

ISSUES OF MERIT

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and Evaluation

Getting Up to Speed: Embracing Internet Technology to Recruit

Blogging, tweeting, and friending should be staples in recruiters' toolkits.

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Current economic conditions may have slowed the much anticipated "retirement tsunami," but it's still important for agencies to continue modernizing their recruitment tools and techniques for the future workforce. To attract the attention of the upcoming generation of workers, many Federal agencies may need to polish their technology skills.

From a recruitment standpoint, the Federal Government should recognize that its potential recruits have grown up with the Internet, are accustomed to rapid communication through instant messaging, and tend to be well connected to mobile communication devices, such as BlackBerries and iPhones.

A first step may be to upgrade agency Web sites to give prospective employees not only the information they need to apply for a job, but more motivation to do so—for instance, by giving them an actual view of the critical missions of the organization. Photo galleries provide a static window into agencies, but with available video capabilities, agencies can more effectively showcase the important work done by Federal employees to a generation that regards YouTube as the norm.

However, agencies shouldn't just wait for applicants to reach them. Beyond

placing information on their Web sites and in job announcements on USAJOBS, agencies should scour the Web for opportunities to get their names and reputations as good employers out there to reach a broad pool of capable candidates.

Social networking sites offer access to a diverse pool of job candidates. These sites allow users to build online communities of people who share their interests and activities. These networks have created new avenues for users to communicate and share information with large and diverse (or small and focused) groups of people through email, instant messaging, blogging, email lists, and other communication mechanisms. Some agencies have established a presence on socially oriented Web sites such as Facebook and MySpace. LinkedIn has gained popularity among career professionals due to its focus on professional contacts, and GovLoop has started connecting public administrators.

Twitter provides another means for agencies to communicate with individuals who may be interested in applying for vacancies. Twitter is a micro-blogging service that allows users to send short, text-based posts, known as tweets. These

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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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Contact us at:

www.mspb.gov
(click on "MSPB Studies")

STUDIES@mspb.gov
202-653-6772 x1350
1-800-209-8960

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U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board
Office of Policy and Evaluation
1615 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20419

DIRECTOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Improving the Hiring Process Through Multiple Hurdles

By using simpler, more predictive personnel assessments successively, agencies may also be able to improve applicant burden and timeliness.

Through our *Issues of Merit* newsletter, the Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) has often expressed concerns about the Federal hiring process. One of the main concerns has been how complex and difficult the application process can be for prospective Federal employees. Not only are job announcements frequently confusing and off-putting, but applicants are often asked to supply copious amounts of information to be considered for a position with the Government. This is a serious problem that needs to be addressed if the Government is to have a flexible, merit-based system that hires the best people.

For example, agencies typically ask applicants to provide multiple, lengthy written narratives describing general knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), such as "ability to communicate in writing" or "knowledge of Federal budgeting." This requirement necessitates a great amount of applicants' time to write the narratives, as well as the investment of considerable agency resources to evaluate these lengthy applications. Because of the generality of the information requested and the lack of structure in how applicants should structure their narratives, much of the information may be only marginally useful in identifying the best applicant. However, it adds significant time to the application and evaluation processes.

Recently, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) completed a pilot project which tested new methods for

selecting members of the Senior Executive Service (SES). The typical application required each applicant to file a separate narrative response for each of the five Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs), to address the 28 competencies that underlay the ECQs. The narratives alone could run up to 10 pages per applicant.

To reduce the burden and increase the quality of applications, one of the pilot methods involved replacing the ECQ narratives with accomplishment records.¹ The accomplishment records are shorter write-ups on a select few of the 28 executive competencies. This approach permitted candidates to submit much shorter applications that targeted specifically selected competencies instead of very lengthy ECQ narratives. Applicants who were determined to be well-qualified based on the evaluation of their accomplishment record were then further evaluated using a structured interview process. The results of this pilot test indicated that it reduced the burden on applicants while at the same time allowing agencies to select high-quality applicants for their SES positions.

In my opinion, if this multiple hurdle process can be successfully used for selecting among applicants for critical SES positions, it can also be used to improve the application and selection process for a variety of Federal jobs. The multiple hurdle approach starts with the use of a broad and relatively easy assessment that winnows the potentially

¹For a more in depth discussion of accomplishment records, see the July 2008 edition of *Issues of Merit*.

