insights & analyses for Federal human capital management

Issues of Merit

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How Trainable Is This Competency?

The answer to this question can help agencies get more from their training dollars.

Research on competencies and the mental abilities to which they are related distinguishes among competencies that can be developed through training (e.g., job knowledge), those that are moderately trainable (e.g., language, social, and reasoning abilities), and those that are less responsive to training (e.g., motivation and mental style). In our soon-to-be-released *Making the Right Connections: Targeting the Best Competencies for Training*, we refer to this as competency "trainability."[1]

The report contrasts employee perceptions of the trainability of job-relevant competencies with research findings about the actual trainability of these competencies. The results can help agencies identify and avoid training that targets less trainable competencies and is therefore less likely to succeed.

Our findings suggest several steps that agencies can take to make employee training more effective.

Track training "retries." Approximately one-third of Federal employees participating in a recent MSPB survey indicated that their next training experience would be a further attempt to learn something they had not learned successfully in the past. The percentages of employees "retrying" to develop less trainable Motivational (29 percent) and Mental Style (39 percent) competencies are greater than the percentage re-attempting to learn highly trainable Knowledge competencies (25 percent). This suggests that agencies should carefully examine second attempts at training. For less trainable competencies, some employees may not have the prerequisite abilities to benefit from the training they are attempting.

Assess training readiness. Training developers can design pretests that help identify employees who have the necessary abilities to benefit from training for less trainable competencies. Such pretesting can also improve the effectiveness of training for highly trainable competencies. While introductory training is accessible to everyone, more advanced training often builds on prior knowledge or work experiences. Pre-training testing and enforcement of training prerequisites can reduce the number of frustrated employees who find themselves in training from which they are not yet ready to learn. Such screening can also improve the training experiences of well-prepared employees

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[1] Also see our September 2009 *Issues of Merit, at www.mspb.gov/studies* for a brief discussion of trainability.

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Our Mission
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

Using Resumes in the Applicant Assessment Process

Simplifying the application process is critical, but the devil is in the details.

On May 11, 2010, President Barack Obama signed "Presidential Memorandum—Improving the Federal Recruitment and Hiring Process." The purpose of this hiring reform initiative is to ensure that Americans can "apply for Federal jobs through a commonsense hiring process" and that agencies can "select high-quality candidates efficiently and quickly."

Before discussing the details of this initiative, I want to give the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) a lot of credit for this hiring reform effort. Director Berry has shown great enthusiasm and commitment on this issue. Under his leadership, OPM has tackled some of the more problematic aspects of the hiring process and has succeeded in drawing attention to an area that badly needs it. We are also pleased that a number of the action items in the Presidential memo and OPM implementation guidance are recommendations the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has made to the President, Congress, OPM, and agency leaders through our studies.

MSPB research has consistently shown that the Federal hiring process is too complex and burdensome for applicants. To help alleviate this problem, the President's memorandum instructs agencies to eliminate the requirement for applicants to submit narrative responses in their initial application materials, often referred to as Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities, or simply KSAs. Instead, applicants will be permitted to submit resumes and cover letters to apply for jobs.

While it makes perfect sense to try to simplify the application process, the devil is in the details. For instance, some agencies may take this requirement to mean that a resume screen by itself is an adequate assessment of applicant qualifications. However, the current research on personnel selection does not support this assumption. A recent panel at the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) 25th Annual Conference noted that little research has been done on the validity and reliability of resume screens—that is, how well they predict future success on the job ("Federal Government Selection: Resumes Versus KSA Statements Versus Assessments", Cucina, McDaniel, Palguta, Paskey, Shugrue, Stafford, 2010). Clearly, this topic is ripe for more research by the I-O Psychology community.

One of MSPB's key research findings is that Federal agencies are often using inadequate applicant assessment methods that are not good predictors of how the applicant will perform the job. Since there is little evidence that resume reviews alone can serve as valid job predictors, agencies need to be careful in how they carry out this new reform initiative. I'm not saying that KSAs were great predictors because the way most agencies used them, they probably were not. My point here is that while using resumes as the first screen in the hiring process may help lessen the burden on applicants, we

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Resumes

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have to remember that resumes alone will not allow us to make the kind of distinctions among applicants that are necessary to identify those who are best qualified.

