CIVIL SERVICE RECRUITMENT: RECRUITING THE RIGHT PERSONS THE RIGHT WAY

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Skilled and motivated personnel are arguably the most important determinant of an effective government. How does a government recruit the best and the brightest?

This *Governance Note* examines different approaches to recruiting through career- and position-oriented systems; measuring knowledge versus competencies; screening applicants through written or oral tests; and recruiting junior- and senior-level civil servants. It also compares the advantages and disadvantages of centralized and decentralized recruitment processes.

Although this note primarily focuses on civil servants, many of the findings presented here are generalizable to other public employees, such as teachers and health workers.

WHY IS RECRUITMENT IMPORTANT?

Merit-based recruitment — hiring based on the quality of the candidate rather than political connections — forms a basic pillar in the Weberian bureaucracy model (Rauch and Evans 2000; Bäck and Hadenius 2008). Research, though limited, shows this approach correlates with economic growth and lower levels of corruption and nepotism (Rauch and Evans 2000; Cingolani et al. 2015; Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen, and Schuster 2018; Meyer-Sahling, Schuster, and Mikkelsen 2018).

Lower corruption is associated with higher citizen satisfaction and trust, and lower nepotism with greater performance, motivation, and satisfaction among civil servants (Meyer-Sahling, Schuster and Mikkelsen, 2018). Especially where patronage is high, introducing merit-based recruitment through formal civil service examinations can have a significant impact (Sundell 2014; Meyer-Sahling, Mikkelsen, and Schuster 2018).

RECRUITMENT SYSTEMS

The manner in which countries organize their recruitment is strongly linked to whether the civil service system is based on careers or positions. Career-based systems tend to recruit once, at the bottom of the hierarchy. Candidates for internal promotions are sought within the existing pool of civil servants.

Position-based systems open up all new jobs to competitive recruitment. Civil servants compete with outsiders from the private sector or other public organizations. Because this system hires for each single job individually, the recruitment and screening methods are more specific. Mechanisms tend to take the form of interviews and a CV, or qualifications, check.

In a career-based system, hiring methods are more general because hiring is for a broad career, instead of a specific job. A general written exam might be more appropriate.

In these examples of both systems, strong emphasis is placed on merit. Position-based systems are first described followed by career-based and then a middle ground.

Australia, Iceland, and the Netherlands. All three countries have similar recruitment systems, which are the most position-based systems of all member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This leads to decentralized recruitment, direct job application (instead of a centralized exam to enter the civil service at large), a scan of the applicant's CV, and a personal interview. The process is often conducted by either selection panels or by a recruitment firm and guided by rules determined at the central government level (OECD 2012).

France. The French system is a classic example of a career-based system. Recruitment is organized through a competitive exam (the concours), and takes place mainly at the beginning of civil servants' career. There are three types of exams: one open to external candidates, one that is only open to civil servants, and one that is open to elected officials, managers of associations and the private sector (Larat, 2018).

China. The Chinese recruitment mechanism of centrally organized examinations has a rich history, dating back to the 7th century CE. A strong focus on Confucian values makes it a unique system. Applicants take a three-part test: (i) 140 questions on logic, mathematics, politics, and philosophy; (ii) an analysis of economic and political documents; and (iii) an essay relating to a topic from the second part. Many questions concern problem solving through the use of Chinese philosophical principles (i.e., Confucius and Laozi) (Mériade and Qiang 2015).

India. The Indian public sector has a rich history of central examinations. To participate in the civil service exam, the candidate must have a university degree and be between 21 and 28 years of age. There is a single examination for all administrative services, with the first step consisting of two papers — one general and one on a subject of choice. If passed,

the candidate writes eight more papers for the second step. Finally, an oral interview complements the eight written tests (Sarkar 2018).

Brazil. The Brazilian system recruits its civil servants through centrally organized concursos (competitive exams). About 90 percent of federal civil servants enter the public sector through one of the concursos, which are organized by professional category (more than 200). These written exams focus on testing formal knowledge of a narrow policy area related to professional category. No interviews are conducted. Some concerns exist that the exams do not measure relevant managerial or generalist competencies.

