Office of the Merit Commissioner

Self-Assessment Questionnaires

Special Study

2015

UPHOLDING FAIR HIRING IN THE BC PUBLIC SERVICE

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Introduction

The Merit Commissioner is responsible for monitoring the application of the merit principle under the *Public Service Act*. Section 8(1) of the *Act* requires that appointments to and from within the public service be based on the principle of merit and be the result of a process designed to appraise the knowledge, skills and abilities of eligible applicants. In conducting audits and reviews of BC Public Service appointments in 2012, the Office of the Merit Commissioner (the Office) observed an increase in the use of self-assessment questionnaires as a short-listing tool and has observed since the continued frequent use of this tool. As short-listing is generally the first step in a selection process, and inappropriate or incorrect use of self-assessment questionnaires could potentially have a significant impact on merit-based hiring processes, an examination of this practice was considered warranted.

Objective

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the elements considered necessary for the appropriate use of self-assessment questionnaires as a recruitment and selection tool, as well as any identified limitations to their use. Within this context, the study also reviewed the use of self-assessment questionnaires in the BC Public Service and identified potential risks to merit-based hiring.

Scope and Approach

The study first reviewed research findings and contemporary literature (i.e., articles, books, reports, and information available online) regarding self-report techniques and in particular, electronic self-assessment questionnaires used to aid with hiring. Available data and findings from the Office's three most recent merit performance audits were also examined to determine the circumstances and extent to which self-assessment questionnaires were being used within the BC Public Service. Supplemental information was provided by BC Public Service Agency (Agency) representatives and found on their employee-accessible website. A full list of references used for this study is available upon request.

Self-Assessment Questionnaires

General

Self-reporting is widely used as a method of gathering primary source data. In the field of recruitment and selection, self-report tools are employed as an efficient means of drawing out the relevant information on required qualifications and filtering (sorting) applicants based on it. Specifically, requiring applicants to assess and report on their own qualifications via a self-assessment questionnaire can reduce the time required by a hiring panel to assess applications to determine if individuals possess the

required qualifications. Allowing for the completion of these questionnaires on-line can further reduce the administration time required and results can be automatically tabulated.

Limitations

It is generally accepted that self-assessment questionnaires are effective hiring tools where it can be assumed applicant responses are accurate. Based on this assumption, research has focused on the key factors that influence the accuracy of self-report responses – namely, applicant characteristics and the design of the questionnaire.

Several studies have found that "social desirability" (the wish to be perceived in a positive light by others) is a primary reason why some applicants may exaggerate their qualifications. Other qualities such as poor memory or lack of self-confidence may lead an applicant to misrepresent or underestimate their qualifications. Applicants with fewer qualifications have been found to overestimate their abilities, while those with greater qualifications are more likely to underestimate.

The language chosen or the phrasing of the questions also has implications for the accuracy of self-report responses. An inaccurate self-report may result when applicants have differing views of what information is being sought, or misinterpret what was intended. Unclear questions could result in individuals with similar experiences responding differently. Also where a forced-choice response method is employed (e.g., yes/no or multiple choice), incomplete or ambiguous options may induce some applicants to choose an answer which, while not quite accurate, they believe to be the best fit.

In addition, where answer options are provided, applicants may choose to select a response based on their perception of what is needed or desired for the position versus what their qualifications actually are.

Risk and Mitigating Risk

The primary benefit of self-assessment questionnaires is the efficient filtering of applicants where there are large volumes and it would be onerous to review each application individually. However, given the limitations described, there is also a risk that inaccurate self-reporting could result in the elimination of qualified applicants or the advancement and potential success of unqualified applicants. The literature identified several ways in which this associated risk may be minimized.

First, although self-reporting can be used as an assessment tool at various stages in the hiring process, it is most effectively used for short-listing. At this stage of a process, applicants are assessed as to whether they demonstrate the minimum job requirements on an individual basis. Short-listing generally involves an absolute (yes or no) form of assessment where it is clear that an applicant has or does not have the required qualifications. Subsequent stages of selection tend to assess candidates' qualifications in relation to the full job requirements and relative to one another and typically involve rating

qualifications on a qualitative or quantitative scale. As this form of assessment involves a more nuanced incremental evaluation of candidates, it is better conducted by an independent evaluator or panel rather than self-reported by the individual applicants. By using self-assessment questionnaires at only those stages of the process where absolute forms of assessment are possible, the risk is minimized.