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Multiple Hurdle Approach

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large number of applicants down to a more manageable number. Accomplishment records are one way to do this because they are fairly good at predicting job success but can require fewer resources than the more laborious, less predictive KSA process. After the first hurdle, applicants are then scrutinized more closely using highly valid selection procedures, such as the structured interview.

The point is that significant effort should be devoted to the second hurdle that determines who among a group of well-qualified applicants is best qualified for a job. Too often, however, excessive resources—of both the applicants and agencies—are spent on the first hurdle of low quality assessments that do not do a good job of predicting how well an applicant will perform if hired.

We need to change how we prioritize the use of our resources. On average, fewer resources should be spent on the first part of the selection process that evaluates whether a candidate is among the best qualified than is spent on the successive measures that determine who

is likely to be the best selection. This makes sense not only from an organizational perspective, but from the perspective of applicants. We should make it relatively easy for a person to apply for a job, determine who is likely to be among the most qualified, and then use the best possible selection tool to determine who is actually the best applicant for a given job. Doing this will not only make better use of agency resources but will better serve the needs of potential applicants.

The current process takes too long and it asks so much of potential applicants in its initial phases that it can discourage many high quality candidates from applying for Federal jobs. As OPM has demonstrated with regard to SES positions, it may be possible to adjust the balance in a way that improves the hiring process for both applicants and the Government.

John Crum

Director, Policy and Evaluation

Hiring Flexibilities: Use with Care

As noted in our report, *Federal Appointing Authorities: Cutting through the Confusion*, Federal agencies now have more ways than ever to fill positions. This flexibility can help agencies use staff time and recruitment dollars more efficiently, but it also brings challenges and responsibilities.

Data from MSPB surveys over the years suggest that Federal agencies have made progress in eliminating prohibited discrimination in the workplace. In our 1992 Merit Principles Survey (MPS), 12 percent of employees claimed they had been denied a job, promotion, pay, or other job benefit because of their race or national origin. In 2007, that figure decreased to 5 percent.

Yet it's clear that reducing levels of discrimination is not sufficient to assure that hiring decisions are perceived as open, fair, and merit-based. Many employees express reservations about how Federal agencies recruit, hire, and promote employees. In the MPS 2005, only 37 percent of employees agreed that they had been treated fairly in the area of advancement. Preliminary data from a recent MSPB survey indicates that many employees believe that hiring decisions are driven more by favoritism and connections than by applicants' relative abilities.

Hiring flexibilities can contribute to such perceptions

when they are not chosen judiciously and administered carefully. The flexibility that permits an agency to focus recruitment on a promising source of applicants may be viewed by frustrated applicants as a way to enable selecting officials to restrict competition to "favored" applicants. Similarly, the ability to select from multiple sources of candidates can contribute to the perception that hiring decisions are based on factors other than merit.

To maximize the benefits afforded by hiring flexibilities and minimize the potential downsides, it's important that agencies:

- Use hiring flexibilities judiciously, to avoid the perception of unnecessarily restricting competition;
- Clarify how hiring flexibilities work so applicants can compete on their merits instead of on their ability to comprehend and comply with hiring procedures;
- Explain the basis on which applicants will compete, to minimize perceptions that hiring processes and decisions are arbitrary; and
- Seek feedback from employees and applicants on the hiring process.

These steps will require time on the part of both human resources staff and hiring managers, but they should benefit agencies and applicants in the long run. ❖

Human Resources: A Key to Employee Engagement and Organizational Results

MSPB research shows that HR programs are the key to creating an engaged, productive workforce.

In the last decade, the Federal human resources (HR) community has transformed from focusing on transactional work to consulting with managers on how best to accomplish programmatic goals. This shift from pushing paper to becoming a strategic partner has been met with varying degrees of success, perhaps in part because measuring the value of the HR function to an organization can be elusive. However, the value of HR programs to an organization's bottom line is outlined in the recent MSPB report, *The Power of Federal Employee Engagement*.

Employee engagement is a heightened connection between employees and their work, their organization, or the people they work for or with. The importance of this connection lies in the fact that MSPB found a significant relationship between increased levels of employee engagement in Federal agencies and improved agency outcomes. Specifically, we found that in agencies where more employees were engaged, better program results were produced, employees used less sick leave, fewer employees filed equal employment opportunity complaints, and there were fewer cases of work-related injury or illness.