OPM understands this point and has addressed it in the Presidential memo and their implementation guidance, but I want to make sure that message doesn't get lost. We've done a number of studies on different types of assessment tools agencies can use, such as structured interviews, job simulations, structured reference checks, and the use of the probationary period as a selection tool. And we've seen agencies that have invested the time and resources into developing high-quality assessment programs that use multiple hurdles.

However, it takes agency leadership support, funding, and expertise to develop these programs, which many agencies currently do not have. OPM is in the process of developing some assessment tools for cross-cutting occupations that can be used throughout Government. That is something we have recommended for some time because it can create a great return on investment, and we are excited to see how that is implemented.

Also, while agencies will be required to use resumes for the application process, it does not appear that there is anything to stop them from requesting KSA narratives as a next step in the process. If agencies decide to use KSAs in this way, they need to be aware of the burden this will place on applicants, HR staff, and subject matter experts who will need to evaluate the essays. Too often in the past, agencies have asked applicants to complete 6 or more general narratives. If essays are to be used as a second hurdle, agencies should identify the one or two most important KSAs for the job, develop specific, job-related benchmarks by which to measure them, and provide adequate instruction to applicants so they will know what information to address in the essay. This will provide an adequate basis for narrowing the applicant pool to a small enough number to use even more valid assessment tools, such as structured interviews.

Using resumes as the first screen in the hiring process may help improve the initial applicant experience, but they likely will not make the kind of distinctions among applicants that are necessary to identify the best qualified applicants. Agencies still need to invest in good assessment programs so they can follow up the resume review with high-quality, valid assessments that can make those distinctions. ❖

Director, Policy and Evaluation

Your Opportunity to Speak Out

Soon, you may get the chance to tell Federal managers and policymakers what you think about your work, your work environment, and your agency's management practices. Approximately 80,000 Federal employees have been randomly selected to participate in MSPB's Merit Principles Survey 2010. This Governmentwide survey plays an important part in tracking the "health" of the Federal civil service.

The employees who participate in the survey provide a valuable service to the entire Federal workforce by sharing their opinions on such topics as the merit system principles and prohibited personnel practices, including whistleblower retaliation. In addition, it will address a variety of other workforce topics, such as what motivates employees and makes them more engaged. Survey responses will identify both areas of success and areas that need improvement in terms of Federal management practices. Participants' responses are voluntary and will be kept strictly confidential.

The survey results will be summarized in a report that goes directly to the President and Congress and will be widely disseminated among Federal policy leaders and decision makers. Those who fill out the survey will be representing not just themselves, but the entire Federal civilian workforce. So if you're among those who receive an invitation to participate in the Merit Principles Survey, please take the time to complete it—you'll be speaking to the Government's top leaders on behalf of over 1.8 million Federal coworkers. For further information, please visit the MSPB web site at www.mspb.gov/studies and go to our 2010 Merit Principles Survey Fact Sheet.

Telework's Negative Effect on Performance: Barrier or Myth?

MSPB's survey results indicate that employees who telework and their supervisors do not see a significant impact on organizational performance.

A common barrier to implementing telework has been the perception that it has a negative impact on the performance of the organization. Some managers have voiced the opinion that because employees are away from the office, telework can make teamwork and collaboration difficult and can reduce productivity because employees' work is more difficult to oversee. The assumption is that an employee has to be physically present in the office to be productive, communicate with others, and meet organizational goals.

In MSPB's recent survey on telework, we found this "barrier" to be a myth. We surveyed 20,000 professional and administrative Federal employees and supervisors in both high and low telework agencies. The results of this survey show that employees and supervisors alike do not believe telework is damaging to organizational performance nor on the morale of employees. In fact, it is having no impact on performance in most cases and a positive impact in others.

