the poor performance are correct.

Managing for Engagement: Communication, Connection, and Courage

Private sector research consistently demonstrates a strong positive relationship between high levels of employee engagement and desired organizational outcomes, such as customer satisfaction, safety, turnover, productivity, and profitability. In our 2008 study, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*, the MSPB confirmed that employee engagement has a strong, positive impact on a number of similar organizational outcomes in the Federal sector.

Now, in our newly released report, *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*, we have analyzed the results of the 2007 Merit Principles Survey to identify the specific performance management practices that drive employee engagement. Our research indicates that employee engagement is higher in agencies in which senior leaders build trust with employees by: (1) aligning their words and actions, (2) communicating openly and frequently with employees, and (3) treating employees as valued business partners. Supervisors in

high engagement agencies define clear performance expectations, develop strong working relationships with employees, provide employees with useful feedback, and recognize their contributions. In short, the effort that leaders invest in managing their workforce appears to pay off in substantially higher levels of employee engagement and performance.

In this report, we offer practical, action-oriented suggestions for driving employee engagement and enhancing performance. Our recommendations can be characterized in three words: communication, connection, and courage. As Chairman Neil A. G. McPhie said, “These are the foundation of performance management—communicating openly and honestly with employees, connecting with them as people to build good working relationships, and demonstrating the courage to address and resolve problems.” The report may be downloaded from the “Studies” section of our Web site, www.msps.gov. ❖



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ISSUES OF MERIT

September 2009

Volume 14 Issue 4

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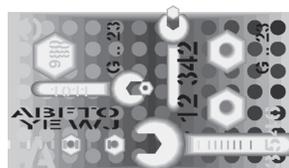
Training What's Trainable. *Not all skills are trainable. Find out if Federal employees are using their training opportunities effectively. (Page 1)*

Director's Perspective. *Getting beyond KSAs in the assessment process. (Page 2)*

Sexual Orientation and Workplace Treatment. *We look at employee survey data about how sexual orientation affects treatment in the Federal workplace and note some limitations of this research. (Page 4)*

Reforming Federal Hiring. *As efforts heat up to improve agency hiring practices, agencies may want to consult some of MSPB's past research on how to reform Federal hiring. (Page 5)*

Tools of the Trade. *As agencies retool their job announcements, the MSPB offers guidance on how to use (and not use) job announcement templates. (Page 6)*



Taking Performance-Based Actions. *Some believe it's the law that keeps agencies from dealing effectively with poor performers. MSPB research indicates it's even more fundamental than that. (Page 7)*

Managing for Engagement. *MSPB's new report identifies performance management practices that drive employee engagement. (Page 7)*