



THE WEAKEST LINK

How Strengthening Assessment Leads to Better Federal Hiring

AUGUST 2010



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

PDRI | A PreVisor
Company

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works.

PDRI is a premier research and consulting firm in the field of industrial-organizational psychology. PDRI designs, develops and implements human resource solutions that incorporate the most recent advances in the behavioral sciences and adhere to the highest principles of professional practice.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For our government to succeed and achieve its mission, it must be able to identify and hire skilled, capable and dedicated employees.

Everyone agrees that the federal government doesn't always hire well, with talent lost because the selection process today moves too slowly and because hiring managers and human resources personnel often do a poor job of selecting the right candidates—those who will be the most successful in the job.

The Obama administration is seeking to address these issues with a hiring reform plan that calls for agencies to “select high-quality candidates efficiently and quickly.”

As the administration implements this new initiative in the fall, the key challenge will be creating a process that is balanced—one that truly puts emphasis both on speed and high quality. Without considerable time and energy being devoted to conducting good assessments of job seekers, a speed-up of the process only will result in the government getting the wrong candidates faster.

Given the direct connection between good hiring decisions, a first-class civil service and a high performing government, the Partnership for Public Service, in cooperation with PDRI, a PreVisor Company, took an in-depth look at how agencies are assessing candidates for federal jobs today, the barriers to hiring the best candidates and how the process can be improved.

Our study found that applicant assessment is the weakest link in the government's problematic hiring chain, with top candidates frequently getting lost in meaningless evaluation. The public is the biggest loser, because the result often is a wasted opportunity to strengthen the civil service.

The federal hiring process by design is less flexible than the private sector's, with congressionally mandated merit principles requiring agencies to select qualified candidates through “fair and open competition” and ensure that all receive “equal opportunity.” Government also must balance other priorities, including diversity and veterans' preference—requirements that cannot be properly implemented without valid and effective assessment tools.

Last year, the government's hiring challenges were compounded by the daunting task of reviewing 13.5 mil-

lion job applications, a record number undoubtedly fueled by the nation's economic crisis. By year's end, there were some 159,000 employees hired into permanent positions across the federal government.

The unique federal hiring principles clearly affect the applicant review process, and the sheer volume of applications makes it difficult to identify qualified candidates and predict job performance. To be clear, evaluating candidates for federal jobs is a difficult task. But there are also numerous other barriers ranging from the lack of collaboration among key players in the hiring process to shortage of expertise and resources that require attention if the assessment of candidates for federal employment is to be meaningful.

Some of these issues have been raised in past studies, but most remain unaddressed. Part of the problem has been the tendency for participants in this process to lay blame and point fingers at each other without devoting enough attention to workable solutions.

In our study, we found that:

- Key players—hiring managers, human resources (HR) professionals, agency leaders and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM)—often do not work in tandem to effectively assess job candidates. Most agencies neither seek nor get sufficient direction and support from OPM, hiring managers lack needed guidance and help from their human resources staff in assessing candidate qualifications, and senior agency leaders fail to give sufficient backing to HR professionals or to make applicant assessment a priority in the hiring process.
- HR staffs often have limited resources, competencies and training needed to assist and guide hiring managers with their assessment of job applicants. At the same time, hiring managers frequently lack many of the basic skills to perform their roles in the assessment process, including the ability to ask relevant questions and structure job interviews in ways that capture consistent information and support optimal hiring decisions.
- Agencies view assessment too narrowly and miss out on good candidates. There is a tendency to think that assessment is confined just to the formal process of measuring applicant competencies. As a

result, HR and hiring managers may pay too little attention to other important parts of the process, including ensuring that job requirements are clear, that reference checks are conducted properly, and that they use the probationary period to validate hiring decisions. In addition, agencies routinely fail to recognize the high value of intern programs and have greatly underutilized internships as the best way to identify, assess and hire entry-level talent.

- Automated applicant tracking systems are meant to expedite the hiring process and support good HR practices, but in many instances they are poorly utilized and do not meet the needs of the agencies. There are multiple systems in use across the government that cannot share information, creating difficulties for applicants to find jobs that suit their talents and for HR staff who must manage hiring. In addition to these limitations, agency staff often do not have full working knowledge of the systems and miss some of the benefits that are available.
- OPM and agencies need good, reliable measures to gauge progress around assessment, but few agencies collect data that either HR staff or hiring managers find useful. Even when information is useful, it does not regularly reach the people in agencies who will most likely benefit from it.

As part of the administration's hiring reform, OPM is spearheading efforts to streamline and improve the processes for job announcements, applications and assessment, including the development of standard tools to assess candidates' competencies relevant to many federal jobs.

The success of this effort will hinge on the quality of these new assessment tools as well as OPM's ability to establish regular and meaningful interactions with agencies to implement them.

Clearly, agencies must take advantage of the guidance and tools provided by OPM, set sensible goals in line with agency needs and reach out for advice and support to make the new hiring process work. OPM, agency leaders, hiring managers and human resources professionals must rally their attention and resources to improve the way government assesses the qualifications and skills of job applicants. We also believe there are a number of steps that should be taken to overcome the existing barriers and enhance this process.

Based on our study, we recommend:

- HR specialists and hiring managers need to work together more effectively to assess the qualifications of job applicants. This means defining roles and responsibilities at the outset, setting realistic milestones for filling vacancies, and then following through to ensure that their collaboration adds value and improves the quality of candidates identified in the hiring process.
- Senior agency leaders, not just the heads of HR, must elevate the importance of assessment in the hiring process by investing sufficient staff time and resources, outlining reasonable goals for agency success, promoting ownership among key agency staff and holding appropriate people accountable for results.
- OPM should be wary of training approaches that separate key players, such as human resources personnel and hiring managers, as these tend to reinforce challenges in communicating and cooperating. Instead, OPM should bring these groups together for training that stimulates teamwork. The training should provide help in identifying critical job competencies, specifics on how to screen large volumes of resumes objectively, guidance in selecting appropriate assessment options and templates for structured job interviews.
- Agencies should give priority to bringing on new skilled HR staff who can guide and support hiring managers through the assessment process.
- Assessment must be closely connected to the rest of the hiring process and not viewed in isolation. This means that agencies must write clear job announcements, check references thoroughly to verify applicant suitability and actively use the probationary period to gauge the success of new employees.
- Agencies must take greater advantage of intern programs by seizing the opportunity to assess the potential of young candidates while they are on the job—one of the best indicators of employees' future performance—and hire those who have demonstrated they have the right qualifications and abilities for vacant positions.
- OPM needs to establish a common standard for applicant tracking systems and provide a corresponding information technology platform that will enable integration of diverse systems to support as-

assessment. Agencies also need technical specialists to ensure that staff is trained to make good use of applicant tracking systems.

- Agencies should jettison make-work data collection and analysis, and instead focus on a few core data points that together measure meaningful outcomes and provide a big-picture view of the effectiveness of assessments. Key indicators of effectiveness should include the satisfaction of hiring managers with new employees after six months to a year, the level of employee job satisfaction after a similar time period, the rate of new employee attrition and performance of new workers.

There is no doubt that good assessment tools help identify those applicants who are likely to perform a job more effectively than others and provide managers with the information they need to make better hiring decisions. This in turn translates into better employee performance, better results for the agencies and better services for the American public.

Devoting resources and attention to assessment is a key element needed to make federal hiring reforms work and must become a priority for federal managers and remain one for the Obama administration. The focus moving forward should be on how to make things right, not on who's doing it wrong.

INTRODUCTION

THE IMPORTANCE OF ASSESSMENT

The federal government hires hundreds of employees each day into its civilian workforce of 2.1 million. The potential impact of each new employee may seem small, but together they filled nearly 159,000 permanent positions in 2009.¹ That's a big infusion of new talent—more employees than work at Starbucks (124,000), General Motors (145,000) or Microsoft, Google and Amazon combined (130,000). And it happens each year, as employees inevitably retire or leave the federal workforce. Unfortunately, problems with federal hiring and, in particular, difficulty in identifying the best candidates for open jobs, result in government squandering many of its chances to strengthen the public service workforce.

Figure 1 The five stages of the federal hiring process



There is ample room for mistakes in federal hiring—a complex system with five major stages and many moving parts.² In brief, hiring begins with workforce planning to align an agency's personnel needs with top mission goals. The next stage involves recruitment efforts to reach great candidates. The third stage in hiring cov-

ers candidate assessment, which includes gauging candidates' capabilities and identifying those most likely to succeed in the jobs being filled. The fourth stage, security and selection, is where agencies convince the top candidate(s) to accept a job offer, obtain any security clearances needed and verify background information. Onboarding, which includes orientation and the probationary period, is the final hiring stage, and often involves a year-long effort to help new employees acclimate and become productive in their new roles.

A breakdown anywhere along the hiring chain can result in problems. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB), the Government Accountability Office and the Partnership for Public Service have all conducted research that identified various shortcomings in the hiring process.³

As reported in the Partnership's August 2010 report, "Closing the Gap: Seven Obstacles to a First-Class Federal Workforce," the federal Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCOs) and other HR leaders cited a government hiring process that is long, inefficient and burdensome; the erosion of human resources (HR) expertise, limited collaboration between HR and hiring managers, limited resources to improve hiring and the challenges in applying the statutory merit system principles and the veterans' preference. Other reports have cited use of unreliable standards and tools to determine qualifications and identify the best candidates.

The Obama administration, under the leadership of OPM and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), now is in the midst of an unprecedented hiring reform initiative to address the most vexing problems, including speeding up the hiring process and making it more transparent.

But these hiring reform proposals have prompted words of caution from federal CHCOs. As reported in the Partnership's August 2010 report, the CHCOs said that simply speeding up the hiring process is insufficient and emphasized that improving the quality of those hired is as important, if not more important. A bad hire is still a bad hire even when done quickly. The CHCOs, while

1 Data from the OPM's *Central Personnel Data File* (CPDF) were used for this analysis. New workers FY 2009 included full-time permanent employees, as well as permanent employees hired for part-time and seasonal work. We included former federal employees returning after a break in service, but excluded transfers between agencies, reinstatements and status-quo appointments. These CPDF results also do not include new employees in intelligence agencies, the Postal Service, the judicial and legislative branches or those in the State Department Foreign Service.

2 Adapted from U.S. Office of Personnel Management, *End to End Hiring Roadmap*, 4-6.

3 U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Reforming Federal Hiring*; General Accountability Office, *Government-wide Management Improvement Efforts*, 8.

supportive of the reforms, also cautioned that the human resources community—the very people who will be on the front lines seeking to implement the hiring changes—are not fully up to the task.