It is probably not surprising that employees who telework stated that telework has had a positive impact on their productivity and performance (72 percent). In fact, the top reason employees requested telework was that they can be more productive at home. Perhaps a little more unexpected is that 81 percent of employees who have never teleworked stated that the teleworking of others has not impacted their personal productivity or performance. Both employees who do and do not telework reported no increased expectation for employees in the office to cover for those who are working at home.

Employees weren't the only ones who disabused the myth that telework undermines productivity. Most supervisors also reported that telework has not had a negative impact on their organization. They felt that work relationships or team work do not suffer due to telework. Also, the vast majority of supervisors, managers, and executives reported that telework has had either a positive or neutral impact on their organization's productivity and performance, ability to recruit high quality employees, and ability to retain high performing employees.

While we know that there still may be some challenges and resistance to telework, these findings provide us with evidence that telework's impact on organizational performance—including teamwork, collaboration, and productivity—should be less of a concern. ❖

Competencies

(continued from page 1)

who will not have to wait patiently while the training instructor helps other attendees catch up on prerequisite learning.

Reconsider "all-hands" training. It is not unusual for supervisors or managers to become convinced of the value of a particular type of training and recommend that—or even arrange for—all of their employees to attend. This may be reasonable if the training is for a highly trainable Knowledge competency and directly related to the work environment. It can be more problematic when the training targets a less trainable competency, or one for which some employees may not have the prerequisite knowledge or experience.

Over half of the Federal employees in our Governmentwide survey indicated that the most recent training they attended was also attended by other employees in their work group. The percentages were higher for less trainable Motivation (82 percent who attended this training said others in their work group also attended) and Mental Style (74 percent) competencies than for highly-trainable Knowledge competencies (66 percent). There are many reasons—including similarity of work and work environment—that make it appropriate for employees who work together to be trained together on the same competencies. However, when the targeted competencies require prerequisite abilities, it is appropriate to make distinctions between employees who possess these abilities and those who are not as well-equipped to benefit from training. The full MSPB report will contain additional recommendations for Federal employees and their supervisors. ❖

Federal Hiring Reform: Requirements and Resources

MSPB has a number of resources available to help agencies carry out the President's hiring reform initiative.

President Obama's recently-issued "Presidential Memorandum—Improving the Federal Recruitment and Hiring Process," overhauls the way Federal civilian employees are recruited and hired. The memorandum notes that the effective and efficient performance of agency missions depends on a talented and engaged workforce that will be strengthened by these reforms. OPM Director, John Berry, declared that, "This initiative is the biggest step toward fixing Federal hiring in over three decades." To view more on the Federal hiring reform, go to www.opm.gov/hiringreform.

The memorandum and OPM's implementation guidance lay out several key requirements:

(1) Eliminate written essays (KSAs) as a first screen;
(2) Allow individuals to apply with resumes and cover letters;
(3) Use category rating;
(4) Ensure manager responsibility and accountability for hiring;
(5) Improve quality and speed of hiring;
(6) Notify applicants about their status; and
(7) Conduct action planning.

Hiring Reform Resources

MSPB has released many studies that examine the issues outlined in the Presidential memorandum. To assist agencies in complying with the memorandum, we have listed some of these studies below, along with the memo topic to which they pertain. All of MSPB studies and newsletters are available at www.mspb.gov/studies.

- **Employee engagement:** (1) *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement;* (2) *Managing for Engagement—Communication, Connection, and Courage*

- **Valid applicant assessments:** (1) *Assessing Federal Job Seekers in a Delegated Examining Environment;* (2) *The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential;* (3) *Job Simulations: Trying Out for a Federal Job;* (4) *Reference Checking in Federal Hiring: Making the Call;* (5) *The Probationary Period: A Critical Assessment Opportunity*

- **Category rating:** *The Rule of Three in Federal Hiring: Boon or Bane*

- **Manager involvement in the hiring process:** (1) *Federal Appointing Authorities—Cutting Through the Confusion;* (2) *In Search of Highly Skilled Workers—A Study on the Hiring of Upper Level Employees from Outside the Federal Government*