The relationship between increased levels of employee engagement and improved agency outcomes should focus management attention on the practices we recommend to improve engagement. Many of these practices are rooted in programs typically administered by agency HR offices. As a strategic business partner, how can human resources improve the engagement level of employees and influence these agency outcomes?

Person-to-Job Fit. First, HR staffs should work with line managers to ensure a good person-to-job fit within their organizations. This starts with improving the marketing of Federal jobs to entice good job candidates to apply and helping managers assess job candidates more intensively so hiring organizations and applicants gain as

much insight into each other as possible.

Orientation/Mentoring Programs. Once new employees are on board, HR staffs should assist managers in developing orientation and mentoring programs to effectively assimilate new employees into the organization and assist them to define their role in the organization. Also, they can promote the use of job rotations so employees understand more about the wider organization and have greater opportunity to match their competencies with organizational needs.

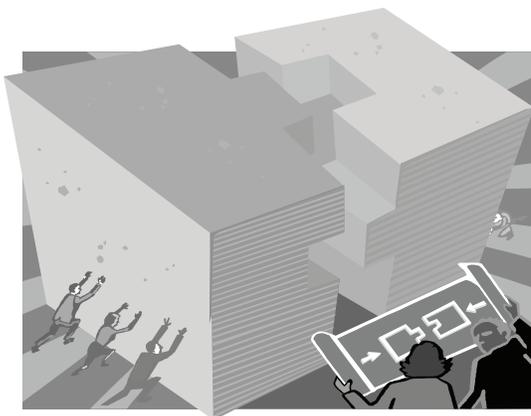
Performance Management. In addition, HR staffs should train managers in effective performance management techniques, including how to communicate with employees throughout the annual performance management cycle to ensure the messages being sent

to employees help rather than hinder their engagement. To foster employee engagement, managers must effectively communicate what is expected of employees, the importance of the employees' work, whether employees are meeting expectations, and what additional steps should be taken to improve performance. They should also model the desired behaviors and organizational values.

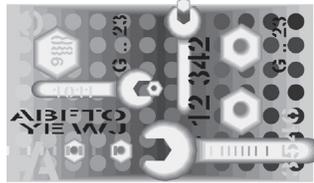
Supervisor Selection. Finally, our research shows that supervisors

play one of the most important roles in engaging employees. Therefore, managers need to hire people for supervisory positions based on their supervisory-related ability or potential without an inordinate focus on technical expertise. HR staffs can assist managers in identifying these individuals during the hiring process.

Since we found a relationship between employee engagement and agency outcomes, we would expect that if employee engagement were to improve in an agency, the outcomes referenced above would improve as well. For human resources to be a true strategic partner, the effectiveness of HR programs should be evaluated against how they add to an organization's bottom line. Measuring the level of employee engagement in an organization can be an important step in this direction. ❖



TOOLS OF THE TRADE



10-Minute Training Evaluation for Busy Supervisors

You are a harried supervisor with papers piled high on your desk. Along with managing and rewarding your team—and helping with their technical work—you try to get them the training they need. Evaluating that training is part of your job too, but you find this frustrating. Any evaluation done at the end of training is only rarely passed on to you. Even then, it does not consider whether the training had any effect in the workplace.

Good news—there’s something you can do. Use *10-minute training evaluation* with each team member to get the job done. Here’s how it works:

The first five minutes. Have a chat about the training soon after your team member returns. Ask these four questions:

1. *What did you think of the training?* This gives your team members an unprompted opportunity to evaluate their experience. Listen carefully to understand what was good and not-so-good.
2. *How much could you get from just the manual?* Sometimes the essentials of training—especially technical training—don’t require class attendance. Knowing this can save resources in the future.
3. *How much did you already know?* Some training

Embracing Technology

(continued from page 1)

tweets are a way to share short bursts of information quickly. In addition to a more general purpose of updating users regarding agency activities, messages might alert prospective employees to upcoming job fairs or vacancy announcements.

It’s still important to recognize that the process of marketing the agency doesn’t end with getting applicants to apply. Given the length of time the hiring process can take, agencies need to continually communicate with applicants so they don’t lose interest. Although many automated hiring systems include a feature to update applicants regarding the status of their application, it tends to be underutilized. Because today’s applicants expect

addresses mostly basic or introductory information that those on the job already know.

4. *What will you do differently on the job?* Your team member has the newly-learned information in mind and is in a good position to predict how it can be used.