Why assessment is essential to hiring success

This report focuses on what may well be the weakest link in the hiring chain—assessing applicants. Effective assessment is the linchpin of federal hiring, both helping to ensure that an agency’s planning and recruiting pay off and acting as a pass-through point for getting qualified people into the right federal jobs. Familiar assessment tools include job knowledge tests, interviews, biographical data, reference checks and many others (see Appendix C). But the names of these tools are far less important than how they are developed and applied within agencies.

Studies show that hiring succeeds more often when assessment criteria are objective, easily verified, linked to performance and applied consistently to applicants. People hired under these conditions are better matched to their jobs, perform better and have higher retention rates.⁴ These and related measures translate to better results as well as millions of dollars in savings—both wins for the agency and the public. In contrast, poor assessment ultimately hurts government’s ability to serve the public due to higher turnover and weaker performance.

A core principle of our merit-based civil service system is that “selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge, and skills after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity.” By definition, this principle cannot be met without the use of valid and effective assessment tools. Applying veterans’ preference, a unique aspect of federal hiring, is likewise undercut by weak assessments. Veterans are given preference over non-veteran candidates with roughly equal or lesser qualifications—a process that assumes accuracy in comparing and ranking candidates, as well as placing them in categories with similarly qualified candidates. Without good assessment tools to make these judgments, veterans’ preference does not work as intended.

⁴ Partnership for Public Service, *Asking the Wrong Questions*; MSPB, *Reforming Federal Hiring*; MSPB, *Job Simulations: Trying Out for a Federal Job*; Pulakos “Selection Assessment Methods,” *Society for Human Resource Management* (2005).

Solving the right problems

It’s clear that some key stakeholders have lost faith in the federal hiring system. Many, including the Partnership, have described the process as “broken.” Yet, some important parts of the hiring process appear to work relatively well, including government’s ability to generate public interest in federal jobs, to uphold merit principles and limit discrimination,⁵ and to ensure that key groups receive preference for past service and current needs. The problem is that other essential parts of the process—assessment in particular—often work very poorly. This imbalance tends to compound existing problems. For example, the growing number of job candidates further exposes the weakness of agency assessment procedures.

Instead of calling the federal hiring system “broken,” a more constructive diagnosis may be that the system is badly “out of alignment.” Defining the problem in this way also affects how we try to solve it. Like an athlete who exercises one set of muscles but neglects the supporting ones, government has created imbalances that increase the chances for self-injury or harm. We need to bring the pieces of federal hiring back into alignment, with assessment as a key lever in the process. Fortunately, that is also the direction that government is looking to head.

Current hiring reforms and direction

The timing is right to focus on assessment. On May 11, 2010, President Obama issued a memorandum directing OPM, agencies and hiring managers to take more responsibility for achieving hiring goals and to assess applicants using “valid and reliable” tools. In response, OPM is spearheading reforms to streamline and improve processes for job announcements, applications and assessment.

Because many vacancies now attract large numbers of applications, good assessment procedures must combine automation (for speed), with top-flight competency-based assessments (to ensure applicant quality). Automation can also enable agencies to use more interactive and media-rich assessments, such as animated situational judgment tests that simulate job tasks and activities.

OPM is currently developing standard tools to assess competencies applicable to many federal job series (e.g.,

⁵ MSPB, *Reforming Federal Hiring*.

reasoning, writing, interpersonal skills). The move reflects several important realities in the federal government and is in line with recommendations from previous studies.⁶

Most agencies do not regularly hire enough staff in all of their job series to justify the expense of developing their own competency-based assessments. Since similar jobs across agencies often require the same basic competencies, it would be redundant for each agency to develop and manage its own separate assessment program. Furthermore, developing and overseeing a program to assess competencies require specialized expertise in statistics, validation, legal issues and related areas that most agencies lack and can be costly to acquire.

OPM's centralized assessment services will provide agencies with tools and resources that will enable them to implement standardized, effective and valid assessments to evaluate applicants' job qualifications for many federal vacancies, without having to incur the time and resources that would be needed to develop these in-house. OPM plans to link these new assessments to existing automated applicant tracking systems, allowing the assessments to be administered and scored quickly. The aim is to improve hiring quality without sacrificing speed.

Report methodology and organization

While President Obama's federal hiring reforms hold great promise, the past is also littered with other efforts that have fallen short of their goals and study recommendations that have failed to gain traction. This Partnership report, done in cooperation with PDRI, discusses why progress on assessment has been slow, where the sticking points are and how agencies and OPM can move forward more effectively to implement the requirements in the May 11, 2010 memorandum.

In this report, we focus exclusively on the assessment of new hires, not on assessments used to determine promotions for federal employees.

Our results draw on a thorough review of assessment research practices in the federal government and a series of detailed conversations—in focus groups and interviews—with thought leaders and practitioners involved in federal hiring. Many of those we spoke with also had experience outside of the federal government. To ensure a cross-section of perspectives in these dis-

cussions, we reached out to large agencies as well as smaller ones and recruited a variety of stakeholders, including human resources professionals, hiring managers, labor union representatives, industrial and organizational psychologists, present and past OPM officials and representatives of veterans groups.

We conducted seven focus groups and 20 additional interviews specifically for this study. These data were collected between December 2009 and May 2010. We also drew on four focus groups conducted with users of USAJOBS.gov earlier in 2009. These discussions centered on applicants' experiences with the federal hiring process.

We've separated the results into three sections, which cover the barriers to progress, recommendations to address the barriers and appendices with tools and resources for agency use. Some of the ideas and recommendations we present will be familiar—good ideas are worth repeating—while other information is new. The purpose is to help agencies move forward in constructive and practical ways.

⁶ *ibid*, 48-51.

In Focus**Fundamentals of effective assessment**

There are many different ways to assess an applicant's capabilities to perform a job, including interviews, work samples, written records of accomplishments, knowledge and ability tests (e.g., reasoning, writing) and simulations of job activities. At their core, however, all good hiring assessments help identify applicants who are likely to perform a job more effectively than others. They allow managers to make better hiring decisions than they could make otherwise. No assessment can do this perfectly, but perfection isn't needed to add value, such as cost savings and productivity improvements.[†] Finally, the best assessments also work for applicants—they level the playing field and help to ensure fairness and transparency in hiring. Rather than viewing these assessments as disincentives to apply, the most qualified applicants appreciate them.

Deciding which assessments to use begins with the job analysis, which is essentially a two-part job review. It involves (1) identifying the basic job requirements or tasks that employees must perform and (2) determining the competencies needed to perform those tasks effectively.

Job analysis information is then used to develop assessments that predict which applicants are likely to perform best. Some assessments, such as work samples, directly evaluate how well applicants perform job-related activities, while other assessments measure the underlying competencies needed for job success in alternative ways. Examples of competencies that are frequently evaluated through hiring assessments include oral and written communication, critical thinking, interpersonal and teamwork skills, customer service, adaptability, and planning and prioritizing work. If a job requires specific technical knowledge, this can also be assessed. Of course, competencies will vary based on the job requirements. For example, assessments to hire a manager are more likely to measure the extent to which applicants can solve complex business problems, be decisive and communicate effectively. Those used to select an administrative assistant, on the other hand, would assess attention to detail, computer skills and customer service.[‡]

Despite a variety of good options for assessing candidates, until recently, many agencies have relied on knowledge, skills and ability (KSA) narratives, which are essentially essays describing past experience in job-relevant areas. When reviewing the KSA narratives, reviewers assign point values based on the reviewer's assessment of the quality and relevance of the applicant's work experience, education and other characteristics. Key problems with these narratives are that they often take significant time for applicants to complete and hiring officials to evaluate, and they are based on candidates' self-assessments, which provide no built-in checks for accuracy. As a result, these assessments often do a relatively poor job of identifying the best-qualified candidates for hiring managers to review. President Obama's reforms will eliminate KSAs in the early stages of the hiring process.

[†]As shown in return on investment (ROI) study results. Cascio, W.F., & Boudreau, J. W. (2008). *Investing in people: Financial impact of human resources initiatives*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.

[‡] More information about job analysis can be found on OPM's website: <http://opm.gov/hiringtoolkit/docs/jobanalysis.pdf>.

WHY ASSESSMENT REMAINS A CHALLENGE

FIVE KEY BARRIERS

The assessment challenges facing government differ in important ways from those in the private sector. Merit principles for federal hiring require that agencies select qualified candidates “after fair and open competition” and ensure that “all receive equal opportunity.” Hiring efforts must also balance multiple and sometimes competing priorities, including diversity and veterans’ preference. These commitments put added pressure on budget-strapped agencies to ensure that government’s assessment procedures work effectively for applicants as well as agencies, and that these assessments ultimately serve the public’s best interests.

For contrast, consider that in many private-sector organizations, a manager who receives 500 resumes for an opening can choose to review only the first 20, interview two and hire the one she feels is best for the job. But when a federal agency receives 500 applications, unless a cutoff is specified in advance, merit principles of fairness and equal opportunity are generally interpreted to mean that all 500 applications must be reviewed. When applicant pools are small, this is not an issue. But federal applicant pools today are anything but small, particularly at the entry level.

In 2006, agencies received about 2.3 million applications for the roughly 250,000 positions posted on USAJOBS.gov.⁷ By 2009, total applications had increased six-fold to 13.5 million, while the number of posted positions more than doubled to 630,000. Roughly 159,000 applicants were hired into permanent positions. For some entry-level federal jobs, agencies receive thousands of applications. For example, a posting for 240 transportation security inspector positions recently generated more than 130,000 applications in just five weeks.

The high volume of federal applications is a major challenge, in part because some of the tools that best predict job performance (e.g., structured interviews, job

simulations and work sample tests) are too expensive and time-consuming to use with large applicant pools. The result is that many agencies routinely use less effective assessment options (such as self-reported questionnaires) to manage larger pools of candidates.

Our research identified five key barriers that affect how agencies assess candidates for federal jobs—problems that compound the already difficult assessment process.

BARRIER 1

Key players are out of sync on assessment

From multiple focus groups and interviews, it is clear that everyone involved in federal hiring—managers, HR professionals, agency leaders, OPM and even job applicants—contributes to problems with assessment and shares the responsibility. Once the problems have been identified and discussed, the key questions are not about who’s doing it wrong, but who is prepared to pitch in and make things right. As one focus group participant observed, “At the end of the day, we all want the same outcome.”

Agencies need better direction and support from OPM

Agency representatives we spoke with recognize that OPM is expected to play two often-conflicting roles with respect to hiring. The first is to set policy regulations and enforce standards, while the second is to work with agencies on implementation. These roles can sometimes be at odds as OPM seeks to ensure consistency across agencies and protect the merit system, while also providing flexibility to accommodate specific agency needs.

