Listen to the Exam Coach: How to Do Well on an Accomplishment Record Assessment

An increasing number of hiring officials are assessing prior work experience in a new way. Instead of traditional “KSA” narratives, which ask applicants to list all of the evidence that they have a certain skill, agencies are beginning to use accomplishment records (ARs). These assessments require a more specific discussion of the candidates’ skills than is required by KSAs. They ask applicants to select one accomplishment from their work history and write about it in depth. Research has shown that this approach yields information which better predicts applicants’ future performance on the job.¹

One danger in using a new assessment—even a better one—is that applicants will score lower than they should because they are unfamiliar with it. We offer the following advice to help applicants get the scores they deserve.

Pick one accomplishment. Pay close attention to the instructions to pick one accomplishment and describe it in depth. Typical AR scoring guidelines are not flexible enough to yield a competitive score for lists of unrelated tasks. Some scoring guides require that this type of list be left unscored. Others require scoring of only part of the information you provide. Under either of these scoring systems, not following directions to focus on a single accomplishment will lower your score.

Select the accomplishment carefully. Do not necessarily select your most recent or most interesting accomplishment—or even the one from the job where people liked you the most. Pay attention to the kind of job you are applying for and the parameters described in the AR instructions. In our office, we ask applicants to describe research projects and reports they have written as accomplishments. If they describe another kind of achievement, we have no choice but to score them lower, even if we find their accomplishment personally impressive.

Focus on the scoring dimensions. AR instructions will tell you what to include in your description. Be sure to provide information about each requested aspect rather than relying on the overall impressive nature of an accomplishment. Most ARs are scored like structured interviews, with very specific scoring dimensions and guidelines. If you omit requested information, you may end up with a “0” on that dimension, and a low score overall. It’s better to describe a weaker aspect of the accomplishment for partial credit than leave it out for no credit.

Choose good verifiers. Many ARs ask you to supply the names and contact information of “verifiers” who can vouch for your role in an accomplishment. It is important to provide this information and understand that this role is similar but slightly different than that of an employment reference provider. Like reference providers, the best verifiers must actually have observed your performance of the accomplishment. It is less important that they have generally positive things to say about you—they are usually asked only to verify, not evaluate, your accomplishment. And, of course, if you fail to provide verifier information at all, you risk receiving that zero score.

AR assessments are designed to give applicants credit for their significant work accomplishments. Applicants who are informed about this format and represent their achievements accurately will likely be more competitive for jobs they wish to obtain.²


²Employee benefits from exposure to leading edge practices in their field.