
Public recruitment

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TO select the chairman of the Higher Education Commission, around three years ago, eligible candidates numbering slightly over 100 were interviewed. The average interview time per candidate was approximately five minutes. The fear that some eligible candidates could approach the court if not called for an interview prevented any shortlisting. This is the essence of public-sector recruitment in Pakistan — satisfy the courts even if it means using a process that can deliver the right candidate only by chance.

Performance on the job depends upon two things: competency and ‘actually performing tasks’. The latter depends on one’s work attitude. The public recruitment

process attempts to test only the competency of a candidate, if at all. No attempt is made to test the work attitude (certainly not possible in a five-minute interview).

How should we assess a candidate's work attitude and competency? To begin with, have a series of interviews of fairly long duration. For the interview, make the candidate comfortable enough to be himself or herself, meaning just one person should interview the candidate or at most a panel of three persons.

Have interviews over a cup of tea or over lunch or dinner with the candidate. Maybe take the candidate for a walk around the workplace and point out different sections while conversing without giving them that 'interview' feeling. Never let the candidate know that you are in a hurry and that other candidates are waiting, which means do not schedule back-to-back interviews. Avoid textbook and memory-based questions eg 'what is velocity' 'what is meant by income elasticity' and so on. Ask questions about family, residence, spending weekends etc. If the candidate says that he or she sometimes does office work at home, this could be a crucial piece of information about work attitudes. Teaching ability is best judged in a classroom with real students and with the candidate being asked to teach using board and marker or chalk.

How should we assess a candidate's competency?

This kind of interview process requires investing time. With hundreds of candidates, this is not possible. Why do a large number apply for government jobs? For absolute job security. To select the right person, such job security will have to go.

The kind of job advertisements we typically have attract many unsuitable persons. The advertisements neither tell what the job entails nor what is expected of the person hired. An advertisement may just say 'relationship manager required by a bank'. A person not familiar with the banking industry may wonder what the manager is

expected to do. Many would refrain from applying if they knew the details or take a chance assuming their profile fits the position.

Work attitude is best assessed on the job, with this opportunity not available before hiring. So how to assess? Try to find out a candidate's work attitude in previous jobs? For this, the developed world relies on references. References from candidates' past employers and teachers familiar with the candidate's performance and work attitude are a good instrument for assessment there. Unfortunately, securing a written reference in Pakistan is all too easy and may not reflect the true picture.

An alternate to formal references is making informal inquiries over the phone from colleagues, employers and teachers of the candidate. To formalise, firms can emerge in the private sector which may investigate and describe the performance and attitude for a fee. This would serve the public sector's appetite of having something on record to justify the decision.

Objectivity in hiring is not always possible everywhere and the opinion of the hiring personnel is essential; even so the cost and benefits must be weighed to lessen the potential of making the wrong choice. The public sector insists upon quantified eligibility criteria and large interview panels. Experience suggests that this approach has failed to yield the right people. What to do then? The solution is to choose the right person for the top slots to whom the authority to hire is delegated; if they err frequently, replace them.

That many people who do not perform well in the country do reasonably well in an overseas work environment matters. The flip side is that a good performer elsewhere may underperform in our public sector, given the work culture thrown up by absolute job security.

Thus despite their best efforts, public entities might end up hiring the wrong person because to err is human. Do not insist upon continuing with the mistake. Use the probation period to say goodbye to the unsuitable person — as of now, this is rarely done in the public sector.

Nothing said in this article is innovative. Some private and very few public entities in Pakistan, (in contrast to public and private entities abroad), manage to hire the right person using the process outlined here.