BUILDING THE CIVIL SERVICE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE

Q&A

BACKGROUND

Rupert McNeil, Richard Hillsdon and Bernadette Thompson hosted a webinar held by Dods in early October on **Building the Civil Service workforce of the future.**

Here is a brief which provides some more information on the webinar.

There was a Q&A at the end of the webinar, and as there were a lot of questions we put together this piece to go through the answers. Speakers Richard and Rupert agreed to answer the questions following the event. These were picked out as questions which each speaker was most qualified to answer.

See below Richard Hillsdon and Rupert McNeil's responses to the questions asked.

Q Richard Hillsdon

EOI are often seen as earmarked posts. How do we make that fairer?

Richard Hillsdon: I cannot offer an official view on the "earmarking" point because, as a non-civil servant these days, I do not have responsibility for the range of recruitment practices employed by CS Depts or more specifically the various reasons an EOI may be used. But, what I can say is that the predominant use of EOIs has grown as the size of initial applicant fields has become large (sometimes into the hundreds) for popular posts.

These EOIs allow a Dept to reduce the field at the outset so that both applicants and recruiters can ensure that those who will be invited to complete a full application and then assessed at sift and subsequent interview are credible candidates.

Otherwise, the resources needed to deal with 'all-comers' could overwhelm the sifting panels with applications that do not meet the essential criteria, and more than that, give false hope to those applicants who will have put in a great deal of effort writing applications that are not going to succeed. As to how the EOI is framed to achieve this, there are many variations.

Among those I have come across are:
- *a 'short' Personal statement (say, 300-400 words) addressing just one or two Essential Criteria*
- *addressing just one Behaviour*
- *submission of just a CV and so on, upon which a decision is taken to invite a full application.*

In other cases, a full application is invited but then the field, if regarded as too large, is reduced on the basis of the answer on one Criterion or Behaviour. It needs to be borne in mind that EOIs have been around for a long time and not introduced as part of the SP system.

My personal view based on many coaching sessions with applicants, is that EOIs as I have described the practice above, serve a useful purpose for both sides of the table provided that the process of EOI assessment is as carefully put together as the rest of the selection procedure. Unfortunately, feedback can be sparse or non-existent. But applicants need to be aware that they have to be compliant with the process and reach a certain standard. It does an applicant no favours for them to believe that they were a credible candidate when they weren't in range and I have met many of those who did not realise this.

Some people struggle to shine at interview and are more capable than they may come across. Where people have demonstrated capability through temporary promotions, is the need for interview really necessary?

RH: Many do indeed struggle at interview, and that, of course, is not down to Success Profiles as such. I have worked with struggling interviewees for more than 25 years pre-dating even the Competence system.

But there are many reasons for this including:
- *being unable to provide a persuasive evidence basis in their answers*
- *not having thought through their 'pitch' for the job through the eyes of the vacancy holder*
- *inability to translate the learning from their examples into what would transfer to the job applied for*
- *failure to appreciate how the challenge of the Sift is quite different from that of the Interview and not preparing accordingly*

I could go on with this list, but those on TP should have an advantage in that they will no doubt have examples which are genuinely pitched at the grade level applied for. The trouble is that they often do not skilfully exploit that or are debilitated by a heightened pressure given that they feel they should be successful.

Worst of all, they can fall into the opposite trap, when interviewed by those who know or even manage them, of "I don't need to say this because they know I know that" instead of adopting a zero-based budget approach.

As you know, the Civil Service has a legislative duty to select fairly and openly and therefore to be promoted substantively requires that all candidates in principle be put through the same process (except special arrangements for disability). My view, which those I have coached are only too familiar with, is that it is down to candidates to make sure TP experience is the advantage it should be, but not a free pass.ppliers.

Q

Having just gone through an interview process for the job I am already doing for almost a year, I felt disadvantaged by the success profile format as it depends very much on being able to say the correct thing in the correct way to achieve a high score.