Jot some notes from this conversation on the top half of a sheet of paper or a generated form. Your notes from the fourth question will help you decide when to plan your second five minutes.

The second five minutes. Have another chat after your team member has had the time and opportunity to put the training to use. Ask these two questions:

1. *How did you use what you learned?* Listen carefully to learn about barriers that prevented use of the training and for any misinformation or mismatch with your work setting.

2. *Would you go again or do something else?* Your team member is in a good position to see how well the training supports the job and perhaps suggest a better alternative.

Take more notes on the bottom half of your paper. Use your judgment about the team’s work habits and environment to add your own perspective as to whether this training would be useful for other team members. As you talk to others about these training episodes, be sure to refer to these notes and emphasize the perspective of your other team members.

A folder of these notes will help when your agency “rolls up” data to meet its yearly training evaluation responsibilities under the recent revision of 5 CFR 410. This training evaluation can help the voice from a single training instance to be heard—and make a difference. ❖

prompt feedback, agencies should consider the growing importance of this feature to maintaining the applicant pool—the highest quality candidates are the ones who may be the most likely to get quick job offers.

Taken together, these strategies can help Federal agencies do two things: (1) market themselves to the future workforce by utilizing the rich source of networks available to reach out to them, and (2) provide applicants with the incentives and information they need to pursue job opportunities with the Federal Government. However, keep in mind that not all applicants will have access to these tools, so they should be used as supplements to a wide-ranging recruitment strategy. ❖



Assessing the Assessments: Structured Interviews

Using properly structured interviews provides better questions for better decisions.

MSPB's Merit Principles Survey 2000 found that 95 percent of respondents use interviews to a great or moderate extent when making selection decisions. These same respondents believed that the interview is an excellent predictor of job performance. This explains why the interview remains a prevalent assessment tool in the hiring process. Throughout the Federal Government, the structured interview has become increasingly popular as a selection strategy.

What is a structured interview? Structured interviews ask all candidates the same set of behavioral questions which are based on job analysis and have detailed rating scales to make the interview more job-relevant and reliable.

What are the advantages of structured interviews?

- Structured interviews have high validity ratings, meaning they are good predictors of performance.
- They typically have low adverse impact.
- They engage managers in the hiring process, giving them a close and careful look at the applicants.
- Applicants view them as fair because they can see the relationship between the questions and the job.
- Structure gives the interviews more focus, makes them more consistent, and guards against errors in judgment.

What are the disadvantages? The key disadvantage to structured interviews is that they require more expertise, training, and resources than unstructured interviews. Without proper training, developing and conducting such interviews may be difficult and many selecting officials may not be getting the most from their interview efforts.

How can agencies develop structured interview questions? There are two important steps to developing effective structured interviews:

1. *Know the job well.* To write effective questions, consult subject matter experts (SME) and/or access job analysis data. Specifically, you may question supervisors and seasoned incumbents about the demands of the job and the critical incidents they think the incumbent is likely to encounter. Position descriptions, qualification standards, and job announcements are other important sources of job information that will help you when preparing questions. The more you know about the job, the more your questions will speak to the needs of the job.

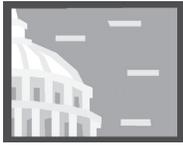
Some more general occupational references you may want to consult include: the Dictionary of Occupations Titles (<http://online.onetcenter.org>); U.S. Standard Occupational Classification System (www.bls.gov/SOC/); and Web pages specializing in job analyses, such as The HR-Guide.com (<http://www.hr-guide.com/data/025.htm>).

2. *Write effective interview questions.* Based on the job related information gathered, questions should be developed that ask applicants to: (1) describe how they have previously accomplished job-related tasks, (2) how they intend to accomplish them in the future, or (3) how they have come to possess identified knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). The point is that almost every duty or task, critical incident, and KSA identified for the particular job can become an interview question. For example, if performing mathematical computations is a task on the job announcement, a job-related question might be, "Tell me about the most difficult mathematical computations you have performed on the job."

You may also develop questions by asking SMEs to talk about the most difficult and challenging events (critical incidents) that take place on the job and how they managed these events. For example, suppose a clerical job SME relates a critical incident about a tight deadline and competing priorities. A question may be written describing the event and asking the candidate about how he/she handled such an event in the past.