Traditionally, OPM has offered guidance and consulting to agencies that have sought it, but agencies also have been responsible for developing their own assessments—a potentially time-intensive and costly undertaking. Study participants acknowledged that when OPM has attempted to develop assessment resources with broad appeal to agencies, it has had mixed success. As OPM now moves to develop a battery of assessments for broader use, study participants suggest that success will hinge not only on quality of these new assessment tools, but also on OPM’s success establishing regular

⁷ The number of job postings is not the same as the number of jobs. Over the course of a year, an agency might post the same job multiple times because no one qualified on the first posting or because no one who qualified was selected. For many jobs above the entry level grade, there are also multiple postings for the same position. For example, one posting will be open to all U.S. citizens while another posting for the same job may only be open to current agency employees. Other postings are “open” announcements meaning that the agency is collecting applicants for a job register but may not currently plan to hire anyone.

In Focus**One size doesn't fit all in assessing candidates**

Annual hiring varies greatly by agency and depends on agency size, budget and need. Three different types of hiring situations, which occur in government agencies, are likely to impact how agencies approach assessing applicants:

HIRING FOR MISSION-CRITICAL JOBS**Distinguishing characteristics**

Agencies typically hire relatively large numbers of employees annually—hundreds and sometimes thousands of people—to perform core mission work. Large numbers of new employees every year mean that agencies can use the same assessment tools repeatedly, which creates economies of scale for developing sophisticated assessment protocols. In smaller agencies, where mission-critical jobs might account for far fewer new employees annually, the importance of the work to the mission still helps ensure that agencies dedicate sufficient resources to hire the right people. Responsibility for mission-critical hiring tends to be centralized, helping ensure that agencies apply consistent standards in assessing applicants.

Importance of assessment

Agencies frequently want the greatest control over hiring for their mission-critical positions, even when the competencies required for these jobs are similar to those at other agencies (e.g., special agent competencies at FBI, Drug Enforcement Administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Secret Service and the Marshals Service). As a result, agencies may opt to develop, implement and administer their own assessment programs for key staff positions. The Department of State and the FBI have taken this approach for hiring special agents. For positions that are unique, such as mine safety inspectors and transportation security administrators, agencies have no choice but to develop their own assessment programs.

HIRING FOR MISSION-SUPPORT POSITIONS**Distinguishing characteristics**

Agencies have similar hiring needs for jobs that support core mission-related functions in professional areas such as accounting, information technology, acquisition and HR. In addition, these support jobs tend to have similar competency requirements across agencies. Despite these similarities, agencies currently develop assessments for mission-support positions independently, leading to substantial duplication of effort, higher costs to taxpayers and wide variation in the quality of these assessments.

Importance of assessment

While agencies typically have fewer vacancies and correspondingly smaller numbers of new employees for mission-support positions, as compared to the mission-critical jobs, developing assessments that target similar positions across multiple agencies can still allow for economies of scale without loss of rigor. Standard assessments that are shared across agencies can minimize the work and expense that would be involved if each agency developed its own assessment processes.

HIRING FOR LOW VOLUME POSITIONS**Distinguishing characteristics**

Many positions that agencies need to fill are idiosyncratic and few in number. Examples may include librarians, photographers, stenographers and many other specialized positions. While employees for these positions are typically hired in “ones, twos and threes” rather than in larger numbers, they should not be ignored. When added together, these low volume positions represent a substantial part of agencies' annual hiring.

Importance of assessment

Although the small numbers involved in hiring for specialized positions may not justify the costs to develop and implement sophisticated agency-specific competency assessments, agencies nonetheless need simple but effective tools to support hiring in these areas. This includes tools to help identify minimally qualified candidates, tools to assess foundational competencies—such as writing, reasoning and teamwork—and also tools to assess more specific competencies that may be required for select positions.

OPM has developed several resources for choosing assessments based on agency hiring needs and constraints. The Assessment Decision Guide is an interactive tool designed to help HR professionals and hiring managers customize their assessment strategies based on their specific hiring situations (<http://apps.opm.gov/ADT>).

and meaningful interactions with agencies to implement them.

Agencies are also looking to OPM to clearly articulate assessment policy reforms and to detail how current practices and procedures are likely to change. A number of focus group participants felt that regular communication between OPM and agencies would help in this regard. They urged OPM to reach out more frequently for agency input and to do so earlier in its decision-making process.

Hiring managers and HR miss opportunities for productive collaboration

The consensus view among both hiring managers and human resources professionals in our focus groups was that the hiring process is much more likely to be successful when managers are engaged from the beginning and are able to work effectively with HR. In many cases, however, HR staff does not take the initiative to foster this collaboration.

Issues likely to affect how managers approach hiring include familiarity and comfort with the process, expectations about their roles, urgency in filling a position and the need for the new employee to “hit the ground running.” HR staff cannot assume that hiring managers know what to do. Federal hiring tends to be episodic rather than continuous and some managers may go several years without hiring and then need to come up to speed very quickly.

Hiring managers voiced a related concern about HR customer support. More than a few were irked when HR staff in their agencies referenced arcane rules or do-it-yourself tool kits in response to questions. As one hiring manager observed, “I need a partner, not a checklist.” Another remarked, “I need to ask the exact right question to get the necessary information.”

In addition, several study participants suggested that managers tend to focus on evaluating applicants’ technical skills, but often need help assessing so-called “soft skills” (e.g., adaptability, teamwork and innovation) that are just as important for effective performance. As one interviewee noted, the result is that managers tend to “hire on the technical and fire on the social.” HR staff often misses opportunities to help bring perspective.

Agencies lack leadership support for assessment

In our focus groups and interviews, HR professionals expressed concern that agency leaders don’t always see the broad connections between improving HR practices (including assessment) and furthering mission goals.

While leaders’ input may not be necessary on tactical issues related to assessment, their high-level support helps to ensure that agencies set clear and appropriate goals for hiring reform, commit time and resources to achieving them, and hold staff accountable for results. In short, when leaders make assessment an agency priority, employees are more likely to do the same.

BARRIER 2

HR, hiring managers lack fundamental assessment skills

Our research revealed that many agencies lack key expertise and resources to effectively evaluate candidate skills. In particular, skill shortages in HR departments and hiring managers’ limitations in using basic question-writing and interviewing techniques combined to limit progress. In this section we outline several of the most important barriers in greater detail.

HR skills fall short

Focus group members—including HR representatives—were concerned by the limited ability of HR staff to assist managers with hiring and assessment needs. A number of study participants noted that HR staff members responsible for hiring and assessment lack the consulting and technical competencies needed to guide managers through the hiring process, to review assessment options and to help them make informed decisions. One respondent revealed that proactive hiring managers in his agency had identified the most capable HR specialists to tap for advice. But others chose to game the system by literally “shopping around” for specialists who would give them the answers they wanted. Overall, many we spoke with conceded that HR staff have “a lot on their plates” and are doing the best they can with limited resources. As one manager summed up, “We are asking for the HR staff to work with the manager to create a miracle within this framework.”

When hiring managers and agency leaders—as well as HR professionals themselves—believe HR departments lack the skills to reliably support assessment, it compromises an agency’s ability to achieve mission goals. Furthermore, difficulties with hiring can hurt agency respect for HR, thereby making it harder to secure additional resources for new HR staff, training and tools, just when these resources and upgrades are most needed. As one interviewee noted, “Is it realistic to expect agencies to invest in more complex and expensive hiring tools when HR can’t seem to handle the simple ones they have now?” Participants also raised a related concern: that it may not be practical to train HR staff to

develop and implement more sophisticated assessment techniques, since these techniques generally require very specialized training.

Questionnaires fail to capture key applicant background information

While OPM is now focused on developing a set of broadly applicable assessments for basic skills—writing, reasoning, interpersonal and others—agencies will still need to gather and assess applicants’ background information and any technical skills that jobs may require. As a result, questionnaires that focus on an applicant’s training and experience can still play a useful role in the assessment process. Such questionnaires will always be limited by their reliance on applicants’ self-reported information, but they can often be improved by asking clearer, more focused questions that are not open to applicants’ interpretation. Poorly designed questions—whether developed by HR or hiring managers—increase the chances of referring weak candidates and potentially hiring weak employees. This ultimately feeds distrust of the assessment process. According to one manager, “the biggest liars win in this system.”

Almost all hiring managers conduct interviews, but few use them effectively

In line with other recent studies,⁸ anecdotal evidence from our focus groups and interviews suggests that interviewing remains one of the most trusted and frequently used assessment tools in the federal government. However, it is an activity often undertaken with relatively little planning or structure, which reduces the accuracy of information managers gain from interviews and utility in assessing candidates. Most hiring managers do not effectively use “structured interviews,” which require some additional preparation but can deliver substantially better results. Part of the challenge is that managers don’t know where to get effective and timely assistance.

In Focus

Leveling the playing field through assessment

For many people, “assessment” is a scary word that conjures unpleasant memories of taking tests and exams. Others are turned off by the complexities and technical details of test development. And some people simply distrust unknown tests, particularly those that seek to measure softer skills, such as interpersonal abilities, motivation or self-discipline.

The potential misuses and problems with standardized assessments have been discussed extensively. Constructive critics often point to the fact that qualified candidates are sometimes passed over for educational or job opportunities based on test scores. Clearly, no test is perfect, but the good ones improve the odds of making a successful hire. What is less frequently discussed is the profoundly positive role that tests and assessments have played in providing opportunities to people who would otherwise not have had those opportunities. When developed in a reliable, fair manner and used properly, these instruments provide a means of measuring skills, competencies and other relevant characteristics.

Prior to the introduction of tests and assessments on a widespread basis, hiring decisions—both in the federal government and in other sectors of the economy—were frequently made on the basis of factors such as “the old boy network” or where a candidate went to school. While those factors may still be in play, assessments provide a means to level the playing field by examining the job-relevant capabilities of all candidates in the same way, regardless of their backgrounds. The use of standardized assessments—by the military, civilian agencies in the federal government, state and local governments and private-sector organizations—has provided increased employment opportunities to millions of Americans since World War II.

In Focus

The downside of applicant self-reporting

An applicant for a marine biologist position at one agency initially reported being “very experienced” in relevant research. But, in a later interview, he revealed that his experience actually came from watching programs on the Discovery Channel. By any measure, it was a stretch to say that he had experience. Yet, the candidate’s interpretation of the question and high level of self-reported experience led to his initially being assessed as qualified, which led to his making it past the first assessment hurdle and onto a list of qualified candidates that was sent to the hiring manager.

⁸ MSPB, *Job Simulations: Trying Out for a Federal Job*.

BARRIER 3**Agencies view assessment too narrowly and miss out on good candidates**

Effective assessment means more than simply creating good tests to screen and evaluate applicants' qualifications. The reality is that if federal agencies don't get the right people to apply in the first place, or if agencies don't provide new employees with regular feedback and support during the probationary period, it may not matter how well the assessment tools work. A key theme that came out of the focus group discussions and interviews was that, in many cases, federal agencies don't recognize how other parts of the hiring process integrate with good assessment.