Republic of Korea. The Korean civil service is a career-based system, which combines both interviews and a central exam, without education requirements. The first step consists of a multiple-choice test, focusing on linguistic and logical ability, data interpretation, circumstantial judgment, and command of the English language. Higher grade entries include a second step. The candidate takes an essay-based test, after which an interview concludes the process. Previously, tests concentrated on legal knowledge. Today, they emphasize job-related competencies (Kim 2010).

Ireland. Ireland is an example of a middle ground between position- and career-based systems, along with Belgium, Denmark, and Mexico (OECD 2012). Although leaning toward a career system, several junior ranking positions in the Irish system are filled through both external recruitment (as in position-based systems) and internal recruitment (as in career-based systems). Clerical, executive, and administrative officers are recruited through open competition. These recruitments are based on the outcomes of psychological and work-related tests, and a final interview (Andrews 2006).

SCREENING: KNOWLEDGE, CHARACTERISTICS, COMPETENCY

The first and most basic factors in screening are often age, nationality, and educational attainment. How then should applicants be measured? In practice, testing of general, and especially legal, knowledge is widespread (Cardona 2006). Psychometric tests, such as IQ and Big Five, and administrative skill testing, such as mailbox exercises, are popular as well (Andrews 2006; Callen et al. 2015).

For position-based applications, specialized testing of knowledge, especially legal knowledge, is common practice as well. Tests concentrate on the area of the job. Finally, despite solid empirical evidence showing the strong positive effects that public service motivation has on the performance of civil servants, it appears that no countries screen for this attribute.

Many tests are criticized, in particular, when taking the form of multiple-choice exams of factual knowledge (Meyer-Sahling et al. 2015). They run the risk of rewarding those with keen memory skills and a basic understanding of certain topics, but not other desirable traits. Much like debates in education surrounding standardized tests, it could be argued that one's test-taking ability is being tested. As a consequence, "applicants are bound to focus their efforts on mastering the test itself rather than the skills that the test is designed to measure" (Sundell 2014).

A third type of testing measures competency. In the early 2000s, competency-based recruitment became a popular tool for human resource managers (Hood and Lodge 2004). Rather than a candidate's topical knowledge, broader issues are measured such as leadership or strategic, critical, and innovative thinking (Lodge and Hood 2005).

The OECD differentiates the necessary skill sets for civil servants into four categories: policy advice, work with citizens, collaboration in networks, and commissioning and contracting. Overarching all are three competencies: strategic thinking, professional expertise, and innovative capabilities (OECD 2017). The importance these competencies have for a well-functioning, modern civil service suggests including them in screening mechanisms. According to this logic, they are much more relevant for a civil servant than factual knowledge of a particular branch of public law.

In two other examples, the Belgian federal government defines its preferred competencies as loyalty, integrity, and orientation toward citizens, internal clients, and society. The regional government chose client orientation, reliability, collaboration, and continuous improvement (Brans and Hondeghem 2005).

In whichever way a government develops its competency framework, it is clear that traditional screening mechanisms are incapable of measuring competencies beyond narrowly defined professional expertise. And even then, that competency is often measured with a one-sided legal focus. Topical knowledge, legal knowledge, and other personality traits such as IQ might still be relevant, but an emphasis on broader competencies could bring civil service recruitment to another level.

WRITTEN VERSUS ORAL EXAMS

Competencies and knowledge can be tested in written and oral form. Both are widely applied across countries and have their advantages and disadvantages.

Written examinations are perhaps the most commonly found recruitment instrument. They can measure general or specific knowledge, IQ, personality traits, or competencies in multiple choice and essay form. When coupled with the right accountability and anonymity measures, written tests can greatly reduce the potential for political or nepotistic influences, although answers to essay questions are more prone to discretion than multiple choice (Sundell 2014).

Secondly, once the tests are designed, the system is relatively cheap to maintain. Badly designed exams, however, can emphasize memory and test-taking skills instead of more relevant competencies. Designing a good exam, and the institutional structures to diminish nepotism and politicization, can create a high cost at the start.

Finally, written exams need to be difficult enough to be properly selective. Meyer-Sahling and colleagues (2015) found that 60 to 80 percent of candidates pass the central exams in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia. Results like those found in the Philippines, between 9 and 17 percent (Brilliantes and Tiu Sonco 2010), are more

useful in diminishing the workload of the assessment process.

Interviews and other oral exams are, by contrast, more flexible than written exams. They can be tailored to the particular job opening and are cheaper to implement. However, they operate more at the discretion of the officials conducting the interview, which increases the risk of nepotism or politicization of the recruitment process.