Second, self-assessment questionnaires are best suited to positions where the mandatory qualifications are well defined and commonly understood by applicants (e.g., commerce degree, 3 years of clerical experience, etc.). Self-report tools elicit more accurate responses when focused on straightforward factual information that is quickly verifiable as opposed to more complicated or conceptual information that requires judgement on behalf of the applicant and is not so readily apparent.

Third, in terms of the questionnaire design, providing question and answer options that are easy to comprehend and require little to no interpretation on the part of the applicant are best. For example, if applicants are asked if they have "a social science degree or equivalent", the definition of equivalent should be provided. In addition, complete and unambiguous response options should be provided so that applicants can identify a response that truly applies to them rather than having to select what they might consider to be the "best fit" response. For example, if post-secondary education is a requirement then the full-range of possibilities should be included in the response option.

Finally, some form of verification may prevent or mitigate the risk associated with the accuracy of self-reporting. While it is recognized that verifying all submissions would defeat the purpose of increased efficiency related to short-listing, it would be ideal if the qualifications of those who advance in the process, or at least those who are successful, are verified.

> **Ways to mitigate risk posed by self-assessment questionnaires:**
>
> ➢ **Use as a short-listing tool only**
>
> ➢ **Use for positions with easily defined, straightforward qualifications**
>
> ➢ **Formulate clear questions and response options**
>
> ➢ **Verify information where practical**

Self-Assessment Questionnaires in the BC Public Service

During the 2012 Merit Performance Audit, the Office of the Merit Commissioner observed an increase in the use of self-assessment questionnaires in the BC Public Service from 18 per cent in 2011 to 46 per cent in 2012. Subsequent merit performance audits noted the continued steady use of this tool – see Chart 1.

Chart 1 – Self-Assessment Questionnaires in Appointments Audited

	2011	2012	2013/14	2014/15*
SAQ used	18%	46%	45%	45%
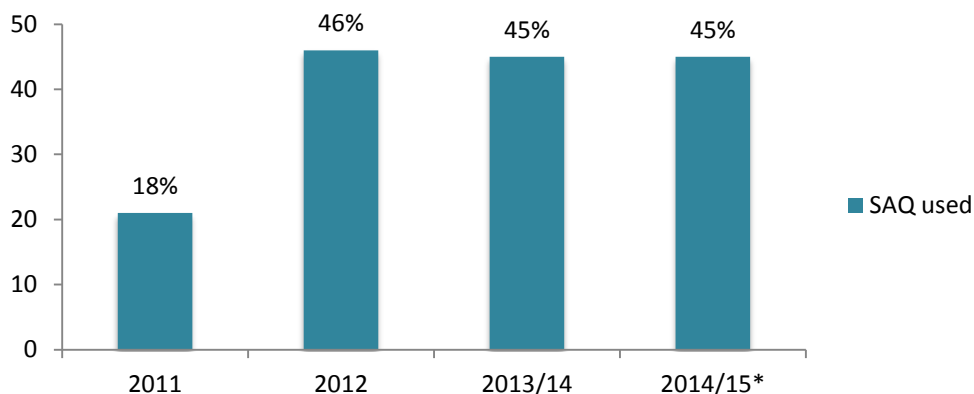
*Information for the 2014/15 Merit Performance Audit was limited to data from samples that were available at the time of this study (appointments made from April 1 to September 30, 2014).

A review of audits completed between 2012 and 2014 found that where self-assessment questionnaires were employed, the majority were administered electronically. The standard questionnaire was comprised of seven questions with a check box format with yes/no or multiple choice response options, or a combination of the two. The questionnaires were used for all sizes of competitions, from those with a few applicants to those with several hundred applicants.

Discussion

The examination of audited appointments indicated that when self-assessment questionnaires were used, they were used exclusively for short-listing purposes and not at a later stage of the process for more in-depth assessment, or to rank candidates. While several of the audits completed in 2012 and 2013 identified issues with self-assessment questionnaires being used to gather information on more subjective requirements such as knowledge, skills and abilities, this practice appears to have discontinued. The more recent questionnaires reviewed for this study focused on factual job requirements such as education and experience or conditions of employment.