How are structured interviews scored? One of the most difficult tasks in interviewing is rating responses. There are several things to consider. We suggest scoring the responses on a 1-5 scale. This scale has been found to provide adequate range and precision. Ensure that interviewers take copious notes of applicant responses during the interview or use a note taker. For each interview question, decide in advance what criteria to use in assigning scores. Scoring criteria may consider the difficulty of the effort illustrated in the response, the complexity surrounding the event that prompted the responses, time constraints under which the effort took place, or the impact of the effort illustrated in the response.

To learn more about structured interviews, please see MSPB's report, *The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential*, available at www.mspb.gov. ❖



Agency Corner: DoD is Accommodating Federal Agencies

The Department of Defense (DoD) is partnering with agencies on its successful Computer/Electronic Accommodations Program (CAP). CAP provides a level playing field for people with disabilities in the workplace in DoD and throughout the Federal Government by making assistive technology and services available at no cost. Assistive technology empowers employees with disabilities to be more engaged in their work, resulting in more productive employees.

DoD established CAP in 1990. In 2000, Congress granted CAP the authority to provide assistive technology, devices, and services *free of charge* to Federal agencies that have a partnership agreement with CAP. Since its inception, CAP has filled over 74,000 requests and collaborated with over 65 Federal agencies for accommodations for employees and wounded Service members with various disabilities. CAP encourages Federal employers to take advantage of their resources to accommodate and hire more workers with disabilities. As Dinah Cohen, CAP's Director, put it, "We buy it, we pay for it, we get it to the users, it's just that simple."

To meet growing program demands, CAP created eCAP, the world's first online accommodation process.

It provides free needs assessments, accommodation selection, and request submission capability for a one-stop shop of assistive technology accommodations, giving people privacy as they review options. eCAP expedites customer requests, allowing CAP to provide thousands more accommodations than in previous years.

In addition, CAP's efforts uphold the Federal Government as a model employer in this area. Much of CAP's success lies in its ability to provide reasonable accommodations to employees quickly and easily, increasing employment and retention of employees with disabilities. DoD received the 2008 Presidential Award for Management Excellence in the area of Expanded E-Government Innovative and Exemplary Practices in recognition of CAP's efforts.

President Barack Obama pledged that his administration would make the employment of people with disabilities a priority, and CAP can help. For more information on how your agency can partner with DoD, contact TRICARE Management Activity in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, which serves as the executive agent for CAP, at 703-681-8813 or visit them online at www.tricare.mil/cap. ❖

Did You Know? Time-in-Grade Is Being Eliminated.

On May 18, OPM is expected to enact a final rule eliminating time-in-grade requirements for promotions in the competitive service. Originally, the change was to take effect March 9, but has been delayed. The time-in-grade (TIG) requirement—found in 5 CFR 300, subpart F—stipulates that Federal employees in competitive service positions at grades GS-5 and above serve 52 weeks in grade before becoming eligible for promotion to the next grade level.

The need for a time-in-grade requirement has been debated for quite some time now. The comments to OPM's proposal show some of the pros and cons of eliminating this requirement. Many respondents argued that abolishing TIG would increase favoritism, as managers could more easily promote those who did not deserve it. They felt that the TIG requirement helps to ensure fairness and equity. OPM disagreed, pointing out that TIG was just one requirement for promotion. An employee must still meet occupational qualification

standards and any additional job-related qualification requirements established for the position.

In addition, OPM argues that eliminating this regulation puts competitive service employees on more equal footing with other Federal employees. OPM points out that TIG does not apply to excepted service positions or to other pay plans, such as wage grade. Many respondents also noted a concern that elimination would have a negative impact on minorities and veterans, though the Federal Register notice does not specify how respondents thought that may occur. OPM responded that managers and HR staffs must continue to abide by civil service laws pertaining to equal employment opportunity.

The Federal Register notice detailing the discussion and rule change can be found at <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2008/E8-26559.htm>. We encourage readers to educate themselves about the change and consider how your agency can implement the new rule to uphold principles of merit while also minimizing administrative burden. ❖



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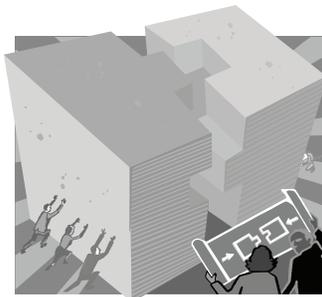
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