- **Manager accountability for recruiting and hiring highly qualified employees:** *Managing Federal Recruitment: Issues, Insights, and Illustrations; A Call to Action—Improving First-Level Supervision (coming soon)*

- **Evaluation of agency recruiting programs:** (1) *Managing Federal Recruitment: Issues, Insights, and Illustrations;* (2) *In Search of Highly Skilled Workers—A Study on the Hiring of Upper Level Employees from Outside the Federal Government;* (3) *Reforming Federal Hiring—Beyond Faster and Cheaper*

- **Evaluation of the Federal Career Intern Program:** (1) *Building a High-Quality Workforce—The Federal Career Intern Program;* (2) *Attracting the Next Generation—A Look at Federal Entry-Level New Hires*

- **Improvement to vacancy announcements:** *Help Wanted—A Review of Federal Vacancy Announcements*

Gender Parity in the Federal Workforce: Do You Know Where the "Goal Posts" Are?

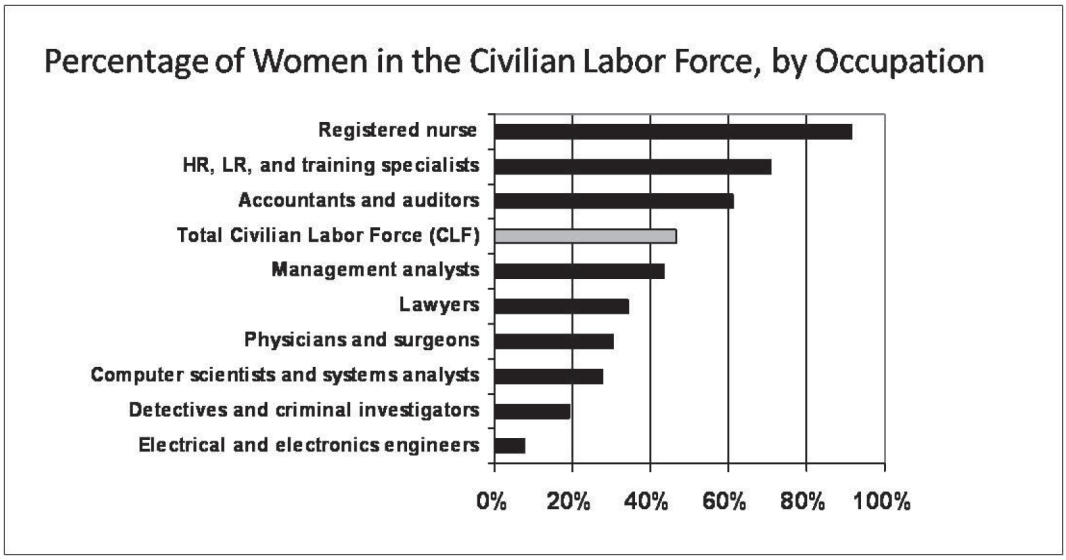
Equal representation in the overall civilian labor force does not translate to equal representation in all occupations.

Women have made great strides in their representation in both the American labor force and in the Federal Government. Women now account for nearly 47 percent of the civilian labor force[1] and hold approximately 44 percent of the permanent full-time professional and administrative positions in the Federal Government.[2]

However, a 50/50 balance between men and women in the overall workforce does not mean that representation has been fully achieved. As illustrated in the chart below, numerical parity between women and men within occupations tends to be the exception rather than the norm, especially in professional occupations. In many occupations, either women or men tend to dominate.

This fact has significant implications for workforce planning, recruitment, and gauging progress in achieving representation. The full representation of women— as measured by comparing an agency's workforce to the relevant civilian labor force (RCLF)—should not be confused with a 50/50 balance between women and men in the overall agency workforce. In fact, full representation may be attained at a markedly different rate, depending on the agency's occupational composition and the underlying RCLF. Because of that, agencies seeking greater gender parity in an underrepresented occupation (compared to the RCLF) may need to expand recruitment strategies to diversify their applicant pools. This means supplementing existing "passive" recruitment efforts, such as posting job announcements on USAJOBS, with broader outreach.