Agencies 'bury the lead' on job requirements

Too often, lack of clarity around what the job requires makes it difficult for applicants to determine whether they'd be right for the job. Providing realistic job previews can provide potential applicants information about both positive and negative aspects of the job early in the process. Part of a good job preview is the use of willingness checklists, which lay out required job responsibilities that all candidates must be willing to perform if selected for a job.⁹

Reference checks are often just a formality

Instead of a mere formality, checking the references of finalists for a position can, if done well, be an important last step to verify a candidate's credentials and review qualifications and suitability for federal employment. It should also be more than a casual, unstructured phone conversation conducted by administrative staff. Reference checking can improve the quality of the federal workforce by reducing the number of unqualified or otherwise unsuitable applicants whose liabilities went undetected during earlier phases of the hiring process.¹⁰

Unfortunately, reference checks are often perfunctory and therefore are not a sound final check on a candidate's qualifications and accomplishments. Surveys have consistently found that many organizations delegate reference checking to HR personnel.¹¹ MSPB results further

9 See OPM's guide to realistic job previews (<http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/RealisticJobPreviews.pdf>).

10 MSPB, *Reference Checking in Federal Hiring – Making the Call*, ii.

11 Although no definitive studies exist for public sector organizations, in 1998 and 2004 the Society for Human Resource Management surveyed HR professionals in the private and nonprofit sectors on reference checking policies and practices. Survey results in both years indicated that about two-thirds of surveyed organizations delegated reference checking to HR personnel, while the remainder were about evenly split between contracting reference checking to outside vendors or having reference checks conducted by the manager who

suggest that many HR specialists who check references do not believe references provide credible information. Such negative views lead staff to limit the time and effort spent checking references. Finally, according to the MSPB, while some agencies provide training on reference checking if it is requested, none reported any standardized procedure.¹²

The probationary period is not integrated into the assessment process

The probationary period (typically 12 months for federal employees) provides a long-term sample of job performance that should be viewed as an extended final assessment. Observing actual work and performance over time is the most effective way to assess candidates. During probation, agencies can more easily terminate underperforming new employees than after these employees complete probation.

Yet, discussion with hiring managers in our study suggests that rather than using the probationary period as it was intended—as a check on poor hiring decisions—agencies tend to act only on egregious violations that are likely to result in uncontested terminations. As one manager explained, “Our agency does not have a culture that tolerates mistakes in hiring.” Firing a poor performer would be seen as admitting that a manager made a mistake, so it is just not done. Another manager emphasized the extent to which the probationary period is underutilized by noting that he had seen employees terminated for cause during probation only twice during a federal career spanning almost two decades.

Agencies do not hire enough of their best interns into permanent positions

Federal agencies employ tens of thousands of interns each year. Every internship offers a chance to assess entry-level talent on the job—one of the best indicators of an employee's future performance. Yet, few agencies use these programs strategically to hire the best people. Many managers do not view internships as an assessment and hiring opportunity. They also have been constrained because one of the two primary federal student programs does not allow for conversion of internships into permanent positions.¹³ In 2007, the federal government hired fewer than seven percent of nearly 60,000 interns. By comparison, private sector firms hired an estimated 50 percent of their interns.

would oversee the candidate in the new job. Burke & Schramm, “Getting to know the candidate: conducting reference checks,” *Society for Human Resource Management* (2005), 7-8.

12 MSPB, *Reference Checking in Federal Hiring—Making the Call*, ii.

13 Partnership for Public Service, *Leaving Talent on the Table*, i.

BARRIER 4**Flawed IT systems hinder assessment and hiring process**

It's typically harder for organizations to make progress when they have to compensate for the core systems and tools that they use. But this is often the reality in federal government—essential information technology systems often limit functionality, add to the workload of agency staff and burden applicants for federal jobs. To make matters worse, HR and hiring managers often do not even take advantage of the capacity of the current system, however limited.

Incompatible systems burden job applicants and handicap agencies

Applicant tracking systems automate much of the hiring process—from developing a job announcement to assessing candidates, to organizing the results of reference checks. They have become a necessary part of the application and assessment process, allowing agencies to eliminate manual processes. However, these systems lose some of their value—both for applicants and agencies—when systems run at different agencies are incompatible.

There are 10 different systems now in use across the federal government just for applicant tracking, and the inability to share information across the systems creates difficulties for applicants and for the staff who manage hiring. Ironically, when vendors modify their systems to meet specific agency needs, it often lessens compatibility across systems.

A frequent complaint is that isolated and incompatible systems tend to burden applicants, who can't take information that they entered into one system, or scores from assessments taken on one platform, and readily transfer these to other systems in different agencies. Government should care, because the best-qualified applicants with the most employment options are the least likely to tolerate this disjointed process when they can apply for jobs in the private and nonprofit sectors (and even in state and local government) far more efficiently. As one agency executive remarked, "If we are going to make applicants jump through a couple extra hoops to work for the federal government, let's at least make sure they are the same hoops."

Agencies make poor use of applicant tracking systems

Automated hiring systems can improve efficiency, but they can also be complicated to use. A big challenge for many agencies is therefore maintaining quality control

and ensuring that staff know how to use the systems effectively.

As one of our study participants noted, "A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing." HR specialists and hiring managers often just know the basics of using these systems and are therefore prone to mistakes unless they have help. For example, this can happen when users try to access the question libraries that automated tracking systems have on file (some have upwards of 80,000 questions) in order to develop questionnaires for applicants. Without quality control, multiple users may be adding new questions to the libraries without proper documentation, thereby making it more difficult for other agency staff that use the same system to find the proper information.

Keyword searches do not effectively match applicants to jobs

Currently, many applicants struggle to find jobs that fit their experience and preferences. There are upwards of 5,000 job postings on USAJOBS.gov on any given day (many with confusing, jargon-filled descriptions), and the only options to narrow down the choices are keyword searches or demographic criteria such as agency name, location and occupation. It is not surprising that job seekers we spoke with almost uniformly said they were unsure which jobs matched their qualifications. Confusion about fit has several downsides. Applicants may not find or apply for jobs that would be a strong fit between their skills and agency needs—a clear loss for everyone involved. Confusion can also lead candidates to apply for more jobs than they otherwise would. This tends to inflate the size of applicant pools and to dilute quality, thereby making it harder for agencies to identify top candidates. The result is a lengthier and often less effective job application and review process for all.

BARRIER 5**Agencies don't know if their assessments work**

OPM and agencies need good, reliable measures to gauge progress around assessment. However, results from our focus groups and interviews suggest that federal agencies currently collect a number of metrics that neither HR staff nor hiring managers find particularly useful. In addition, potentially useful results do not always reach the people in agencies who are most likely to benefit from them.

Agencies aren't collecting meaningful data

A number of participants in our study suggested that agencies tend to measure results of the hiring process

simply to satisfy compliance requirements rather than because they find the measures useful. While agencies had no shortage of measures related to hiring and assessment—showing that agencies put resources into data collection—the consensus view is that many of these measurement exercises are a waste of time. Part of the problem is that metrics are sometimes chosen based on data that are available or relatively easy to collect, even if their value may be limited.

More than a few participants questioned whether leadership agencies, such as OPM and OMB, put enough energy into identifying metrics that provide real value to agencies. Some suggested that metrics should link hiring to actual employee performance, not just initial manager satisfaction with a new employee. Several told us that HR departments at agency headquarters often do not have a way to gather data from field offices. The systems used at headquarters and field offices may not be compatible electronically, which necessitates time-consuming work to aggregate results.

Agencies don't see data in their larger context

Discussion within our focus groups and interviews suggested that many agencies view their efforts to collect data in isolation and not as part of the agency's DNA. Metrics should be forward-looking, indicating to managers where the logjams are and helping with mid-course corrections. Therefore, it is important for metrics to provide more regular, if not continuous, feedback. For example, if an agency is concerned about the time it takes to hire, it would be much better for HR staff to send a weekly update to managers and senior staff showing how long each position has been open, rather than send out only an annual or quarterly summary of the average hiring times.

Current systems make it difficult to track applicants' success after hiring

The effectiveness of the hiring process is difficult to gauge without tracking the success of the candidates hired. More than a few focus group participants and interviewees told us that performance management systems are not integrated with applicant tracking systems. As a result, there is little information available on the effectiveness of assessment efforts on job performance or other important outcomes such as turnover and engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE ASSESSMENT

From the start of this project, it was clear that the case for improving how federal agencies assess job applicants has already been made forcefully in previous studies, and the basic facts are not in dispute. Better assessment procedures lead to better matches between candidates and jobs, to better hiring decisions and, ultimately, to better results for agencies and the public. The challenge is to recognize and find practical ways to overcome key barriers that hinder implementation.

We've argued that the hiring process is out of balance and that assessment is an important lever for change. But, it's not a magic pill. Making progress on assessment is more like daily exercise—we all know the benefits, but the process still requires ongoing work. Agencies have to start moving, set sensible goals in line with mission needs and reach out for advice and support. Likewise, success takes ongoing commitment of staff time and resources, openness to new approaches and leaders who are willing to hold staff accountable for their efforts and results. Our recommendations reflect this reality.

1 Key players must work in tandem to improve assessment

While the federal government faces a number of challenges around assessment, it can also marshal substantial resources, build on current agency strengths and model the good practices that already exist across government. But it is essential that key agency stakeholders—leaders, hiring managers and human resources—work with OPM on shared solutions rather than focusing separately on current challenges and limitations. All stakeholders share responsibility for aligning their roles and responsibilities with those of their colleagues and working together to help meet these challenges.

HR specialists and hiring managers should partner for best results

The relationship between hiring managers and HR professionals is vital for a successful hiring process, but it is strained in many agencies. HR and hiring managers need to work together from the start, by defining their roles and responsibilities and setting realistic milestones for filling vacancies. An initial face-to-face meeting is generally recommended and may be particularly important for managers who only hire sporadically and

In Focus

Partnering for success at NIH

On its hiring reform website (opm.gov/hiringreform), OPM recommends that hiring managers and HR specialists meet before a job is posted to get on the same page about the process. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) calls this the "Strategic Recruitment Meeting." Hiring managers and HR specialists, joined by an administrative officer and equal employment opportunity specialist, use the meeting to jointly complete a simple hiring checklist which outlines key steps, responsibilities, timeframes and expectations. The team also brainstorms and decides upon recruitment and assessment strategies.

The strategic recruitment meeting opens up communication lines between hiring managers and HR professionals and reinforces the latter's role as a strategic advisor to managers and selecting officials—a role that many of our focus group participants felt was critical. Most importantly, it signals to hiring managers that they have a true partner and that they are a key players in the process.

