


*At a Glance* is a summary of the highlights of the Office of the Merit Commissioner's 2008/09 annual report, available on our website.

A qualified and engaged public service is critical to tackling the present and future challenges facing our province. The BC Public Service is accountable to hire and promote employees based on the principle of merit, through a fair process, without political influence. My mandate through the *Public Service Act* is to monitor the application of the merit principle.

In 2008, we conducted Stage 1 of a special audit of temporary appointments made for a term of seven months or less. We concluded the 2007 annual audit and prepared for a change in the timing of our annual audit process for 2009. By auditing shortly after an appointment is made, organization heads are receiving more timely reports; which improves accountability and prevents recurring mistakes.

During my three year term, it has been an honour to have served as the first independent Merit Commissioner and a privilege to be entrusted with this responsibility. I look forward to passing the torch of oversight and insight into merit in the BC Public Service to my successor.



Joy Illington, Merit Commissioner

## The principle of merit

Merit means that appointments are made based on an assessment of competence and ability to do the job, and are non-partisan.

## Monitoring the application of merit

To provide oversight of and insight into the performance of merit-based hiring in the BC Public Service, we focus on three business lines: annual and special audits, independent staffing reviews; and education about merit-based staffing requirements and the impact on employee engagement.

## 2009 Annual Audit

The Office's annual audit focuses on appointments that form the long-term workforce to determine: whether recruitment and selection processes were properly applied to result in merit-based appointments; and whether the individuals appointed were qualified.

## Interim Results – First Quarter of 2009

The overall results for 2009, including year to year comparisons, extrapolations, and findings will be reported in the 2009/2010 Annual Report. Our analysis of the first quarter audit findings for 2009 provides insight into the current state of merit-based hiring, and identifies issues and trends.

The interim audit findings indicate a positive trend toward better documentation of the appointment process, which is fundamental to a merit-based appointment.

In the first quarter there was no evidence of any appointments based on patronage.

We found evidence that one candidate was appointed who did not possess the advertised qualifications. Lesser qualifications were considered for this candidate without applying the same standards to other candidates. This did not meet the test of merit.

Problem areas identified in the first quarter audit results include:

**a) Assessment:** A flawed practice continues to be noted - candidates are being short listed based on resume statements of their knowledge and skills. An objective assessment limits initial screening to stated education and experience requirements.

**b) Notification:** Managers are required to notify employee applicants of the outcome of competitions. Failure to provide final notification has been identified as an ongoing issue which undermines confidence in the merit of the appointment and adds to the perception that managers are not accountable for their hiring decisions. It also frustrates employees' statutory right to review of appointments.

**c) Assessing Years of Continuous Service:** This is one of the factors of merit, and for positions covered by the BCGEU collective agreement it must be assessed using a specific formula. As in previous years, this

calculation was not done or was done incorrectly in many cases. These errors can affect a candidate's appointment or their order of placement on an eligibility list.

### **Special Audit – Stage 1**

In 2008 we undertook a special audit of temporary appointments of employees made for a term of seven months or less, which represented almost one quarter of all the hiring in 2008.

These appointments must be based on the principle of merit. However, as the appointments are intended to be short-term, they do not require a competitive process; as is required for temporary appointments with a term of more than seven months.

Stage 1 of the special audit found that 79% of short term promotional appointments were finished within seven months. We continue to examine the 21% which continued longer, some of which were extended many times.

### **Staffing Reviews**

Upon an employee applicant request, the Merit Commissioner provides a final and binding review of the application of merit for appointments to bargaining unit positions. Employees submit requests for review because they believe an appointment was not merit-based.

About half of the requests this year included a focus on behavioural competency-based interviews. Some employees also questioned

whether their experience was appropriately considered. Others raised concerns which reflected employees' perception of staffing practices in their work environment.

During the 2008/09 fiscal year, there were 15 requests for review. Four requests were deemed ineligible for review; and in all 11 cases where a decision was issued, the appointments were found to comply with merit.

### **Education and Outreach**

This year focused on raising awareness of the value of merit-based hiring among public service employees, particularly hiring managers. The Merit Commissioner met with groups of employees to talk about merit and presented at a course for new public service managers. She also spoke at national conferences, and presented to the international Commonwealth Association of Public Administration and Management.

### **Looking forward**

A public service hired through a merit-based process should reflect the diversity of people in the province's workforce. We will explore how other organizations have increased their diversity while upholding merit. We will conduct a random survey to determine employee awareness of their statutory right to request a review of an appointment decision. Now that a baseline has been set through annual and special audits, future audits will focus on areas where merit-based appointments may be at risk.



## *2008/09 At a Glance*

Oversight and Insight into Merit-Based  
Hiring in the BC Public Service

Website: [www.meritcomm.bc.ca](http://www.meritcomm.bc.ca)