Agencies may also need to review staffing patterns and practices to ensure they allow for desired representation, including the level at which a job is filled and the specificity of the job's skill or competency requirements. Competency requirements should, of course, be dictated by job duties identified through job analysis. Selection decisions should then be based on this job-related ability rather than on non-job-related demographic characteristics. However, agencies may find that filling a job at entry level or providing certain skills through training or on-the job learning will allow them to consider a larger, more diverse pool of highly-qualified applicants. Similarly, agencies may find that assessments that directly measure ability or potential produce a better (as well as more diverse) applicant pool than do assessments that rely on training or experience as indicators of ability. ❖



[1]U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009 Current Population Survey. Employment status in the civilian labor force by sex, accessed at ftp://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/lf/aat2.txt on June 7, 2010.

[2]U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Fedscope (www.fedscope.opm.gov). Employment in permanent, nonseasonal full-time professional and administrative positions as of September 2009.

Avoid Committing a Prohibited Personnel Practice When Hiring the Right Person

Be careful about deciding too quickly who might be the perfect person for that promotion.

Picture the following situation. You are the supervisor of a vacant GS-12 team leader position, and you have a current GS-11 employee named Sam. You are certain she would be perfect for the promotion. Sam not only has the right technical skills, but she is also known for thinking ahead to resolve issues before they develop, is great at strategic planning and creative problem solving, and is a natural leader who motivates those around her. To you, the decision seems simple—hire Sam. So, you start to send an e-mail to human resources that says, "I want Sam to get the job. Create a vacancy announcement that will allow me to get Sam."

Why shouldn't you send that e-mail? Among other reasons, if you send that e-mail, it could be followed by a phone call from the Office of the Special Counsel inquiring about your possible commission of a prohibited personnel practice (PPP).

The law, 5 USC § 2302(b)(6), states that "any employee who has authority to take, direct others to take, recommend, or approve any personnel action, shall not, with respect to such authority… grant any preference or advantage not authorized by law, rule, or regulation to any employee or applicant for employment (including defining the scope or manner of competition or the requirements for any position) for the purpose of improving or injuring the prospects of any particular person for employment." In other words, if you deliberately do something in the way you design the job or the announcement for the purpose of helping (or hindering) a particular candidate, you've committed a PPP.

This does not mean you can't hire the right person—you just need to let the process find the right person without any improper manipulation of the system. If success in the position depends upon having the right technical skills, then candidates should be assessed against those skills. Therefore, it is critical that you identify the appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) necessary for the job. In this instance, the required competencies may be those skills you see in Sam: a proven talent for thinking ahead, strategic planning and creative problem solving skills, and the ability to lead and motivate.

However, you should also consider KSAs that Sam may be lacking if they would enhance performance in the job. Your crediting plan should neither add unnecessary selection criteria just because a certain individual has it, nor should it omit legitimately job-related criteria because a certain individual does not have it.

In addition, you should avoid cherry-picking hiring authorities for the purpose of including or excluding any one person. You should also strive to use an appropriate area of consideration that will result in a diverse, well-qualified applicant pool. Finally, implement reliable and valid assessment methods, which could include structured interviews and reference checks.

If you have created a recruitment plan that is right for the job, and if you are correct that Sam is the best candidate, then Sam should do well in the process. If another candidate is better than Sam after all is said and done, then the better candidate should get the job. However, creating "sham" competitions that result in a pre-determined decision will likely end with morale problems in the organization and could also get you into legal trouble. The key to getting the right person, and avoiding the commission of a PPP, is to dispassionately look at what knowledge, skills, and abilities the ideal candidate would have, and be prepared to hire whatever candidate proves most likely to succeed in the position. ❖

Want to Learn More About the Prohibited Personnel Practices?

Then check out our recently published report, *Prohibited Personnel Practices: A Study Retrospective* on our studies page at www.mspb.gov/studies. The report summarizes the research MSPB has done regarding the PPPs and kicks off our effort to re-examine the prevalence of PPPs in the Federal Government.

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