NIH measures suggest that the meetings are contributing to improvements in hiring. Beyond boosting managers' satisfaction with the process, the numbers for FY 2008–FY 2009 show a 29 percent drop in positions that needed to be re-advertised, while recruiting efforts that ended without selecting a candidate plunged 71 percent over the same period. Anecdotally, NIH reports that the meetings also help to engage HR professionals by connecting their efforts more closely to the agency's mission.

may not be familiar with the nuances of hiring. Such cases may require extra effort by HR to coach hiring managers through the process and keep them involved. Fortunately, agencies can look to and learn from some successful models in the federal government.

Agency leaders must be out front in reforming assessment practices

Top agency leaders must make applicant assessment a priority. They do not need to focus on the tactical issues of assessment, but their high-level support and commitment is needed to push their agencies forward and build the momentum to make related hiring reforms work. This commitment includes investing sufficient staff time and resources, outlining reasonable goals for agency success, promoting ownership of the change process among key agency staff and holding appropriate people accountable for results. At agencies like Government Accountability Office (GAO)—where leadership takes these responsibilities seriously—discussions about as-

sessing and developing talent occur during executives' performance appraisals, at strategic planning sessions and at various progress reviews. In short, accountability for assessment has become part of the culture.

OPM must stay in close touch with agencies and clarify how to implement new reforms

For successful implementation of hiring reforms, agencies need direct channels and regular access to knowledgeable OPM liaisons. OPM needs to be aware of unique agency circumstances to ensure that its guidance is targeted and ultimately useful. OPM also needs honest feedback from agencies to gauge progress on new assessment procedures and to alert OPM if mid-course corrections are necessary. The frequency and quality of ongoing interactions between OPM and agencies can make the difference in working through inevitable challenges and driving successful process improvements.

OPM can ensure that channels stay open by having liaisons reach out to their agency contacts on a regular basis, both leading up to the deadlines for changes to take effect and afterwards; asking agencies to designate points of contact for briefings and regular updates, including some that are outside the HR ranks and have direct responsibilities for coordinating the activities covered by the policy reforms; and responding quickly and thoughtfully to constructive agency input. In summary, it is not enough for OPM to monitor agency progress toward meeting hiring reform deadlines. A key to successful hiring reform will be an ongoing dialogue with a broad spectrum of agency representatives, beyond senior officials and HR executives.

Specific guidance should involve how to screen large volumes of applicants objectively and fairly in accordance with merit principles in light of the decision to eliminate essay-style questions in favor of resumes and cover letters (or simple applications) when candidates initially apply for federal jobs. Similarly, while the new hiring reforms specify broad changes in how agencies consider qualified candidates—eliminating the ability to review just those candidates with the three highest scores (rule of three) and moving to a system where hiring managers can review all candidates in the most-qualified category (category rating)—agencies may not know how these changes will impact their assessment procedures.

OPM has implemented mobile assistance teams to provide direct support to individual agencies in helping them to implement hiring reform. They also have been pursuing various outreach and communication strategies to get information out about hiring reform. Both

initiatives are positive developments, but will require sufficient staffing and a sustained commitment in order to respond to agencies to meet the new hiring requirements.

OPM must use HR and hiring manager training to foster teamwork

To fully support agencies in their ongoing assessment activities, OPM should review and, where appropriate, modify its training process to encourage more interaction among key agency stakeholders and more ongoing work with agencies. Successful efforts should include joint training sessions that bring together core agency teams comprised of staffing specialists and hiring managers that are likely to work together in an agency; multi-session trainings that allow agency staff to develop more in-depth knowledge and build stronger relationships with each other; a focus on making training materials—such as tool kits and checklists—more practical and easier to understand; and outreach to agency leaders to enlist them as champions for hiring reforms and to provide accountability for implementing results.

Making training materials more practical and user-friendly is a long-standing challenge that OPM can address both by encouraging more agency feedback and by developing easier ways for agencies to provide input on the usefulness of particular resources on its site. OPM should dedicate staff to respond to agency input and improve these resources in a timely manner. Finally, when developing new resources, OPM should also seek user input before materials are far along in development. OPM can reach out to agencies individually, but should also take greater advantage of its ability to convene cross-agency working groups to address shared problems, identify good practices and build them into its tools and resources.

Agencies should work with OPM to improve assessment resources and tools

Responsibility for getting the help they need ultimately rests with agencies. A useful starting point is OPM's website, apps.opm.gov/ADT, which contains a variety of resources and tools to help agencies navigate the federal assessment process. The site has recently been expanded and reorganized to give users easier access to its contents. But, as suggested above, OPM's site and related materials should be treated as "works in progress" to be regularly improved and updated. The community of agency users should be able to easily contribute useful information to the site through a wiki or some other collaborative online forum. The timely input from HR, hiring managers and others involved in the hiring and assessment process is critical to shape the content go-

ing forward and to help OPM clarify information and make it more useful to those on the frontlines.

2 Address key gaps in HR, hiring manager knowledge and expertise

Federal agencies face a number of limitations in assessment-related knowledge and expertise. They cannot all be addressed at once, but these recommendations focus on essential areas that should be addressed first, in order to make the best use of resources.

Agencies should revisit how HR staff is hired and capitalize on new OPM assessment tools

Agencies should give priority to bringing on skilled HR staff who can guide and support hiring managers through the assessment process.

While an infusion of new talent will help, there is no quick fix for federal HR departments grappling to meet their own internal staffing needs. In the face of this reality, HR leaders should examine the suite of new competency-based assessments currently being developed by OPM to see how these can meet their needs. These assessments target a range of mission-support positions—including key job series in human resources—and are designed to be applicable across agencies.^{14,15}

Customer service is one of the key competencies that the new inventories can be used to assess. It is sometimes undervalued in federal HR departments in favor of more detailed and specialized knowledge of the federal hiring code and regulations. But both kinds of knowledge are critical. A consistent theme in our focus groups was the lack of customer service competencies among HR professionals. Study participants—both hiring managers and HR professionals—felt this translated into limiting HR’s capability to help hiring managers navigate the complex process surrounding applicant assessment. To improve its customer service, HR staff need to gather key information to understand a hiring manager’s needs, triage that information to provide as much direct guidance as possible and know when to

seek more detailed advice from assessment experts on behalf of the hiring manager.

Finally, OPM can encourage agencies to bring HR staffs up to speed with the new assessment procedures by arranging a series of roundtable conversations to spotlight their potential uses and value. Past experience suggests that OPM should actively promote these conversations and engage agencies directly, rather than hoping that agencies will take the initiative to ask for more information. A roundtable setting also has the advantage of reaching many agencies at once—which will help OPM use its limited resources more effectively.

Agencies need gatekeepers to oversee applicant tracking systems

Applicant tracking systems have become the backbone of hiring in most agencies. As a result, agencies need at least one expert on staff who can assume oversight responsibility for these systems and provide quality control. These technical specialists can ensure that staff are properly trained on system use, ease the burden on staffing specialists and hiring managers and allow them to focus on their core roles, and help agency staff use applicant tracking systems more efficiently and effectively. These experts can also ensure that users of applicant tracking systems do not inadvertently corrupt or compromise the systems in the process of normal use.

Agencies should improve the quality of frequently-used assessment tools

No assessment tool is right for every circumstance, but some come into play so often that agencies would benefit by building staff skills to use them more effectively. Two such tools are training and experience questionnaires and structured interviews.

Training and experience questionnaires are designed to gather job-relevant background information along with demographic details from candidates. Typically used on initial applications, these are not sophisticated tools and they are limited in their usefulness for determining applicant qualifications, due to their reliance on self-report information. However, they can be good, low-cost alternatives for winnowing down large applicant pools by separating candidates who lack essential prior experience or technical expertise from those who have them. To work effectively, the questions must be specific and well-written, but too often they are not. For more detail on how to develop better questions, see “Creating better training and experience questions for government hiring” on page 25.

14 The CHCO Council and OPM have recently undertaken a collaborative project to develop and implement government-wide competency standards for HR staff at all levels of work. Competency-based assessments are being developed to qualify HR staff at different levels of proficiency, and professional development tools are being created to enhance and professionalize the skills of the federal HR community.

15 Another place to start when reassessing the competencies necessary for HR professionals and other occupations is the OPM Assessment Decision Tool. It lists possible competencies by occupation. (<http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/Content.aspx?page=TOC>).

The interview is the most common assessment that organizations use to make hiring decisions. Most interviews are “unstructured,” which means the choice of questions to ask is left up to the interviewer, and there are no agreed-upon standards for evaluating how well an applicant answers the questions. Research has shown that these types of unstructured interviews are not useful for predicting how well applicants will perform on the job.¹⁶ A highly effective alternative to the unstructured interview is the “structured” interview. With standardized administration and proper scoring, structured interviews have been shown to be extremely useful for predicting how well candidates will perform a job.

Structured interviews use standard sets of questions designed to assess critical job competencies—both technical and non-technical. The questions typically focus on situations or problems that allow candidates to describe details of their past experience and relevance to the jobs for which they are applying. The structure ensures greater fairness and consistency across interviews, allowing interviewers to evaluate candidates on objective criteria and make better hiring decisions. For more detail, see “Conducting structured job interviews” on page 27.

Agencies should ask the experts when needed

Agencies cannot be expected to have all the answers about assessment practices and procedures. In fact, very few agencies have true experts on staff—typically industrial and organizational psychologists—to help them create assessment tools and oversee hiring programs. Our research suggests that knowing when to ask for help—particularly technical help in developing assessments and using them—is important. We also found that some of the agencies and sub-elements with the best-developed assessment programs (e.g., Customs and Border Protection, Transportation Security Administration, Internal Revenue Service) were among the most likely to seek outside expertise. The rule of thumb is to seek outside advice when doing so can speed the process and help agencies avoid technical and legal pitfalls. Valuable sources for assistance on assessment issues include peer agencies as well as OPM, which provides a range of free materials¹⁷ as well as fee-for-service consulting to agencies. Some agencies also choose to hire industrial organization psychologists or to use the services of private consulting organizations.

16 McDaniel, M.A., Whetzel, D.L., Schmidt, F.L., & Maurer, S.D. (1994). The validity of employment interviews: A comprehensive review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 79, 599-616.

17 See Appendix C.1 for list of OPM assessment and hiring resources.

3 Agencies must use a full range of assessment tools

It can be tempting to view assessment in isolation. But when the goal in hiring is to successfully match applicants to jobs, we have to remember that assessment is closely connected to the rest of the process. What happens before and after applicants are assessed (e.g., recruiting and probationary period) can both affect how agencies approach assessment and impact the choice of formal screening and evaluation tools that agencies use to determine job fit.

