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Report to Alan K. Campbell, Chairman, Civil Service Commission; by H. L. Krieger, Director, Federal Personnel and Compensation Div.

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The efficiency and effectiveness of the Civil Service Commission (CSC) and several agencies in obtaining qualified persons for competitive clerical and technical positions were surveyed. Observations were made primarily from data obtained from region IX area offices in San Francisco and Sacramento, and therefore, may not reflect the total system. Findings/Conclusions: Although the CSC system is designed to be a fair and equitable applicant examination and referral system that responds quickly to agency requirements, three problem areas were found: length of time required for placing applicants' names on job registers, inaccuracy of information on registers about applicants' availability and employment interests, and unused certificates of eligible applicants sent to agencies by CSC. The job registers were returned unused for a variety of reasons, including that extra lists were requested to insure that there would be enough applicants to choose from, and the position may be cancelled, regraded, or never materialize. A predetermined score/instant referral (PDS) system was developed to fill the many vacant steno-typists positions in the San Francisco area. The system, designed to test "walk in" applicants against a minimum score and by-pass the register, was considered to be successful and worth expanding. The California State Personnel Board, after giving written and oral examinations to applicants, determines their eligibility and refers them directly to the agencies. (SMS)

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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

FEDERAL PERSONNEL AND
COMPENSATION DIVISION

B-179810

MAY 27 1977

The Honorable Alan K. Campbell
Chairman, United States
Civil Service Commission

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This letter summarizes our survey results of the Civil Service Commission's (CSC's) procedures and processes used in hiring clerical and technical employees. We have provided much of our data and discussed our work with officials of the Bureau of Recruiting and Examining.

Our survey focused on the efficiency and effectiveness of CSC and several agencies in obtaining qualified persons for competitive clerical and technical positions, generally in the GS-2 through GS-9 grade levels. Our observations resulted primarily from data and information obtained from region IX area offices in San Francisco and Sacramento, California. Such observations may not be applicable throughout the entire system and all regional offices. However, we believe that sharing our concerns with you, even though they are based on data from a limited geographic area, is worthwhile as a basis for wider study and improvement by the CSC.

CONCERNS

The overall labor market for clerical and technical employees changes rapidly. Therefore, it is important to have a fair and equitable applicant examination and referral system that responds quickly to agency requirements. Although the CSC system is designed to meet these requirements, we found three problem areas.

- Length of time required for placing applicant's names on job registers.
- Inaccuracy of information on registers about applicants' availability and employment interests.

--Unused certificates of eligible applicants sent to agencies by CSC.

Length of processing time

Depending on the test location, we noted that the time between testing and placing an applicants' name on a register took from 2 to 5 weeks. Although a substantial number of applications were processed within CSC's 30-day standard, the time required for about 25 percent exceeded the standard in San Francisco. Outside of San Francisco, processing time ranged from 19 to 55 days.

Agency personnel officials are concerned that long processing time leads qualified clerical and technical applicants to take other jobs. CSC's new centralized and automated system for scoring written tests, located in Macon, Georgia, should reduce processing time. However, at the time of our survey, we were told that early results from the automated system were disappointing to the San Francisco area office. These early results may not be indicative of the system's capability when it is fully operational; however, enough concern was expressed during our survey to warrant a review to determine whether the automated system is cost effective and meeting its objectives of a 5-day turn around time.

Register information inaccuracy

CSC registers used in compiling a certificate of eligibles include:

- A numerical score rating based on the individual's examination results.
- The type(s) of position for which the individual is qualified.
- The type(s) of appointment and work location that the individual will accept.

From the beginning of fiscal year 1976 through mid-march 1976, CSC made nationwide referrals of about 465,000 individuals to requesting agencies for about

124,000 various clerical and technical position vacancies. Approximately 63,000 selections were made resulting in a ratio of about 7 referrals for each selection.

Analysis of certificates issued by the San Francisco area office for steno-typists, office aids, and science and engineering personnel showed that individuals declined consideration for positions for several reasons including:

- already obtained another position in Federal service or elsewhere,
- not the type position or location desired or
- position grade was too low.

We found that a substantial proportion of individuals on steno-typist registers declined jobs because they had found employment before they were included on the certificate or during certificate processing. Most individuals who declined jobs had originally indicated that they would accept but had changed their mind; others notified CSC of changes in job preferences, but their records had not been updated.

