

Fair and Open Competition: Competent Staff Required

In April 2014, Jeff Neal, a former Chief Human Capital Officer for the Department of Homeland Security, posted an item to his blog¹ titled “[Fixing the Federal Hiring Process: Deus ex Machina](#).” If effective hiring and the role of technology and people in hiring are of concern to you, that item is worth reading. You may also want to watch for our upcoming report on fair and open competition and check out some previous MSPB reports on various aspects of Federal hiring.

Mr. Neal notes—and we agree—that it is a serious mistake to rely solely on technology to screen applicants for complex and demanding jobs (in Federal Government, the rule rather than the exception). Although technology can certainly assist in identifying potential job candidates, effective hiring continues to require that well qualified *people* make good decisions about the hiring approach and conduct appropriate applicant screening.

MSPB encourages a continued role for competent staff in the hiring process, most notably in HR specialist and managerial positions. First, a fair and open competition (one of the merit system principles), is the result of conscious choices made by people. As discussed in “The First Merit Principle: Fair and Open Competition” in our January 2014 *Issues of Merit* newsletter, those choices include: (1) appointment authority; (2) application period; and (3) assessment methods. Those choices require knowledgeable staff.

Second, a fair and open competition requires rules—and meaningful enforcement of those rules. Such enforcement is unlikely to be aptly implemented by machines. Just as every professional sport uses a referee, umpire, or judge to ensure (reasonably) fair play, there is a need for a human arbiter to make sure that the rules of Federal hiring are upheld. It would be poor judgment to assume that hiring technology could (or should) fulfill this role, and such an assumption could have serious consequences.

For example, our 2004 report *Identifying Talent through Technology: Automated Hiring Systems in Federal Agencies* documents the risk that an unrefereed competition may become a less-than-fair competition.

“Automated systems rely heavily on self-reported information. Agencies have found that undue reliance on self-reported information can compromise the quality of referrals and the integrity of the hiring process.”

— U.S. MSPB, *Identifying Talent through Technology: Automated Hiring Systems in Federal Agencies*, August 2004, p. 56 (online version).

¹ Jeffrey Neal’s Blog can be accessed at: www.chiefhro.com.

That report also states why an active role for HR staff and subject matter experts is not only compatible with a fair and open competition, but essential to it.

“[Agencies] found that quality control—a procedure for verifying and documenting applicant’s self-ratings, and modifying ratings, referrals, or both when appropriate—is critical to consistent referral quality and the integrity of the hiring process.”
— U.S. MSPB, p. 56 (online version).

As Mr. Neal also states, quality control is essential when using technology in the hiring process. For example, MSPB’s recent report, [*Evaluating Job Applicants: The Role of Training and Experience in Hiring*](#), underscores the importance of verifying applicant’s claims on self-report questionnaires, or requiring applicants to supply information that supports their claims. Examples of such strategies appear below, most of which are best performed or evaluated by a person with good judgment.

Sample agency-driven strategies:

- Verify information of a random sample of applicants, reducing the resources required while giving each applicant the same chance of investigation.
- Verify information from misplaced candidates who score highly on other assessments and are candidates for referral or selection.
- Verify selective content, such as what is critical to the job, what is most often falsified or exaggerated, or what does not seem consistent with other information.

Sample applicant-driven strategies:

- Provide notice of verification or actual warnings about the consequences of misrepresenting or falsifying application information.
- Require documentation from applicants that supports their claims or proficiencies.
- Require elaboration from applicants on their experiences to justify their proficiency ratings.

—Adapted from U.S. MSPB, *Evaluating Job Applicants: The Role of Training and Experience in Hiring*, January 2014, pp. 43-44.

This report also discusses the value of using multiple hurdles in the hiring process, in particular using subsequent assessments in addition to applicant self-ratings of training and experience. In addition to augmenting an agency’s overall hiring and assessment approach, such multiple hurdles can also function as a verification tool. Some applicants may intentionally or unintentionally misrepresent their qualifications on “first hurdle” questionnaires resulting in some false positives in the candidate pool; one or two subsequent assessments could greatly assist agencies in determining the extent to which applicants truly do have the knowledge, skills, training, and experience that they claim.

There are a range of options for these subsequent hurdle assessments. The following MSPB reports provide valuable information on several such assessments.

- [*Job Simulations: Trying Out for a Federal Job*](#)—an overview of assessments that incorporate a realistic presentation of one or more aspects of the job;
- [*The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential*](#)—an overview of the benefits of structured interviews and the elements of structure;
- [*Reference Checking in Federal Hiring: Making the Call*](#)—a review of the use of reference checking in public and private sectors and a summary of practices that can increase the contribution of reference checking to hiring decisions; and
- [*The Probationary Period: A Critical Assessment Opportunity*](#)—a discussion of how the probationary period should be used to assess candidates after the initial appointment.

In summary, technology can bring value to the Federal hiring process, but it must be used in conjunction with human expertise. Fair and open competition will continue to require an active role for HR staff and managers in making decisions about the hiring approach; reasonably enforcing rules; and ensuring that only candidates with the appropriate qualifications make the referral list.