Agencies should put essential job requirements in can’t-miss places

A list of any non-negotiable requirements for a position, sometimes called a “willingness checklist,” should appear clearly and prominently near the beginning of job postings, where applicable. These lists help to give applicants quick “realistic job previews.” Some requirements may seem obvious (e.g., police officers must carry a gun; airport screeners routinely stand for long periods of time). Other jobs may have requirements that are less intuitive but similarly non-negotiable, such as the need for frequent travel or relocation to a specific work site. In all cases, these checklists reinforce core job requirements, allowing candidates to quickly decide whether they want to go forward with an application. This benefits agencies too, by encouraging applicants who are not suited for the job to remove themselves from consideration early in the process.

Agencies should conduct thorough reference checks

Checking the references of finalists for a position can, if done well, be an important last step before extending a job offer. Unfortunately, reference checks are often perfunctory and do not serve as a sound final check on a candidate’s qualifications and accomplishments. To check references thoroughly, reviewers need to have job knowledge that allows them to ask key questions, probe for relevant information and ask the right clarifying questions (See “In Focus” box on page 16 for sample questions). HR should therefore engage hiring managers and subject matter experts in reference checks. They should also increase standardization of, and training in, effective reference checking techniques. Further guidance is available in OPM’s guide to reference checks.¹⁸

18 See OPM’s guide to reference checks (<http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/ReferenceChecking.pdf>).

Agencies should be encouraged to use the probationary period more effectively

The typical 12-month probationary period is a critical time for agencies to give new employees the support and resources—including onboarding, training and mentoring—that they need to succeed. Managers should use this period to help employees grow fully into their new roles and to document and dismiss those who chronically underperform. Currently, if managers do nothing, the trial period expires and employees automatically move out of probationary status. Because the default doesn't require busy or inattentive managers to make proactive decisions about underperforming employees during probation, these managers can end up saddling their agencies with poor employees for the long term.

Instead, the calculus should be flipped to require managers to take action to convert probationary employees to permanent status. Absent such action, employment would end. This would ensure that managers make proactive decisions to move employees from probationary to regular status, thereby restoring the important check that has been consciously built in to the probationary period. This would likely require action by Congress to amend current civil service law. However, there is precedent for such an amendment in the operations of the Federal Career Intern Program.¹⁹

Managers also would benefit by having simple, structured templates to guide them and to facilitate performance check-ins with new employees. An initial check-in with new employees should be done by the six-month mark in a new employee's tenure. OPM should consider developing a master template that agencies can adapt to their own needs. Managers also need support from leaders signaling that continued assessment during the probationary period matters. These efforts will give hiring managers a clearer sense of how new employees are performing, put these managers in a stronger position to determine next steps and ensure that hiring managers have the proper documentation to support desired follow-up actions—including the possible need to terminate an employee.

Agencies should use intern programs as the primary source of entry-level talent

Agencies must take greater advantage of intern programs by seizing the opportunity to assess the potential of young candidates while they are on the job—one of the best indicators of employees' future performance—

¹⁹ Presidential Executive Order 13162 of July 6, 2000 created the Federal Career Intern Program, under which employees are hired for two-year appointments, after which they may be converted to permanent status at an agency's discretion.

In Focus Basic questions for reference checks

- How long have you known the job candidate?
- What is your professional relationship with the candidate?
- Describe the job candidate's professional relationship with co-workers, customers and supervisors.
- How does the candidate react in stressful situations?
- Are there any situations in which you would avoid placing the candidate?
- What is your overall opinion of the candidate?
- Where does this candidate rank among others you have worked with?
- What are the candidate's professional strengths?
- In what areas do you feel the candidate can improve?
- Does the candidate work better individually or in a group environment?
- What comments/suggestions would you have for the candidate's new supervisor?
- Would you re-hire the candidate?

Adapted from Capwell, "Personal Reference Checks Valuable but Require Extra Care," Society for Human Resource Management (2008). <http://shrm.org/hrdisciplines/staffingmanagement/Articles/Pages/PersonalReferenceChecks.aspx>.

and hire those who have demonstrated they have the right qualifications and abilities for vacant positions. Managers also must cultivate their student interns. This means assigning them real work that is in line with that of permanent employees, providing constructive feedback, offering the potential for growth and development and making them feel a part of the team. In short, managers must intentionally view and engage student interns as potential employees, in order to fully assess their qualifications during this important period.

4 Upgrade IT systems to support assessment and hiring needs

Over the past decade, automation has helped simplify some of the complexities of the federal hiring process. Many technologies show potential to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of hiring. But delivering on promised benefits means implementing technologies with a clear focus on serving the needs of agencies and applicants.

OPM needs to create and enforce common standards across hiring systems

To make the most of the many applicant tracking systems and related tools now in use across agencies, OPM needs to establish a common standard for these systems and provide a corresponding IT platform that enables integration of diverse systems. Essentially, vendors and agencies that comply with a government-wide standard

could run their own assessment instruments and tracking systems, but still share information that could be utilized throughout federal hiring. This also would benefit agencies by facilitating the sharing of best practices and providing more compatible benchmarking data within and across agencies. Since automated tracking systems enable agencies to gather and export aggregate hiring data (e.g., timeliness, assessment score, source of referral), greater compatibility and integration of systems across agencies would be an important step to facilitate cross-agency benchmarking.

Use job matching to improve applicant experience and agency results

Job/profile matching technologies offer an opportunity for a quantum leap in connecting applicants with jobs that fit their experience and interests, while also helping agencies get more value from their USAJOBS.gov postings. Demonstrating the viability of this technology in the federal space could bring substantial benefits to both agency staffing specialists and hiring managers.

Some of the expertise to pursue job-matching applications already exists within the federal government. For example, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence has been developing a pilot program for the past several years. In general, initial steps in the process entail gathering data on key competencies and interests shared by top performing federal employees across government jobs/series; grouping the competency information into categories to create profiles of successful performers; allowing job applicants to build their own competency and interest profiles by surveying their skills and capabilities, personality and vocational interests; and using an algorithm—essentially a mathematical formula—to more closely match applicant profiles to that of successful performers based on job-relevant categories rather than key words. Having this back-end information would allow USAJOBS.gov to search and identify job vacancies that closely match applicants' experience, abilities and interests—a win for applicants and for hiring managers.

5 Measure assessment results in ways that serve the needs of agencies and OPM

The federal government needs new approaches to measure assessment. Successful approaches make the most of available data, limit unnecessary burdens in collecting data and make it easier for agencies and OPM to use the results. Success also combines regular feedback on metrics, but geared to an important end: ensuring that

the assessment process works for agencies and applicants by effectively matching talent to jobs.

Agencies should abandon make-work data collection and analysis

Agencies should take an inventory of their current measures, how they are being used and whether they provide value to executives and employees. We recommend that agencies include among their measures satisfaction of hiring managers with new employees after six months to a year, the level of job satisfaction of new employees after a similar time period and the rate of new employee attrition and performance.²⁰ These indicators should be viewed holistically to give agencies a high-level summary of assessment-related outcomes. In addition, ensuring that results are widely shared and are understandable to non-technical consumers will help keep agency staff—particularly HR specialists and hiring managers—committed to ongoing data collection.

OPM and agencies should coordinate to share results and best practices

The limited success of past efforts points to the need for OPM and agencies to work more closely on measurement issues. OPM can leverage its contacts and connections across agencies to identify and share promising practices found in individual agencies and to add value to the raw data by analyzing and sharing the results in ways that are most useful for HR departments. This could include developing dashboards as well as indexing and benchmarking information to highlight relationships between measures and outcomes.

Hiring manager satisfaction with new employees—a useful metric for gauging hiring effectiveness—offers a good test case for OPM and agency coordination. To date, OPM's hiring manager satisfaction survey has struggled to generate even moderate response rates from agencies.

There are a number of ways that OPM could improve the survey and make it more valuable for agencies, including using agency input to streamline the existing survey, which a number of focus group participants said is too long;²¹ standardizing the data collection process, using an automated system to send out the surveys to

20 OPM's list of suggested metrics that can be consulted in this process can be found at <http://opm.gov/hiringtoolkit/docs/keymetricworksheet.pdf>.

21 The most current version of the survey that we saw—as of April 2010—had only 15 numbered questions but, because many of the questions had multiple parts, actually included over 40 questions in all. As of this writing, the survey is being reviewed by the CHCO Council and a revision is expected soon.

hiring managers as needed—the current “manual” process leaves too much room for error in oversight; coordinating with agencies that already conduct similar surveys and are leery of over-surveying their managers. For example, it may be possible for agencies to insert one or two key OPM questions into their own survey and then share the results with OPM; and revisiting how survey results are shared with agencies. Although OPM currently posts hiring manager satisfaction results to OMB’s “MAX” website (a site dedicated to collaboration and information sharing), study respondents suggested that the results could be made more accessible and easier to use.

Agencies can also do more to encourage and hold managers accountable for completing these surveys. As one HR director suggested, agencies can make the message crystal clear by refusing to give final sign-off on new employees until hiring managers certify that they have completed the hiring manager satisfaction survey.

Agency leaders must ensure assessment measures lead to better outcomes

Purposeful and validated assessment mechanisms mean little without attention from agency leadership. To improve hiring and mission results, agencies must create opportunities to discuss measurement results and ask key questions about what’s working, what isn’t and why. Leaders can play a critical role by holding relevant stakeholders accountable for explaining their results and using them to inform decisions at key stages in the process. One study participant summed it up saying, “at the end of the day, it’s not just the form [of assessment] that matters, it’s accountability.”

One model gaining traction in the federal space and worth considering for assessment is based on CitiStat,²² an accountability model that emphasizes regular, in-person meetings to discuss organizational results. The meetings aim for transparent and honest discussion of results up the chain of command, leading to actionable next steps in 60 minutes or less. Importantly, the discussion focuses on outcomes, causes and mid-course corrections rather than assignment of blame. Vivek Kundra, the federal government’s chief information officer, has already adopted the model (“TechStat”) to help manage at-risk federal IT projects.²³

In Focus

Regular reporting at DOE

Rather than getting quarterly summaries of the agency’s time-to-hire metrics, hiring managers and HR staff at the Department of Energy (DOE) receive weekly reports detailing the status of recruitment for all open positions within their unit. The reporting tool allows agency leadership, hiring managers and HR to see where the bottlenecks are and to better determine whether offices are overwhelmed and need additional help or are slipping for other reasons and slowing down the process. Engaged managers are kept in the loop, and hiring specialists are held accountable for deliverables. In contrast to the open communication of these metrics at DOE, managers at several other agencies that lacked these data typically expressed frustration with the hiring process and had little insight into why the process takes so long.

