

## The Importance of KSA's (Knowledge, Skills and Abilities) in the Federal Application Process

KSAs...Knowledge, Skills and Abilities...a list of special qualifications and personal attributes that you need to have for a particular job. *These are the unique requirements that the hiring agency wants to find in the person selected to fill a particular job. A primary purpose of KSAs is to measure those qualities that will set one candidate apart from the others.* In federal personnel guidance, KSAs are defined as the factors that identify the better candidates from a group of persons basically qualified for a position. **How well an applicant can show that he or she matches the position's defined KSAs determines whether that person will be seriously considered for the job.**

**Knowledge** statements refer to an organized body of information usually of a factual or procedural nature which, if applied, makes adequate performance on the job possible. A body of information applied directly to the performance of a function.

**Skill** statements refer to the proficient manual, verbal or mental manipulation of data or things. Skills can be readily measured by a performance test where quantity and quality of performance are tested, usually within an established time limit. Examples of proficient manipulation of things are skill in typing or skill in operating a vehicle. Examples of proficient manipulation of data are skill in computation using decimals; skill in editing for transposed numbers, etc.

**Ability** statements refer to the power to perform an observable activity at the present time. This means that abilities have been evidenced through activities or behaviors that are similar to those required on the job, e.g., ability to plan and organize work. Abilities are different from aptitudes. Aptitudes are only the potential for performing the activity.

### KSAs.....Why You Can't Ignore Them.....

Some job applicants, especially those looking for their first federal position, are not sure whether the KSA requirements apply to them or where a response is optional. There's an easy way to decide when to pay attention to KSAs. In a word, **ALWAYS**.

Agencies may emphasize the most important aspects of a job by assigning relative weights to each KSA. Others will designate particular KSAs as being **Mandatory (M)** or **Desirable (D)**. Obviously the job applicant will want to focus the most effort on responding to the more heavily weighted KSAs or the mandatory ones, but it is important to remember that you need to address every one on the list. If a vacancy announcement makes no distinction among the position's KSA, the applicant should assume that all KSAs are equally important.

**A key point to remember about all KSAs is that they must be job-related.** An agency cannot ask for anything in a KSA that is not in the job's position description.

### The Writing Part.....

Do not assume that reviewers will pull the information out of your application package and pick up the salient points. **They will not.** Even if there were time for such insight, reviewers/ evaluators are not allowed to infer anything.

**Hints to follow when developing your KSAs:**

Read the vacancy announcement carefully

Gather the information needed to begin writing

Be specific

Be precise

Get to the point

Do not ramble

Use lots of examples

State specifically what you have done

Do not use acronyms

Present yourself in “clear and plain” language

Do not borrow language from the position description

## **HOW TO WRITE RESPONSES TO KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND ABILITIES (KSAs)**

If you apply for a position announced in the KSA format you should respond to the KSAs. You have to describe your experience and how it relates to each of the KSAs. How do you do this? Where do you start? What do you need to think about?

To help you do this, we have divided the process of writing KSA responses into 4 steps.

**Step 1. Read the KSAs very closely.**

You need to make sure you understand what the KSAs are and what they mean. This step is critical. If you do not understand each KSA, you will not be able to write good responses. A KSA by itself tends to be general in nature. The vacancy announcement usually contains a brief summary description of the duties of the position. Read this summary description very carefully.

**Step 2. Review very thoroughly all the experiences you have had and look for things that relate to the individual KSAs.**

This step is really a "brainstorming" session. You need to review your experiences and find things that relate to the KSAs.

Let us say the KSA that you are writing about is the ability to communicate orally. You need to think about all of the times when you use oral communication skills.

**Examples:** While you were a File Clerk you instructed other clerks on new filing procedures; as a Management Analyst you had to present recommendations on workflow procedures to members of top staff.

Also, consider relevant education, training and self-development activities, and any awards received.

**Examples:** A training program in effective briefing techniques that you completed or an award you received that relates to your ability to communicate orally.

Do not forget experiences you have had in non-work related areas (volunteer activities) or in school related activities.

**Examples:** While you were a Cub Scout Leader you acted as the Chairperson for a fund raising activity; while a student you were a student council representative.

These experiences are just as valid as work-related examples as long as they are relevant to the KSA about which you are writing.

Try reviewing your experience in order from the earliest experience to the most recent experience so as not to miss any job or experience that is relevant to the KSA. You should review your **total** experience both paid and volunteer, and training for each KSA and look for situations that apply to the particular KSA. This is because experience that you have in one job or one area may apply to more than one KSA.

**Example:** The KSA Ability to meet and deal with members of the general public and the KSA Ability to coordinate the activities of a subordinate staff- both involve skill in oral communications.

