



# Merit Systems Protection Board

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
February 20, 2002

## **MSPB CALLS FOR BETTER CANDIDATE ASSESSMENT AND MORE EFFECTIVE USE OF PROBATIONARY PERIOD**

Employee selection processes vary widely among Federal agencies and do an uneven job of predicting how well candidates are likely to perform, according to a report released today by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB or the Board). The report, "Assessing Federal Job-Seekers in a Delegated Examining Environment," examines the ways Federal agencies assess job candidates. It notes that the ability of commonly used assessment tools to predict future job performance varies significantly and that one of the most-used tools—rating candidates' training and experience—can be one of the least predictive.

Today, Federal departments and agencies operate almost 700 delegated examining units—or DEUs—that assess job applicants. While the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) establishes standards for the operation of DEUs and periodically reviews their operations, DEUs operate with substantial independence.

According to the report, agencies usually assess job applicants through reviewing applicants' training and experience, interviewing them, and conducting reference checks. One MSPB concern is that some agencies view the assessment process as a cost, rather than an investment, and find minimal candidate assessment acceptable. Another issue is a lack of expertise in candidate assessment, raising the likelihood that some agency assessment processes may appear to be reasonable but actually do a poor job of predicting future performance. The report notes, however, that some agencies have taken a strategic view of candidate assessment, are using very good assessment processes, and have documented tangible benefits from this investment.

The report also focuses on the final assessment step for all new employees—the probationary period. This is the safety valve that allows new employees to demonstrate their ability to do the job and lets managers correct selection errors before new employees gain the job protections that follow successful completion of the probationary period. According to the report, if it is hard to find enough minimally qualified individuals to fill vacancies, it may be impractical to conduct multi-step assessments to identify the very best candidates. When business necessity justifies less stringent pre-appointment assessments, however, managers should take even greater care to use the probationary period effectively.

The report recommends that OPM increase its efforts to develop valid candidate assessment tools and make them available to agencies. It further recommends that OPM pay greater attention to addressing the costs of developing assessment tools so that cost alone does not prevent DEUs from having access to the best tools available. Among the report’s recommendations to agencies are that they take a strategic view of candidate assessment and emphasize the importance of making effective use of the probationary period for new hires.

Order copies of the report from the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Office of Policy and Evaluation, 1615 M Street, NW, Washington, DC, 20419; telephone (202) 653-6772, extension 1350; V/TDD 1-800-877-8339; or e-mail to [studies@mspb.gov](mailto:studies@mspb.gov). The report may also be downloaded from the “Studies” area on the Board’s website, <http://www.mspb.gov>.

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