²² <http://americanprogress.org/issues/2007/04/citistat.html>

²³ <http://cio.gov/pages.cfm/page/What-is-TechStat>

APPENDIX A: CONTRIBUTORS TO THE REPORT

Partnership for Public Service

Max Stier, President and CEO
Bob Lavigna, Vice President for Research

Bob Cohen
Sarah Crowell
Sally Jaggar
Bevin Johnston
Joshua Joseph
Barb Male
Karen Rogers
Lara Shane
Erin Simpler
Erica Van Steen

PDRI: A PreVisor Company

Elaine Pulakos, Ph.D., Chief Operating Officer

Ryan O’Leary, Ph.D., Team Lead
Gary W. Carter, Ph.D., Vice President
Christine C. Parker, M.S., Team Lead

APPENDIX B: TSA CASE STUDY

Perhaps one of most visible and rigorous uses of assessment for federal hiring in recent years has been the development and implementation of the program to select transportation security officers (TSOs) at the Transportation Security Administration (TSA).

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the federal government took over all passenger and cargo screening in the United States. It was an extreme case. Tens of thousands of potential employees needed to be screened, selected, trained and at work in less than 10 months, with no systems in place for doing so. The time pressures were extraordinary for validating new workforce standards, implementing new hiring systems, training new personnel and getting them on the job, all while ensuring high standards throughout the assessment process.

The diverse project team—which included industrial organization psychologists, legal consultants, stakeholders from an access, diversity, and civil rights consortium, and human factors psychologists from the Federal Aviation Administration—started by conducting a job analysis of the skills and competencies that would be needed for TSOs. The result of this work was used to define a new TSO job with five mandatory rotational stations and a number of critical work functions, key activities and competencies. The project team also designed a study to demonstrate the relationship between applicant performance on the assessments and job performance.

The multi-phased selection process began with the least expensive and least time-consuming evaluations to screen down the vast number of applicants in an efficient and effective manner. First, applicants completed an on-line application that was evaluated against minimum qualifications (e.g., citizenship, education) and hiring rules (e.g., veterans' preference, displaced airport workers). Eligible applicants were invited to Phase 1 testing, a 3.5-hour, self-paced assessment process of critical abilities (e.g., customer service orientation), English proficiency skills and officer technical aptitudes (e.g., visual observation of X-ray images). Candidates received a score of pass or fail at the end of the test. Those who passed Phase 1 testing were invited to stay for the more in-depth Phase 2 assessment process. This included a structured interview, physical abilities test and full medical evaluation. Phases 1 and 2 were completed in one or two days, at the end of which

applicants received their conditional job offer. This was followed by background security screening, drug testing and final hiring processes.

To better appreciate the scope of this effort, consider that vacancies opened for the first officers on March 8, 2002. By November 19, 2002, nearly two million applications had been processed, 340,000 applicants tested and 58,000 officers hired, with another 50,000 applicants in the ready pool for continuous hiring.

The initial workforce hired was highly diverse, with 38 percent women and 44 percent ethnic minorities, and approximately 40 percent veterans' preference eligible. Ethnic diversity of the new officer workforce was greater than the general civilian labor force in comparable job classifications. Further supporting the effectiveness of the new assessments, less than two percent of the officers hired failed either the 40-hour classroom training and testing or the 60-hour on-the-job training and testing.

One of the key criticisms that developers and implementers of assessment systems face is that their work simply takes too long and organizations are often unwilling or unable to wait. But TSA's effort shows that good outcomes are possible. It also gives practitioners an effective model and procedures for standing up large, complex selection systems quickly and in line with professional standards. In short, it makes sound selection practices more accessible for organizations—especially those in the federal government—to implement.

While TSA succeeded in meeting its initial staffing needs under extraordinary circumstances, the assessment program has been refined significantly to cut the time required for assessment centers, to allow TSA managers to participate in the interviewing process and to include a TSA-led realistic job preview presentation to applicants. Such adjustments are normal and reflect good assessment practice designed to make improvements iteratively, over time. Improvements also are aimed to address TSA challenges of high employee turnover, due to stress and other factors.

More recent refinements have improved the assessment process by addressing emerging needs and implementing new technologies, including a video-based job preview and an electronic orientation. TSA is now evaluating the applicability of unproctored computer-based

testing for some portions of the initial TSO selection process, as well as determining what additional assessments should be added to continue meeting the latest workforce requirements.

In the final analysis, TSA would not have met the congressional deadline of federalizing the aviation security program across the nation in less than a year if innovative and technically sophisticated assessments were not initially employed and continue to evolve.

The Partnership for Public Service and PDRI would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Kolmstetter, now with the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and Dr. Alana Cober of the Department of Homeland Security, for providing information for this case study.

APPENDIX C: ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND RESOURCES

C.1. OPM assessment and hiring resources

Following is a compiled list of assessment tools and resources developed by OPM, many of which are cited in this report. These materials include both general overviews of the assessment process as well as guidance on specific parts of the assessment process.

- **Overview of Assessment:** Watch OPM’s “Principles of Assessment” video and PowerPoint, which make the business case for assessment. <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/Content.aspx?page=RelatedDocuments>
- **Personnel Assessment and Selection Resource Center:** Visit the main contents page with links to all available assessment tools. <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT>
- **Assessment Decision Guide:** An overview of different assessment options, this directory provides technical assessment definitions as well as guidance about how to evaluate and implement appropriate assessment methods. <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/Content.aspx?page=TOC>
- **Assessment Decision Tool:** This is an interactive tool that allows hiring specialists and managers to appraise possible strategies for assessment based on occupational series, competencies and other important hiring factors. <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ADTClientMain.aspx>
- **Managers and Hiring Specialists during the Hiring Process:** A Strategic Approach to Hiring provides a checklist of steps for the hiring process and recommendations about who should lead at each stage. http://www.opm.gov/hiringtoolkit/docs/Hiring_Process_Checklist.pdf
- **About Realistic Job Previews (RJP):** This document describes and defines RJPs, including an implementation checklist. <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/RealisticJobPreviews.pdf>
- **Job Analysis Toolkit:** The Assessment Decision Tool can be helpful when reassessing the competencies necessary for HR professionals and other occupations. It lists possible competencies by occupation. This link to an OPM Job Analysis Toolkit presents worksheets and handouts for job analysis. <http://opm.gov/hiringtoolkit/docs/jobanalysis.pdf>
- **Structured Interviews, a Practical Guide:** This OPM guide, which explains why hiring interviews should have structure, will help with the design, development and implementation of structured interviews. <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/SIGuide09.08.08.pdf> and <http://opm.gov/MediaCenter/videos/OPM-Media-Center/Structured-Interview-Training.aspx>
- **Developing Training and Experience Questions:** Information about Training and Experience (T&E) can be found in the Assessment Decision Guide. <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/Content.aspx?page=3-12>
- **Reference Checking:** Here are some tips and suggested steps for conducting reference checks, including sample questions. <http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/ReferenceChecking.pdf>
- **Metrics:** This worksheet provides the assessment and hiring metrics recommended by OPM. <http://opm.gov/hiringtoolkit/docs/keymetricworksheet.pdf>

C.2. What managers should know about hiring

Hiring managers shouldn't wait until their human resources department sends over a list of qualified applicants to first get involved in the hiring process. Upfront efforts by hiring managers can determine the quality of applicant pools and the overall success in hiring. The following are tips for navigating the hiring process in the early stages:

- **Work carefully on the job analysis.** Hiring managers have unique expertise and typically understand the needs of the positions much better than staffing specialists. To fully tap this knowledge, managers must personally determine the combination of competencies and experiences that applicants need to create a job analysis. What is most important? Which skills can they do without? What career paths are likely to lead to the desired experience? The job analysis should drive the job announcement and screening strategy.
- **Understand the recruitment strategy.** Discuss with your staffing specialist what hiring authority to use and the best recruiting vehicles for each job. Will your target applicants understand your job announcement? Do you need special outreach for this job?
- **Review and edit the vacancy announcement with the recruiting strategy and job analysis in mind.** Find out how your HR office plans to screen applicants. Then help to develop or review the criteria that will be used to determine which applicants will be screened out. Make sure you understand how the screening questions work—you don't want them to eliminate candidates that would be good but not perfect.
- **Go to HR first with problems.** If the certified list of candidates has any problems or if experiences cited don't seem to match what you expected, ask HR for an explanation and any necessary adjustments to correct the problems.
- **Get help if you need it.** If you feel that you need help to conduct good interviews (and you probably do), know that help is available. Look to your HR office and to OPM for a variety of tools and trainings.²⁴

²⁴ Toolkits and information about Structured Interviews from OPM include: Structured Interviews: A Practical Guide (<http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/SIGuide09.08.08.pdf>) and the Structured Interview Video (<http://www.opm.gov/MediaCenter/videos/OPM-Media-Center/Structured-Interview-Training.aspx>).

C.3. Types of common assessment methods²⁵

- **Structured interviews:** Interviews that employ objective, pre-determined rules for eliciting, observing and evaluating interview responses.
- **Unstructured interviews:** Interviews in which the questions asked may be unplanned and vary across interviews, and the results are analyzed and applied subjectively.
- **Cognitive ability tests:** Tests that are used to estimate applicants' abilities involved in thinking (e.g., reasoning, perception, memory, verbal and math ability, and problem solving).
- **Occupational questionnaires:** Questionnaires with multiple-choice items that allow agencies to rate applicants' education and experience—often used in tandem with multiple-choice questions supplied by applicant tracking systems (e.g., QuickHire, AVUE or USAStaffing).
- **KSA narratives:** Essays that summarize applicant knowledge, skills and abilities, which agencies can use to rate applicants' education and experience.
- **Reference checks:** Information collected from those who have prior knowledge of an applicant, which is used to evaluate an applicant's past job performance.
- **Biographical data:** Typically includes questions about past events and behaviors reflecting personality attributes, attitudes, experiences, interests, skills and abilities validated as predictors of overall performance for a given occupation (e.g., ACWA Form C).
- **Accomplishment records:** Applicants provide written descriptions of personal accomplishments that best illustrate their proficiency on critical job competencies. A panel of trained raters then uses competency-based benchmarks to score the degree to which the behaviors and outcomes reflect the benchmark levels of proficiency.
- **Job knowledge tests:** Tests that measure applicants' current knowledge of the field or job for which they are applying (e.g., a test that measures an applicant's

²⁵ List of assessment methods adapted from Merit Systems Protection Board, *Job Simulations: Trying Out for a Federal Job*, 57.

knowledge of basic chemistry or accounting principles).

- **Education level:** The level of education attained by the applicant (e.g., college graduate, graduate degree, Ph.D.).