This does not guarantee that someone who knows the language to use to hit these score can necessarily do the job required whereas someone who knows and does the job successfully often going the extra mile may not perform as well in the interview so is not successful and the person who performed well in the interview is given the position but cannot do what is expected seems very unfair.

RH: My answer to the question above is directly relevant here but I would like to add something else very important in the light of what I was saying about SP on the webinar. The improvement in recruitment success with SP depends crucially on how vacancy holders manage to re-analyse jobs thoroughly so that they have selected Essential Criteria that really reflect the core deliverables required for success in the job - and reflect that clearly in the adverts – and including as appropriate diversity.

My personal experience over the past 2 years of running workshops with vacancy holders, as I said on the webinar, is that so far this is in short supply and hence perhaps your comments about saying the "correct" thing in the interview.

Under the old competency system, I think that people got used to how to play the S.T.A.R. process in often quite a formulaic way and interview panels perhaps were influenced by a good performance at that. You can think of this as the "competencies" becoming the foreground at the expense perhaps of assessing the potential for actual job delivery.

But we now need to use the SP system to change. It is not enough to substitute Behaviours as though to invite the mindset of the old system on both sides of the interview table. What needs to be done is for vacancy holders, in addition to the job analysis I have described above, to consider all 5 SP elements and score the relevant ones directly in relation to its potential contribution to future job success. All too often I have heard SP described in effect as a Behaviours/Strengths blended approach. It is more than that.

To achieve this, we also need to look at other assessment methods that have been shown empirically to be better predictors than just candidate descriptions of previous job performance examples or even Strengths. I would include here relevant qualifications and experience as validated by job sampling 'tests' and other 'live' demonstrations as well as Behaviour examples, accepting that this will add resource cost to the process.

But – and this is a vital but - based on my coaching experience, I have long experience that the best candidates do not just trot out 'correct' answers. Instead, they show the panel that they have thought through the job demands carefully and shaped their Behaviours and Strengths examples to make those links creatively and evidentially. Bluntly put, those "going the extra mile" as you say, therefore just have to get better at telling that story through the SP framework.

Q Rupert McNeil

What can we do to make the Civil Service LOOK like an attractive place to work? At the moment, attracting talent is a challenge when our Civil Service jobs site doesn't show us to be as innovative as we really are. Compare us to the Private Sector and first impressions aren't as good as they could be

Rupert McNeil: I disagree with this. I think the Civil Service does look like an attractive place to work. You only have to look at the fact we were once again named The Times Top Graduate Employer to show that people who care about public services, especially young people, want to work for the Civil Service.

Q

Rupert mentioned in his opening the responsibility of the employer to provide continuous, high-quality, structured learning for the employee - to develop the expert skills needed for the future and the right employee experience. What needs to change for the CS to do that even better?

*RM: As part of our work around modernisation and reform, we've established a new **Government Skills and Curriculum Unit** that will accelerate the development of the knowledge, skills and professional practice of all Civil Servants. It draws together the Civil Service Leadership Academy, the National Leadership Centre, Accelerated Development Schemes, and other enablers such as the new CSL website and our new contracts with suppliers.*

Q

Are there any plans to look at the performance of civil servants? We employ a number of people who do not always perform and they get passed from one department to the next but the current HR processes are difficult and people do not want to address poor performance.

RM: The Civil Service (CS) has a continuous focus on robust performance management (PM), aimed at building a high-performance Civil Service culture with the leadership, skills and capability to deliver quality services flexibly both now and in the future.

From 2011 to 2017 the CS utilised a common system, introduced to bring more consistency to performance assessment across departments along with equal value being placed on skills and behaviours and stronger focus on differentiation of different performance levels to identify and nurture our best performers and effectively tackle poor and underperformance.

Whilst this approach achieved success in those areas, there was an over-focus on process, which in itself has negligible impact on improving performance outcomes as opposed to the other elements which have been found to be more effective in driving performance improvement when looked at together; i.e. line manager confidence/capability, an engaged, motivated workforce and inclusive culture.

