

## **GPPI/Accenture Dialogue Series October 29, 2009 Session**

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Hiring Tools: Utilizing Innovative Assessment Techniques to Recruit Talent**

**Moderator:** Angela Bailey, Deputy Associate Director, Center for Talent and Capacity Policy, U.S. Office of Personnel Management

**Panelists:**

Bob Lavigna, Vice President for Research, Partnership for Public Service

Julia Leaman, Ph.D., Supervisory Personnel Research Psychologist, Customs and Border Protection, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Breck Marshall, North American Practice Lead, Talent & Organization Performance for Health and Public Service, Accenture

Jennifer Hemingway, Staff Director, Senator George Voinovich (R-OH); Member of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

Unless otherwise specified, all views expressed by the panelists and summarized here represent their personal opinions and do not necessarily reflect the official policies of their employers.

Panelists held a wide-ranging discussion on major issues arising from the current situation and future trends in assessment practices for federal government employment, as highlighted below. Some recurrent themes emerged from the panel and audience discussion: 1) the need for assessment and recruitment strategies and methods to be considered together; 2) in selecting assessment methods, the need to ensure relevance of the assessment to the specific job in question; 3) challenges arising from the Millennial generation and their higher expectations with regard to technology. Assessments are in effect part of the marketing and recruiting process, and for many Millennial applicants there is a risk that current assessments are often not effective at encouraging such applicants to continue in the recruiting process.

#### **I. General Background and Context**

- Strategic importance of assessment tools and technology to identify, recruit and advance the right talent, which is key to improving performance of government agencies and strengthening innovation in the public sector.
- Key features of high quality assessments are: effectiveness in predicting job performance, efficiency, legal soundness, practicality, user-friendliness.
- The significance of assessments has increased, primarily due to: 1) soaring number of applicants for federal jobs due to factors such as the economy, an increased number of open positions, and increased interest in the federal sector; 2) addressing generational changes in expectations and needs of applicants. This is particularly important in improving the use of technology in assessments, with the Millennial Generation composing an increasing share of applicants and of the workforce.

## II. Key Issues Discussed By Panelists

### A. Challenges Federal Government Faces in Assessing Applicants; Key Factors Sought by Applicants

- Moderator Angela Bailey noted that assessments are central to the challenge of finding the best person for a given position, in the present context of the massive volume of applicants to the federal jobs. Evaluating candidates primarily on the basis of prior academic records is not effective, as it is not an adequate indicator of future job performance. Further, the federal government needs to identify qualified candidates from a talent pool drawn from all segments of society. She noted that while there was a range of assessment approaches used in the public sector, it may be time to move beyond some methods commonly used such as KSA narrative essays. OPM is currently investing significant resources in finding improved assessment methods and hopes to introduce such methods to other agencies in the near future.
- Panelist Bob Lavigna (PPS) discussed how assessment is one process in a broader chain of events leading to selection of a candidate. He emphasized that while assessments are of course necessary, it is equally important to ensure there will be an adequate pool of qualified candidates for critical federal jobs in future. A key challenge prior to addressing a high number of applicants is ensuring the quality of candidates. In this regard, PPS highlights mission-critical federal jobs on its website. He noted that a key challenge in assessment is to identify and appropriately incorporate what applicants want from assessments. He listed 3 such factors: a more user-friendly process, technical and face validity in terms of relevance to the specific job, and improved communication throughout the selection and assessment process.
- Panelist Julia Leaman (CBP) noted that her agency had found key features applicants seek in assessments are: 1) a fair, open process with feedback at multiple stages; 2) job relevance of the assessment. Echoing a recurrent theme of the dialogue, she noted that there is no common solution for assessments and diverse assessment batteries are needed for the range of different positions in the federal government.
- Panelist Breck Marshall (Accenture) asked if there is a broad need to reconsider the current approach to assessments given the challenge of generational change in the workforce and the projected large 'deficit of talent' in many sectors by 2020. The increasing numbers of staff and applicants from the Millennial generation (due to be 40% of the workforce by 2010) requires reconsideration of key topics such as: engagement of applicant through the assessment process; assessment of new competencies needed in successful candidates (e.g., inter-generational

cooperation). He noted elements of on-the-job assessments (such as probationary periods and internship evaluation) can be fruitfully integrated with assessments of prospective candidates.

