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Back to Basics: Selection Documentation & Contact Officers

It's a new year, so we're going to start the January newsletter with the first step in a job application ... the selection documentation and the contact officer.

The selection documentation is absolutely essential to have when applying for a government job. The job ad will tell you where you can get hold of the documentation, and the documentation should tell you important things like what the selection criteria are, if there is a duty statement/job description, what is expected of your application, if there is an application form that you have to fill in, where to find out more information about the position and who the contact officer is.

Once you have read through the selection documentation, the next step is to give the contact officer a call. A lot of applicants feel awkward or embarrassed about ringing the contact officer listed on a job ad. But, successful applicants almost always have one thing in common - they rang the contact officer and had a chat about the

position. Therefore, you should ALWAYS get in touch with the contact officer.

Before calling the contact officer you should make a list of questions to ask, which will clarify any areas of uncertainty or concern about the position, or how to address your application. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to visit the contact officer to see the working environment, and find out more about the organisation's work and where the vacant position fits. While some people may not agree to show you around the work area, others will be delighted that you have asked and be keen to show you around and give you more information about the position, which of

course is probably more than your competition (the other applicants) know and better for you in the long run.

Questions to ask a Contact Officer:

- Who is the contact officer, and what is their role? i.e. Is it the supervisor of the position? The manager of the area? Someone doing a parallel position? The Human Resources area? Someone acting in the position? Knowing who you are talking to will help you frame your later questions.

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- What are the main day to day responsibilities of the position? These may differ from the position description if it is a general document produced by human resources.
 - Does the position have a title? Sometimes this is not advertised and will make a big difference to your perception of the role.
 - What is the composition of the selection panel? This will help later on when you attend an interview.
 - Why is the position vacant? High turnover should cause alarm bells, but the last incumbent's promotion should be reassuring. If it is a newly created position you should look out for other similar vacancies that may also be advertised either now or in the future.
 - How long has the position been vacant? This will not only allow you to potentially see how important the position is in the day to day functioning of the area, but how long the selection process is likely to take. If a position has been vacant for a long time, for example, the chances are that they will not be in a hurry to fill it.
 - Is there someone acting (sitting) in the role? If there is, it is likely that this person is also applying for the job, and you will therefore have to take more time and effort in presenting yourself as a superior applicant. However, just because there is someone already doing the job, doesn't mean they are doing it very well, and will be selected for the position, so don't use this as a reason to pull out.
 - Clarify any elements of the selection criteria and duty statement / job description that you are uncertain about and if the statements are generic, ask how they apply to this particular position. E.g. if a selection criteria mentions communication skills, why are communication skill important in this role? You can then address this specifically in your written application.
 - What is the structure of the organisation, and how many people are in the team?
 - What is the composition of the team, and what kind of person is likely to fit well into the existing team?
 - What are the key priorities for this position, or the work area in general for the next 12 months? This will give you information as to what skills are going to be useful in the mid-to- long term, and not just those that are listed in the selection documentation.
 - Is the organisation going through any significant change, or is it likely to in the near future? If there is a significant change coming it can be good to address your flexibility and adaptability in your application, as this can be a big concern for hiring managers when bringing someone new into a changing environment.
 - If conditions of service, professional development and organisational culture are important to you it may be appropriate to ask about the hours of work in the area of the position, the organisation's approach to professional development and the current organisational culture.
- These questions are just a guide, and the list is by no means exhaustive, or essential. Only ask questions that are relevant to the job, or that you feel are important to you when making a decision about your future employment. When calling the contact officer, be polite and professional. Remember, this is your first impression, and you want to make it a great one!
- This information has been extracted and condensed from Get That Job! The Best Guide to Applying for a Government Job.*

Feature Article

How Job Applications Are Like Horse Racing By Vanessa Jordan

After attending the Spring Racing Carnival last year I was struck by how much the job application process is like horse racing. At first it might be hard to see; what do animals racing around a track have to do with getting a job? But let's explore some concepts in more detail.



When horses are entered into a race, odds are set as a probability of them winning that race. These probabilities take into account a number of factors such as previous performance in similar races, their preparation for the race, the conditions of the track, the horses breeding, their competition, their trainer and their jockey.

In reality, selection panels are doing a similar thing when they are selecting someone for a job. They are placing a bet on who they think will be the best person in the job, and then hoping that they were right. They make their choice by choosing the person with the highest odds, that is, the person with the highest probability of performing the duties of the position most effectively. What can influence this probability? Let's go back to horse racing.

1. Previous performance in similar races.

If a horse has performed well in a similar length and class of race leading up to this one, their probability of winning is higher than a horse who has not performed well. Selection panels consider the same thing when selecting an applicant for a job. How has an applicant performed in previous positions similar to this one? This is the basis for behavioural questioning in an interview.