As a result, we introduced a common framework, enabling departments to broaden their focus and develop approaches tailored to their business and cultural needs, whilst still adhering to the principles introduced in 2011. Assurance analysis has shown that although departments now operate more diverse approaches, these retain a clear focus on improving individual and organisational performance but with a stronger emphasis on future development, capability and inclusion.

Q

Thank you for talking to us about your own journey to becoming qualified as an accountant. I agree that increasingly people need to be able to operate across functional areas. Do you have any words of advice for managers and organisations - and HR teams - on how they can shift their own mindsets to not just consider employee development for the role/profession they are in, but also support people to explore complementary - relevant - professional pathways and qualifications that will enable them to perform and add value more widely in the future?

RM: *The new core curriculum framework (the 'what') and Campus (the 'how'), will define and deliver the skills, knowledge and networks essential for working in public service. Much of this relates to developing capabilities specific to working in Government, but, as with all training and learning, what's acquired and practised in one domain is highly transferable to others.*

Managers in government can attract and retain great people by illustrating the unique challenges and opportunities of civil service roles, which are also common across all sectors: major project delivery, complex problem-solving, data analysis. In raising the confidence and competence of our people we also raise the status of our workforce and attract career-switchers, and secondees, and become more 'porous', which is why very high-quality induction for all entrants to govt careers is so important.

Q

I wondered if Rupert could expand on his thoughts of the people profession of the future please? I agree it will/should change with automation and digital savviness, but if anything I would hope/expect that expertise in People, Inclusion, and OD only to become more important?

RM: Absolutely, whilst the world of work is continuously changing we also need to ensure that we are building the capability of those within our profession. We as a profession have always had a relentless commitment to providing a world-leading approach and it is more vital than ever that we continue to raise our professional standards.

Through the newly formed HR Professions Board and the HR Sub-Profession forum, we are constantly reviewing, how do we continue to build capability, capacity and people strategies in environments that are volatile, uncertain, complex and with high degrees of ambiguity? Inclusion and building capability, build-in data analysis, strategic workforce planning and OD&D forms part of the Board and the Forum priority.

Q

Are there any plans to move from several unconnected to use a single platform across gov e.g. Microsoft Team?

RM: Our Civil Service reform programme is looking at ways to improve the interoperability of the Civil Service in order to allow for better collaboration and better results. One of the areas we are exploring is rationalising our IT infrastructure to do just this.

Q

Given budget cuts year on year and minimal pay increases and also with the difference in pay between the public and private sector for specialist skills and posts, are we thinking how to keep these staff long term rather than seeing them move into the private sector?

RM: The question of pay comes up quite regularly. Although you are correct, and there are differences in pay between the public and private sector for certain skills, if you look at the Civil Service's entire offer, including the pension, annual leave, commitment to flexible working, I think we have a much more competitive offer than people always realise.

Q

I have seen an increase in Project Management infrastructure within our organisation in the last 12 months. In Human Resources do you think this way of working will become more prevalent within the Civil Service HR and what do you think are the benefits of this? In terms of the discussion about upskilling do you think this is an area HR professionals should focus on?

RM: I think we all need to be able to manage projects, i.e. think in straight lines, manage people and resources, meet deadlines, and there are simple tools and checklists that help, but we have to be proportionate. Building an oil rig or the Olympics needs elite PPM - running a simple project just needs the basic level of administrative efficiency. We mustn't deploy complex griddery or governance structures where they hinder, or divert people from true personal accountability, and doing the right thing.

Q

Rupert mentioned skills and experience is important for the future and we should invest in learning, but at the same time degrees are not essential. Does that mean the Civil Service does not value degrees or those studying towards degree-level qualifications? What about apprenticeships?

RM: Absolutely not. The point I was making was that degrees are not the only way to learn new skills and gain experience. I think apprenticeships are a fantastic, alternative way to build that level of knowledge. I also think that CPD is another fantastic alternative that recognises the type of on-the-job training which is so essential to building deep expertise. Degrees have their place, but they are not, and should not, be the only type of qualification which is recognised.

**Contact the Dods Training
team for more information**

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