For those appointments audited between 2012 and 2014, self-assessment questionnaires were found to have been used to short-list applicants for a wide variety of positions including clerical, administrative, technical, professional and managerial. Auditors observed that some of the questionnaires attempted to assess complicated or multifaceted qualifications through questions such as "How many years of experience do you have leading and coaching multi-disciplinary senior level professionals and/or managers in the development and implementation of complex projects/policies?" While others provided complicated answer options that required interpretation by applicants such as "Managed projects of medium scope and moderate complexity with several deliverables including leading project

teams." Further, some questionnaires used unclear terms or phrases in the formulation of questions and answers such as "relevant" education or degree or "equivalent" without any further definition.

During this same period, auditors occasionally noted a potentially qualified applicant whose responses to the questionnaire resulted in them being screened out of the competition. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether this outcome was the result of question design or applicant error. It was found that although self-assessment questionnaires continue to be used for all types of positions, the majority reviewed through the 2014 audits showed much improvement in design with simpler, clearer and more complete question and response formats. As well, questions were prefaced with a caution that applicant responses should be consistent with the information provided in their resumes.

With respect to verification, it was not possible to determine from audit information how often some or any of the questionnaire responses were verified; however, it was observed in a few processes that candidate(s) screened in on the basis of their questionnaire responses were later removed from the process when it was discovered they did not possess the qualification as indicated on their questionnaire, demonstrating the importance of verification.

Given the extensive use of self-assessment questionnaires and the difficulties of designing clear questions and answers that meet job requirements in all circumstances, the BC Public Service Agency has introduced a number of measures to address the challenges associated with this tool. Alternative short-listing tools such as qualification grids and free-text questions are now available which better suit competitions with smaller applicant pools or positions with complicated requirements (e.g., executive, specialists). These alternatives require candidates to write a response in lieu of the standard check box to indicate they have a certain qualification and to demonstrate how they have gained it (e.g., dates, institutions, examples). While these tools are less efficient as they require more panel time to review responses, they will help where the job qualifications may be gained in various ways and where it is difficult to structure clear questions and comprehensive response options.

There are also several different types of resources available to assist hiring managers and hiring advisors with the design and development of standard check-box self-assessment questionnaires. These resources include guidelines for the development and use of questionnaires, as well as a library of template questionnaires for commonly posted positions.The guidelines note the importance of questions that "are clearly understood by applicants" and response options that "provide a sufficient range of choices to encourage applicants to answer honestly and accurately." The guidelines also recommend that at a minimum, where self-assessment questionnaires are used, the responses of candidates who advance in the selection process be checked. They also suggest that some situations may warrant the manager to "spot check a random sample of failed questionnaire results in order to see why applicants may be failing the questionnaire".

Table 1 reflects how well the elements necessary for mitigating the risk associated with the use of self-assessment questionnaires are being applied in the BC Public Service.

Table 1 – Mitigating the Risk of using Self-assessment Questionnaires in the BC Public Service	
Ways to mitigate risk	**Observations on the way self-assessment questionnaires are currently used**
Use for short-listing only	Used exclusively for short-listing purposes While some questionnaires in 2012 attempted to assess knowledge and skills, by 2014 questionnaires were used to confirm only education and experience requirements.
Use for positions with easily defined, straightforward qualifications	Used for all types of positions While decreasing, in 2014 there were still incidences where questionnaires attempted to assess complex or ambiguous qualifications.
Formulate clear questions and response options	Generally questions and responses are well-designed The formulation of question and answer showed much improvement in 2014.
Verify information where practical	There was some evidence of verification being undertaken in 2014.

Conclusion

This study found that self-assessment questionnaires are considered an effective hiring tool where they are well-designed and used thoughtfully, in the appropriate circumstances. Currently, self-assessment questionnaires are used extensively throughout the BC Public Service, and as indications are that they will continue to be used, it is important that any risk they pose to merit-based hiring be minimized. It was apparent from this study that the BC Public Service Agency recognizes the limitations of using self-assessment questionnaires and has taken steps to mitigate these shortcomings. Comprehensive guidelines have been developed that help to ensure that hiring advisors and hiring managers are aware of how best to develop and use self-assessment questionnaires, as well alternative tools which are better suited to some types of competitions are now available. The Office is aware of the ongoing improvements being made in this regard and will continue to observe on the use of this tool as part of the regular random audit of appointments in the BC Public Service.

Office of the Merit Commissioner
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