Do not worry about being repetitious in writing KSA responses. Each KSA is rated separately by the subject matter expert (SME)/promotion panel and as long as the information you give is relevant, it does not matter if you have used it already in another KSA.

To help you with this step we have attached a chart showing one method you can use to organize your thinking when you begin to review your experience.

**Step 3. Analyze the experiences you have identified**

This is where you scrutinize the experiences you identified in step 2 and zero in on the things that really matter in what you do or have done. It is where you identify how you use the knowledge, skill, or ability in your job or experiences. This kind of information is at the core of the KSA process. (This process is sometimes called "Task Analysis.") You need to ask specific questions about the experience you have identified. The answers that you come up with will be used to complete the actual writing of the KSA (Step 4). Examples of the kinds of questions you need to ask about your experiences follow:

**What kind of knowledge or skills do I use in my job?**

What are the steps, procedures, practices, rules, policies, theories, principles or concepts that I use in my job?

How do I apply the knowledge, principles or concepts that I use in my job?

How do I apply the knowledge that I have to accomplish my work?

**What kind of supervision do I receive?**

How is my work assigned?

What is my responsibility to accomplish work?

How independent are my actions?

How is my work reviewed?

**What guidelines do I use to accomplish my work?**

Are the instructions that I use to perform my work in written or oral form or both?

Do I use procedural manuals?

What other written procedures do I use?

What kind of oral instructions do I use to perform my work?

How much judgement do I have to use to apply the guidelines for my job?

Are the guidelines I use very easily applied or do they require interpretation?

How difficult are they to interpret?

### **How complex is my job?**

What is the nature of the work that I do?

**For example:** Tasks are clear-cut and directly related to each other; or the work involves different and unrelated processes and methods; or the work consists of broad functions and processes of an administrative or professional nature?

How difficult is it to identify what needs to be done?

**For example:** Little or no choice in deciding what needs to be done; or it depends on an analysis of the situation as there are many alternatives; or extensive analysis is required to even define the nature of the problem.

How difficult or original is the work I do?

### **How does my work affect other processes or individuals?**

Who do I have contact with on a daily basis?

Why do I have contact with these individuals?

What is my role in these discussions or meetings?

**For example:** To provide information; to receive information; to influence or advise someone; to convince someone of something.

If you have done a thorough job on steps 1, 2 and 3 in this process, you now have a good understanding of the KSAs and lots of facts about your experiences. You also have a better understanding of these experiences. You are now ready for the last step.

### **Step 4. Show how the facts you have gathered about your experience relate to the individual KSAs.**

You need to tell about the experiences you have had in a way that **clearly** shows how they are related to the knowledge, skill, or ability. In other words, you need to show a **link** between your own experience and the KSA. Do not assume that the link is obvious to someone else even though it may be obvious to you. The SME/promotion panel member(s) who(m) rate your application can only credit what you tell them in your KSA response. They will not be able to give you proper credit for

your experiences unless you give them specific examples showing how and why your experience is related to a particular KSA.

In telling this to the SME/promotion panel, remember a few important facts:

\*It is the **content** of your responses that is rated and **not** the writing style that you use. It is acceptable to use brief sentences or phrases as long as the SME/promotion panel knows what you mean.

\*Very long responses do not guarantee a high rating. Give the SME/promotion panel direct and to - the-point responses.

\*Do not use abbreviations, acronyms, or jargon. Chances are the SME/promotion panel will not know what you are talking about if you write this way. They will be able to give proper credit for your experience if they do not understand what you have done.

## **HYPOTHETICAL KSA #1**

### **SECRETARY, GS-5**

**KSA Title :** Ability to write non-technical correspondence.

#### **Sample Responses**

##### **KSA Response #1:**

I type letters every day. Sometimes I have to type them from a draft that the manager gives me. I also use form letters or the manager tells me that he wants me to write. I write memos requesting supplies or advising employees of training classes. I have been a secretary in my unit for 3 years and always finish my work quickly and correctly.

##### **KSA Response #2:**

I am the secretary in my unit. I handle the writing of responses for most non-technical correspondence received in the unit and for all administrative matters within the unit. I respond using various form letters that we have. Sometimes I have to draft a letter from start to finish depending on what the inquiry is about. For example, an employee may need a statement regarding leave balances, which I would write or I might have to write a memo to the warehouse regarding supply shortages. When the manager writes memos he will give them to me in draft form and I will rewrite them to ensure proper grammar and to put them into the right format.