C.4. Creating better training and experience questions for government hiring

As one of the initial steps in the hiring process, many government agencies collect applicants' self-reports of their training and experience, gathered through questionnaires.²⁶ Training and experience questionnaires serve two useful purposes: initially winnowing large applicant pools by separating out those candidates who report that they do not have the requisite experience needed for a job and providing hiring managers with background to explore in later stages of the hiring process, including interviews and reference checks. Agencies also frequently use these questionnaires to help determine minimum job qualifications—a task for which other assessment tools are often far better suited.

Agencies currently collect training and experience information in one of two ways: written summaries prepared by the applicant that demonstrate how his or her training and experience relate to critical knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) for the job or responses to multiple-choice questions. One goal of the Obama administration's hiring reform is to eliminate the written KSA summaries from the initial application by early November 2010, because they are often burdensome for applicants to prepare and time-consuming for hiring officials to evaluate. The use of multiple-choice training and experience questions is much less burdensome.

Although other types of assessment tools are much more effective for determining applicant qualifications and capabilities to perform a job, it is unlikely that such assessments can be implemented quickly enough in many agencies to meet an early November timeframe.

The administration's plan calls for adoption of procedures that will "allow individuals to apply for federal employment by submitting resumes and cover letters or completing simple, plain language applications, and assess applicants using valid, reliable tools."

Although reviewing large numbers of resumes is difficult, they can serve as a gateway or initial starting point for individuals to become applicants. While agencies may opt to use automated resume reading tools, the inconsistency of information provided by applicants makes resumes problematic as a basis for applicant screening. Well-developed training and experience questions address this issue by enabling standardized information to be collected from all applicants, allowing for apples to apples assessment. Thus, they provide a viable stop-gap measure to comply with the directive to eliminate written narratives by November, although identifying the best candidates for the job and achieving quality of hires overall calls for using more effective assessments.

Caveats when using training and experience questionnaires

While information on training and past experience is important to collect, it has significant limitations:

- Many job applicants receive high scores on multiple-choice questions that rely on self-reports of their training and experience, suggesting that more than a few are inflating these self-reports.
- As a consequence, self-report multiple-choice items are among the least accurate assessment tools for differentiating between applicants who will perform effectively on the job.²⁷
- Multiple-choice training and experience items provide only an indirect measure of the critical competencies applicants must possess to perform a job. Applicants with some experience or training in an area may not be able to apply the training or do related work effectively.
- Using training and past experience information can significantly disadvantage applicants who have not had the same opportunities as others to gain access to education and experience, but may nonetheless possess strong capabilities to perform the job. For example, an applicant can have exceptional customer service skills without prior experience in a customer services job, yet this person would be bypassed using education and experience as qualifications factors.

²⁶ Information from OPM about Training and Experience can be found in the Assessment Decision Guide (<http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/Content.aspx?page=3-12>).

²⁷ MSPB, Federal Appointment Authorities; MSPB, Reforming Federal Hiring; Partnership for Public Service, Asking the Wrong Questions; MSPB, Job Simulations: Trying out for a federal job.

The problems identified above mean that self-reported training and experience items have limited usefulness for determining applicant qualifications or capabilities to perform a job. Over-reliance on training and experience items for these purposes leads directly to hiring manager complaints that too many candidates referred to them for consideration are not well-qualified.

Getting started

Recognizing that it may not be practical for government agencies to implement higher-quality competency assessments immediately, below are guidelines for preparing useful training and experience questions using multiple-choice formats.

First, identify the competencies that will be measured, based on your job analysis. Some competencies, such as written communication, teamwork and customer service, will be common across many occupations. Others may be more technical and job-specific, such as technical systems design and program management.

The competencies should relate to tangible job tasks and activities that can be seen and measured. Generally, you will want to select between five and eight of the most critical competencies as the focus of the questionnaire.

Writing behaviorally based questions

The goal is to develop quality items that ask about past experience performing the work behaviors associated with each competency. Between three and eight items are typically asked for each competency area, depending on how many of the most critical work behaviors are associated with that area. Writing a quality item includes all of the following:

- Make sure each item reflects a critical work behavior that targets a single competency. A single question should not, for example, attempt to obtain information on both technical IT implementation experience and more generic teamwork experience.
- Consider the type of experience required. Should the item focus on experience that demonstrates specific knowledge and skill (e.g., developed Java applications) or more general job-relevant behavior (developed software applications)?
- Items should be written to differentiate among candidates’ levels of experience. This is best accomplished by writing response options in which the

complexity (from straightforward to highly complex) and independence (from supervised to supervising others) of the work is described.

- Use observable, verifiable terms. “Write a report” is better than “develop a report” as a measure for written communication.
- Write clear and succinct items. Example: Audits time reports of supervisees by checking for errors and verifying hours claimed.

Table 1 Common question-writing pitfalls and fixes

Pitfall	Fix
Unnecessary Words	Strip the task to the bare elements; make it as concise and clear as possible.
Double Barreled (includes multiple behaviors or competencies)	Remove extra actions or break the item into two (or more) separate items.
Overly Specific Items	Unless the job demands very specific prior experience, use more general actions. For example, instead of “Use Excel to add, subtract and divide subordinates’ timecards to calculate time and leave,” a better item would be “Use Excel to add, subtract and divide data.” (e.g., Use spreadsheets to track pay and leave.)
Vague or Ambiguous Terms	Do not use subjective adjectives and adverbs (e.g., complex, difficult, accurately) that open the door for respondents to interpret items differently. For example, instead of “Prepared complex reports that became highly visible in the organization,” a better item would be, “Prepared reports that required integrating information from multiple sources, identifying critical issues, and developing conclusions that persuaded others to a viewpoint.”
Abbreviations	Avoid using abbreviations and acronyms; spell out terms to ensure all applicants understand the item.

Table 2 Pros and cons of generic versus customized response options

	Generic	Customized
PROS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively inexpensive to develop • Easier and less time to develop • Measurement expertise less critical • Can be used across questionnaires and occupations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May provide greater differentiation among candidates • Can be specifically tailored to an occupation or grade level • More meaningful descriptions of experience
CONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little to no input from subject matter experts • May provide less differentiation among candidates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More challenging and time-consuming to develop • Requires greater measurement expertise • Requires much more subject matter expertise involvement • Less useful across questionnaires and occupations

Response options for survey questions

Various types of response options can be used with training and experience items, such as:

- **Yes-No:** Applicants select Yes or No
- **Multiple choice:** Applicants select one answer from the options provided
- **Select all that apply:** Applicants select as many options as describe their experience

You can use generic or customized response options for training and experience items. Examples of each are shown in table 2, followed by a summary of their pros and cons:

Example of Generic Response Options:

- No experience.
- Experience in training, but not on a job.
- Performed with direct supervision on a job.
- Performed with limited guidance on a job.
- Independently performed on a job.

Example of Customized Response Options:

- No experience evaluating civil engineering work.
- Experience in training and evaluating civil engineering work, but not on a job.
- Experience evaluating the work of others (adherence to contract terms, deliverables, milestones and costs) for limited scope projects in situations where services were prescribed, clear-cut to deliver, and straightforward to oversee.
- Experience evaluating the work of others (adherence to contract terms, deliverables, milestones and costs) delivering specialized services for projects

where you were required to gain specialized technical expertise to properly evaluate the work.

- Experience evaluating the work of others (adherence to contract terms, deliverables, milestones and costs) delivering large-scale, multifaceted services for projects that required ongoing collaboration, oversight and guidance to refine requirements and considerable technical expertise across relevant engineering disciplines to evaluate work.

C.5. Conducting structured Job Interviews

Structured job interviews use a standard set of questions designed to assess critical competencies—identified through a job analysis—that are required for a job. Structured interview questions can be developed to assess almost any competency, but they are often used to assess softer skills such as dealing with people, communicating, leading, planning, organizing and being adaptable. An effective structured interview assessment will meet the following criteria:²⁸

- All candidates for a specific vacancy are asked the same set of questions.
- The most effective structured interview questions require candidates to describe a time when they handled a situation or problem relevant to a critical job competency. For clarity and focus, candidates are asked to provide an example of only one situation per question. Candidates begin by providing a description of the circumstances that led up to the situation. They then describe what actions or behaviors they engaged in to handle the situation and the outcomes that resulted.

²⁸ For more information consult OPM's Structured Interview Guide (<http://apps.opm.gov/ADT/ContentFiles/SIGuide09.08.08.pdf>).

Figure 2 Example of interview question, probes and rating criteria on interpersonal skills

QUESTION: Tell me about a time when you started out in a difficult, adversarial situation that you had to improve with a co-worker in order to successfully complete a project.

Probe: What were the circumstances that made the situation difficult or adversarial?

Probe: What did you do to develop rapport and improve the relationship with your co-worker?

Probe: What happened as a result of your actions?

SAMPLE RATING CRITERIA FOR APPLICANT RESPONSES

1	2	3	4	5
Low Rating		Moderate Rating		High Rating
The Applicant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Made minimal attempts to understand the person’s perspective. Developed only a surface-level relationship in a simple situation. 		The Applicant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attempted to understand the other person’s perspective. Developed a positive working relationship with the person in a moderately difficult situation. 		The Applicant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectively reached out to person and actively sought to understand the person’s perspective. Developed a very positive relationship with the person in an extremely difficult situation.

- Interviewers take notes during the interview, recording the situation, actions and results of each situation.
- Interviewers may probe to collect more information using proper probing techniques to ensure that the interview is kept as standard as possible for all candidates.
- An effective structured interview provides standardized rating criteria, which interviewers use to evaluate responses.
- Interviewers need to be trained in how to administer the structured interview properly and apply the rating criteria consistently and accurately.
- Each interview question is typically scored using the standardized rating criteria, and these ratings can be summarized across the questions to achieve a final overall score.

Typical steps involved in developing competency-based assessments²⁹

1. Observe or interview job experts to develop lists of work activities performed on the job and competencies that are required to perform these activities.
2. Survey a sufficiently large and representative sample of job incumbents or supervisors, asking them to rate which work activities and competencies are critical for effective job performance.
3. Analyze the survey data to prioritize the most critical work activities and competencies.
4. Develop assessments that measure critical job competencies. This can include a variety of assessment types (e.g., work samples, multiple choice assessments, cognitive skills assessments, writing assessments, and video-based judgment assessments).
5. Pilot test assessments to ensure they have acceptable measurement properties.
6. Validate the job relevance of the assessments—different validation strategies can be employed depending on the assessment type and content.
7. Implement assessments for operational use.

²⁹ Pulakos, Elaine D. *Selection Assessment Methods: A guide to implementing formal assessments to build a high-quality workforce*, Society for Human Resource Management Foundation.



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

1100 New York Avenue NW
Suite 1090 EAST
Washington DC 20005

202 775 9111
ourpublicservice.org

PDRI | A PreVisor
Company

1300 N 17th Street
Suite 100
Alexandria VA 22209

703 276 4680
pdri.com