With the belief that past behaviour is an indicator of future performance, selection panels in interviews will often ask applicants for examples of what they have done in the past and how they did it. For example, "can you tell me about a time that you delivered superior customer service," or "can you give us an example of how you have communicated effectively in writing." Similarly in written applications, the best applicants give examples of their skills in action.

In future editions of the newsletter this year we will talk about how to choose and prepare relevant examples of your past behaviour to include in your written applications.

2. The horse's breeding, or family history of success.

You can have all of the qualifications and experience required for the job, but if you do not adequately prepare your application (both the written application and interview) you are not likely to win the job.

What is your organisation, department or team's history of success? Applicants who have come from high achieving teams or organisations with solid outputs and cultures of innovation will take on these attributes in their own work and bring them to their new organisation. Similarly, applicants from work cultures of laziness who are resistant to change and not aligned to their organisation's vision will communicate these negative attitudes in their applications.

How can you leverage this predictor to your advantage? Be strategic in choosing who you work for and the behaviours of your team that you adopt. Be instrumental in the success of your organisation and align yourself with their positive attributes.

In future editions of the newsletter this year we will have an article about job and career success.

3. The horse's preparation for the race.

A horse can have the best trainer, the best jockey and the best breeding, but if they have not trained and prepared for the particular race they are not likely to win. The same is true of government job applications. You can have all of the qualifications and experience required for the job, but if you do not adequately prepare your application (both the written application and interview) for that particular job you are not likely to win it. Unlike private industry applications where you can prepare a standard resume and send it off to multiple advertisers on Seek, MyCareer and other internet job boards, government job applications require a lot of preparation and tailoring to the job requirements.

4. The condition of the track.

Some horses race better in wet conditions and some horses race better in extremely dry conditions. What does this mean for a job application? Some applicants perform better with panels who like short, quick and to the point written applications and responses to interview questions and some applicants perform better with panels who expect comprehensive written applications with interview that require little prompting and a lot of talking for the applicant. As an applicant, how do you best prepare yourself for the "track"? In your written



application you need to find a medium in how much information you present while maintaining clarity and conciseness. In the job interview the key is to read the panel and ascertain what they want to achieve from the interview.

In future editions of the newsletter this year we provide an article about how to read your interviewer and respond appropriately.

5. The trainer and the jockey.

What training do you have in preparing your application? Who is helping you get your application together? Or, are you going it alone? When a job application can have such huge implications for your future why would you not seek some expert advice in this area? When taking on advice, you should make sure it is from someone with a valid opinion. A friend or colleague already in a government position or with a track record of application success is a great resource. The person who sits next to you who hasn't been promoted in quite a while and is more opinion than expert is probably not a good source of information. The same goes for choosing (and paying for) professional advice.

In future editions of the newsletter this year we will be going through a checklist for ascertaining the credibility of your professional support that you can use to assess articles on the internet, books and resume writers.

Finally, as any punter will tell you, sometimes a horse can have everything going for it (and hence be tipped as the favourite) but at the end of the day lose the race to another horse. The same can happen when you apply for a job, and when this happens the only solution is to get back on the horse and try again.

Vanessa Jordan is the Director of Review Consulting, a government recruitment consulting organisation that teaches selection panels how to do it right, and how to do it better. She is the author of *The Selection Criteria Coach* and *Get That Job* as well as numerous other employment guides, e-books, training courses, magazine and journal articles and is recognised as a leader in her industry.

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Reader Questions

Q. Given that most Commonwealth Government agencies are now using the 'Capability framework' as the basis for selection criteria. Are you able to provide some advice and examples on how to address these – as it is quite different from the 'old' way?

A. Capability Frameworks, or People Frameworks are the current HR hot topics. Many organisations, both government and private, are developing frameworks that explain what is expected in terms of work output and behaviour at different levels within the organisation.

The Australian Public Service Commission (Commonwealth Government) released the Integrated Leadership System in 2004, to support the building and sustaining of strong public service leadership. (Visit www.apsc.gov.au/ils to read through the framework). Different state and local government organisations are beginning to introduce their own capability and people frameworks, and have their own capability clusters and behavior descriptors.

These capabilities are increasingly being used as selection criteria for advertised positions, however the rate of usage is still low and according to an audit in 2007 of Commonwealth Government vacancies by Review Consulting, only 2% of positions are actually using these capabilities. This shows that agencies appear to prefer to use their own position specific selection criteria.