To reduce these risks, some standardization is possible through interview handbooks and neutral interview panels, although the costs of the screening mechanism increase (Chen, Chiang, and Chen 2013). Training will be needed for each new interview panel, and the flexibility of interviews is at odds with attempts to standardize them. There is either the need for one surface level interview handbook or many different ones per position and per department.

CENTRALIZED VERSUS DECENTRALIZED

Institutionally, recruitment can be centralized or decentralized. In a centralized system, the authority to determine who and how many people are hired is located at the national level, usually a recruitment commission or specialized agency (Mosley 2012).

By contrast, decentralized recruitment is organized by the line ministry, agency, or subnational government itself. Having recruitment carried out by line ministries can lead to more specialized recruitment mechanisms, a higher likelihood of recruiting the right person for the job, and a smaller processing time. It also makes it harder for the Ministry of Finance to control all personnel budgets for the line ministries and increases the risk of nepotism or corruption.

Overall, there is a correlation between decentralization and position-based systems, and between centralization and career-based systems (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Centralization of Recruitment and Recruitment System
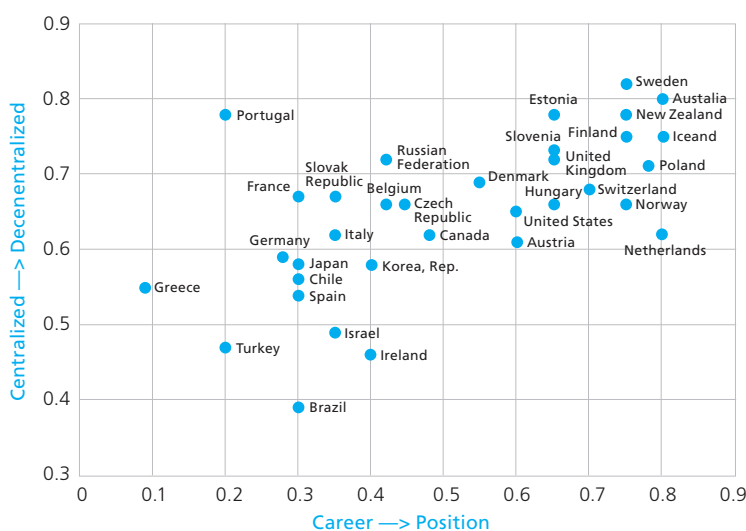
Sources: OECD 2012, 2016.
Note: The scores are approximations, interpreted from graphs as provided by the sources.

JUNIOR VERSUS SENIOR RECRUITS

A distinction should be made between recruitment for junior- and senior-level positions. An increasing number of governments have created a specific recruitment mechanism for senior-level civil servants. At the senior level, less focus is put on measuring specific and general knowledge. More attention is paid to assessing competencies, specifically, skills linked to the interplay between politics, policy implementation, and policy coordination with other departments.

In a purely career-based system, these senior positions will only be available to current civil servants. Many career-based systems, however, have opened up some senior positions to external candidates to acquire competencies that might not be developed in a public sector context (Kuperus and Rode 2008). Furthermore, whereas junior-level applicants are usually hired by their future direct supervisor under position-based systems or by an examination board under career-based systems, at the senior level, the final decision is often made through the use of panels, selection committees, and supervising bodies. For the most senior positions (e.g., secretary generals), political representatives and head-hunting firms might be involved as well (World Bank 2012).

CONCLUSION

Countries at different stages of development will need to focus on different elements, whether it is designing and systematizing a centrally administered written exam or implementing a competency-based framework. Merit-based recruitment requires constant attention as reforms are easily reversed, and the temptation to do so might be high, especially since these mechanisms strongly diminish the possibility of recruiting people for their electoral efforts (Rose and Gowthaman 2015; Kiragu and Mukandala 2003). For example, Meyer-Sahling (2011) showed that recruitment reforms in Poland and the Slovak Republic were largely reversed, after the incentive of EU-accession had been cashed in.

At the same time, some systems may be merit-based on paper, but not in practice. Enforcement is equally important. Implemented correctly, merit-based systems can increase government capacity, service delivery, transparency, and trust.

For more cases, reports, working papers, or answers to questions, contact wvanacker@worldbank.org.

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