#### **Which response is better?**

The writer of the first response seems to be confusing typing with writing. It is not until the third sentence that we get some specific information regarding a writing activity. And then, in the last sentence, the writer gives us some new information (how long the writer has been a secretary and how well the writer does the work of the position) that has nothing to do with the KSA as defined for the job. Remember that the SME/promotion panel rates your responses as they relate to the Crediting Plan. If what you have written is not relevant to the KSA, it will not relate to the Crediting Plan either and you will not receive any credit for it.

The second response gives more relevant and useful information. The writer has provided specific information related to the KSA and has given examples to show the kind of writing that is being done. This response has given the SME/promotion panel enough information to properly credit the writer's experience.

## **HYPOTHETICAL KSA #2**

### **Management Analyst, GS-12**

**KSA Title:** Ability to communicate in writing.

#### **Sample Responses**

##### **KSA Response #1:**

One of the most important things I do in my position is prepare reports and studies of the various components in our organization. They always have to be written in a clear and concise manner and often involve very complex issues like organizational structures, work methods and procedures, manpower utilization, delegations of authority and other issues. I usually have to pull together a lot of different information and from different sources. I usually have to work within very short time frames to produce a really needed study or report. Below are some examples of the material I have written.

Staffing Reports/Workload Reports -in particular I am involved in the WMS/FTE weekly reports - this includes components in Fiscal Control and also DTB PLUS studies. These studies are done on an "as needed" basis and involve many operational and technical issues. They only are required when management sees a need for them and specifically requests an analysis. We set up a team and review the targeted work. These reports require a lot of data gathering activity. Director's reports- These also involve a lot of data analysis from the HAL reports and are sent to the Director's Staff Advisor.

##### **KSA Response #2:**

I write technical and administrative memos and study reports, which identify actual and potential problem areas in interrelated work processes, the underlying source of operating difficulties, trends, significant management accomplishments, merit/deficiency situations and areas of imbalance. These papers always include recommendations for improvement in the studied areas. Example of the kinds of studies or reports I produce are as follows:

I write memos, which represent the Regional Office (RO) position on proposed procedures or work processes. This involves evaluating the affect of alternative actions on the work processes under consideration and how best to use manpower and resources and the identification of other alternatives worthy of consideration. This almost always involves the consolidation of information and comments from multiple components into one memo representing the Regional Office position on a given issue. An example of this type of product is the formulation of office comments on the design of the new national fishery control system user's comments, a committee reviewed the release to evaluate if all pertinent work processes were included and to identify possibly more efficient design alternatives. In most cases I consolidated the comments of the committee and formulated the final office comment memo.

I have been involved in periodic reports on national TS/incubation workloads since 1978. These reports were researched and written by a team of analysis. The final product was usually consolidated from other area reports and consolidated report issued to the Secretary.

I also wrote position papers detailing the Regional Office position on administrative, workload processing, or work measurement issues. An example of this type of product is a memo prepared for Central Office in July 1989 stating the RO's position on the issue of productivity measurement in the field stations. This memo presents our views on the Secretary's Productivity Analysis Project and pointed out what was considered flaws in their basis assumptions. It then listed the major problems with areas, which should be addressed in order to provide valid productivity measures for all the field stations. The RO's concerns and ideas concerning the elements necessary for an acceptable productivity measure were presented.

In addition, I have also completed 6 semester hours of writing courses in college. I am presently the corresponding Secretary for Tri Sigma National Sorority.

### **Which response is better?**

The writer of the first response has "borrowed" some of the language from the duties described in the vacancy announcement in order to tell the SME/promotion panel what he/she does in the job. Unfortunately, this does not give the panel any more specific information about his/her experience than they would get by reading the announcement. The examples given by the writer sound like they could be relevant to the KSA, but the writer does not provide any specific information to explain how these activities relate to the KSA. The writer also uses a lot of acronyms. These are sure to confuse a SME/promotion panel and should not be used without explanation. Finally, the writer does not tell us what his/her specific role is in any of these activities (i.e., what is the meaning of "I am involved in...", what is the writer's role when he says "We set up a team..."?).



The second response gives more relevant and specific information. The writer gave a general introductory statement, which acts as a background to the examples that follow. The first and last examples are **very specific** and give enough information so the SME/promotion panel will understand what the writer does and how it relates to the crediting plan. The second example of this response falls short of the other two examples. The writer uses some jargon (TS incubation workload) which may mean little or nothing to the SME/promotion panel. It is also not clear what the writer's involvement was in the activity described in the second example (i.e., what is the meaning of "I have been involved in periodic reports" -should the SME/promotion panel assume that this means involvement as a writer or just as a team member?). Regardless of this problem, the second response is the better of the two responses.

In each of the hypothetical responses you have just read, the second response, although the better of the two, is not the best response possible. With practice you could write an even better **KSA** response.