How should you address these capabilities if they are used as selection criteria? They are actually no different to addressing a "standard" criteria. Regardless of whether a criterion is a statement or a competency, the rules for addressing it are the same. A competency criteria may look like this:

1. *Ability to think strategically*
 - *demonstrates sound research, interpretation and problem solving skills*



- demonstrates strategic thinking by making balanced, well informed decisions
- demonstrates analytical thinking skills
- demonstrates originality of thought and innovation
- contributes to the strategic environment

This criterion is giving you not only the competency, but also the descriptor of the competency. It is listing the things that you should be writing about and telling you how you will be assessed, which in effect is making it easier for you to target your application effectively.

Keep in mind that it is not necessary to treat each dot point as its own criteria, or use it as a heading. Just make sure you cover these points in your statements, perhaps highlighting the points in bold throughout your application so that the Selection Advisory Committee can see that you have clearly addressed all of them.

Do you have any questions about applying for a government job that you think other newsletter readers might also want the answer to? Send them to us at the email address below (unfortunately we won't be able to provide individual responses, so keep your eyes peeled on future editions of the newsletter!)

admin@publicservicejobs.com.au

Recruitment News

Western Australia's government has announced a new scheme aimed at retaining experienced public sector employees as it's public sector workforce ages. This scheme gives workers aged 55 and over access to their superannuation entitlements while they continue to work full time or change to more flexible working hours. More than half of the WA State Government is over 45 which will create a large loss of corporate knowledge as the workforce retires in the next 10 years.

A Robert Walters survey reports that one in five workers expect a 15% payrise in 2008. Visit the

[VIP section](http://www.selection-criteria.com.au) of [selection-criteria.com.au](http://www.selection-criteria.com.au) for more information on salary trends.

The Australian Public Service State of the Service Report 2006-2007 provides an interesting insight into the makeup of the Australian Public Service (Commonwealth Government workforce). Below are tables outlining the number of employees per classification level and age group, as well as the agencies who employ the most staff (extracted from the State of the Service report which is available at: <http://www.apsc.gov.au/stateoftheservice/0607/ataglan ce.pdf>). The first column is 2005, then 2006 and 2007.

Age group (ongoing only)				
Under 25 years	No.	4,993	6,028	7,127
	%	4.0	4.5	5.0
25-34	No.	31,037	33,498	35,700
	%	25.1	24.8	24.9
35-44	No.	37,614	40,379	41,786
	%	30.5	30.0	29.1
45-54	No.	37,435	40,572	42,766
	%	30.3	30.1	29.8
55 and over	No.	12,421	14,325	16,146
	%	10.1	10.6	11.2

Classification (ongoing only)				
APS 1-2	No.	6,295	6,004	7,154
	%	5.1	4.5	5.0
APS 3-4	No.	43,993	48,482	49,907
	%	35.6	36.0	34.8
APS 5-6	No.	42,065	45,534	48,310
	%	34.1	33.8	33.7
EL	No.	27,915	31,031	34,048
	%	22.6	23.0	23.7
SES	No.	2,028	2,257	2,509
	%	1.6	1.7	1.7
Graduate/Trainee	No.	1,204	1,494	1,597
	%	1.0	1.1	1.1

Top Commonwealth Government Employers by Number of Employees:

1. Centrelink
2. Australian Taxation Office
3. Defence
4. Immigration
5. Human Services
6. Medicare
7. Australian Customs Services
8. Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
9. Health and Aging
10. Department of Employment and Workplace Relations



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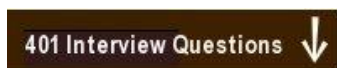
And, ever wondered what departments your State Government has, what councils you could work for

or need to know where to find out more information about an agency that you're applying to? We have links through to every government department there is.

Check out your state page by following the links below:

[ACT](#), [NSW](#), [NT](#), [QLD](#), [SA](#), [TAS](#), [VIC](#), [WA](#)

Product Spotlight



401 Interview Questions is the latest in the series of "quick guides" available from www.selection-criteria.com.au. For its launch this January, we are happy to be able to offer the e-guide at 50% off its normal price – you can buy and download it for just \$7.50 until Monday 11th February.

This e-guide lifts the lid on government interview questions by exploring 401 commonly used interview questions in public service interviews. It is the perfect resource for practice interviews and public service interview preparation.

It covers administration, attention to detail, communication, computer skills, customer service, concern for standards, contract management, equity, OHS & organisational values (including APS Values), engineering, finance, flexibility, initiative, interpersonal skills, interpreting guidelines, inventory management, making decisions, management, motivation, organisational skills Including prioritising and meeting deadlines, problem solving, project management, purchasing / procurement, risk management, strategic influencing, supervision, teamwork, tenancy, tolerance for stress, working as an individual ... as well as some of those tricky questions that always appear at the beginning and end of an interview.

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