B. Use of Assessments to Strategically Winnow Huge Applicant Pools

- Bob Lavigna addressed this question, noting that relevant job competencies are critical to assessments which can effectively sort through the large number of applicants currently faced by the federal government. Assessments should be custom-designed for a given job and should consider the competition for that job in the labor market – the alternative jobs candidates would most likely also apply to. He noted that attention should be given to developing sound assessments for key jobs of the future, many of which may not enjoy the currently high volume of applicants. He noted that agencies should not always require resumes and cover letters just because of the perception that the private sector requires these documents, as in his view this was a myth. Moderator Angela Bailey commented on this point that OPM wants resumes and cover letters to be optional for the applicant, and to avoid uniform document submission requirements for applicants to different jobs.

C. Proposed New Legislation to Improve Federal Hiring Process

- Jennifer Hemingway (Legislative staff, Senator Voinovich) commented that the proposed legislation was straightforward and built on OPM's recent work in this area. Major highlights of the bill are: 1) requiring workforce planning as a key goal for agencies – agencies would formulate a strategic plan for critical jobs both in the short-term and in future; 2) removing the KSA at the initial point of entry for applicants (with agencies having the flexibility to use the KSA as needed at later stages in the assessment process); 3) requiring a minimum of 4 communications from agencies to job applicants over the entire process from application to selection or denial, as the case may be; 4) requiring agencies to take an average period for the hiring process of a maximum of 80 calendar days.

D. Thoughts on the Future of Assessment; Private Sector Approaches to Assessment

- In response to a question on private sector approaches to assessment, Breck Marshall commented that private sector approaches increasingly recognized that assessment tools could be interactive and interesting for the user while capturing what the candidate was like. He noted that in future video resumes may become common in the private sector. The private sector assessments will tend to provide a broader perspective on talent rather than being exclusively confined to evaluating talent in relation to one particular job with the organization. Instead of a conventional assessment for one job, assessments may include 'pre-

assessments' that aim to assess where the best fit for an applicant exists within a given organization.

- Angela Bailey noted that while the private sector has greater flexibility in assessing applicants for the best possible position rather than solely for one job, OPM is considering feasible ways to conduct such assessments in future. Panelists noted that in the public sector the feasibility and legal soundness of re-directing applicants to jobs other than what they applied for would be important factors in designing such approaches.
- Julia Leaman commented that in future increasingly federal HR staff are trying to move to working as strategic partners with the hiring manager in the hiring process for a given job. This will facilitate better workforce planning as well as improved hiring and assessment. She noted that HR staff still faced a heavy load of transactional work due to the high volume of applicants.
- Commenting on technology and new assessment tools, Julia Leaman noted that technology made new assessments possible that could be more effective, efficient and have greater appeal to Millennials. She discussed the example of video-based assessments of live situations used in CBP offices. While computer-based assessments offered more flexibility, sound measurement methodologies remained essential for both new and traditional assessments to be effective.

#### E. Choosing from the Range of Assessment Options; Use of High-Tech Assessment Tools

- Addressing the issue of choosing from diverse assessment options, Bob Lavigna emphasized: 1) assessment should be viewed as a science, and designing sound assessment systems required expertise; 2) decisions in this area should be based on experience and systematic data gained from recruitment and assessments. He noted that structured, benchmarked interview assessments may be more valuable than conventional interpersonal interviews. He advised agencies to obtain expert input on their assessment process from industrial/organizational psychologists, which if not available in-house can be requested from OPM. He encouraged agencies to assemble databases on their job performance, turnover, and recruitment activities. This could be used to estimate the agency return on investment (ROI) on specific recruitment activities.
- Angela Bailey concurred that in her experience group and panel assessments were often better predictors than individual assessments.
- Breck Marshall commented that agencies use of cutting-edge assessment tools such as interactive exercises and video resumes should depend on the particular context. Technology used appropriately according to the context can successfully reduce the volume of the applicant pool. He noted that the most cost-effective assessment tool depends on the context and competition for a given position.

Other countries such as Australia can offer relevant examples of the use of structured assessments based on input from Industrial/Organizational Psychologists to replace their equivalent of narrative essays (KSAs).

- Jennifer Hemingway noted that agencies faced the risk of making hasty decisions in choosing among new computer-based assessment tools based on insufficient information, which would be costly to reverse in future. She noted it would be advisable for OPM to identify any broadly useful technology and software-based assessment packages for federal agencies.

F. Assessing Prior Experience: Self-Ratings and Structured Assessments

- Regarding this topic, Julia Leaman observed that the trend was for hiring managers to want more structure and objective ratings in assessments than self-ratings. She noted that she viewed self-ratings and tools based on self-review (e.g. resumes) as generally too subjective. However, if prior experience is a key factor in assessing applicants for a given job, customized self-rating questionnaires can be a useful tool.