A Federal job applicant can qualify for several different types of positions and grade levels by taking an appropriate examination. The applicant's name can then appear on several job registers and be included simultaneously on more than one certificate. Multiple certification does provide opportunity for consideration of an applicant who qualifies for several positions; however, the administration of the process has generated problems of sufficient concern to CSC that field offices have been asked for comments on policy changes which would eliminate multiple certification. We believe that more effective administrative procedures which do not compromise merit system principles are in order, such as:

- more intensive cross-referencing where simultaneous certification occurs, and
- expeditious updating of files.

Unused Certificates

We found, in our limited sample for the San Francisco area office, many certificates for clerical and technical positions that CSC issued to agencies were returned unused without individuals being contacted or positions filled.

A September 1975 report of the Federal Personnel Council of Northern California also showed that the percentage of unused certificates was surprisingly high and that such a practice was wasteful. CSC officials stated this problem was nationwide, that a study to determine the reasons for unused certificates was recently completed, and that the study's findings are now being analyzed by the Program Management and Evaluation Division.

Agency reasons shown on the returned certificates for not using them were:

- Position filled outside certificate by reinstatement, transfer, promotion, or predetermined score applicant.
- Position canceled, suspended, or did not materialize.
- Position to be filled at another grade level.
- Person requested not eligible for grade level certified.
- Person requested not within reach.

Agency officials we interviewed during our survey gave several additional reasons for returning certificates unused.

- To reduce the effect of applicant unavailability, more vacancies than actually existed were indicated.
- For a given vacancy, certificates for various grade levels are requested. One person is selected and all other certificates returned unused.

CSC does not verify the agencies' reasons for returning unused certificates without contacting individuals or determining their availability.

PREDETERMINED SCORE/INSTANT
REFERRAL SYSTEM

Since the San Francisco area office is considered to have a shortage of steno-typists, CSC has used a pre-determined score/instant referral (PDS) system, which is a direct-hire system to speed filling vacancies and to reduce certification requirements. Under the PDS system, the area office can set a minimum score and then refer applicants whose scores are above the minimum outside of the normal certification process and the rule-of-three principle.

Our examination of selected certificates showed that about 70 percent of the steno-typist applicants in the San Francisco area had scores above the PDS minimums. About 50 percent of the steno-typists appointments made during the year ended September 30, 1975, were by the PDS process. The majority of these appointments were in the city of San Francisco.

Agencies appear to like the PDS system for steno-typists because it allows them greater selection flexibility, provides more available eligibles, and eliminates the certification process. Some agencies rarely requested a certificate of eligibles for steno-typist positions since they had sufficient "walk-in" applicants who were eligible under the PDS system. However, the San Francisco area office adjusted the minimum PDS score sharply upward for steno-typist positions, to reduce the number of PDS appointments and to increase the use of the regular certification process.

Agency officials said they would like the PDS system broadened for the steno-typist registers and extended to other registers, and since it offers potential for improved timeliness and efficiency, further consideration of the PDS system seems warranted to us.

AN INTERESTING ALTERNATIVE SYSTEM
MERITING FURTHER STUDY

During 1975, California agencies in the six county San Francisco Bay Area and in the Sacramento metropolitan area appointed 2,600 individuals to clerk, clerk-typists,

and stenographer positions. The process of recruiting and referring job applicants for these positions, as well as others, is the responsibility of the California State Personnel Board. The Board's functions of receiving and processing job applications, administering examinations, scoring and ranking applicants, maintaining registers of eligible applicants, and referring applicants to State agencies are similar to those of CSC.

We found that clerical position vacancies were filled:

- in a relatively shorter time period,
- with fewer applicants being referred, and
- involving a smaller ratio of referrals to selections.

Under the system used by the California State Personnel Board, job applicants for stenographer, typist, and clerk positions generally are scored and ranked on registers based on a written and oral examination. The written test is designed to measure basic skills required for successful job performance. The oral exam is a qualification appraisal interview designed to assess interpersonal skills, communication skills, and attitudes and behaviors, taking into consideration education and experience.

To provide enough available applicants for State agencies to consider and select under a rule-of-three concept, the board uses a direct-referral system for high turnover positions. Under this system, agencies do not receive a list of names to determine an applicant's availability. Instead, the Board determines an applicant's availability and then refers the individual directly to an agency with a position vacancy. The applicants, however, must declare their continued interest in a position and appear before the board within 3 days of contact before being referred to an agency. Applicants are then given their choice of a vacancy for which they wish to be considered and are referred directly to an agency. Generally, applicants in the San Francisco area are not referred to more than one vacancy at a time and are allowed only three declinations or one failure to respond before their names are removed from the register.

B-179810

We hope the above information will be helpful to you in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the selection and referral processes discussed in this letter. The cooperation and courtesy extended to us by CSC headquarters and field staff is appreciated.

Sincerely yours,



H.L. Krieger
Director